CONFLICT ANALYSIS SUMMARY YEMEN

Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy in Conflict-Affected Contexts Programme

This report summarizes findings from a conflict analysis[1] that was undertaken as part of the UNICEF Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy Programme (PBEA) funded by the Government of the Netherlands. The purpose of the report is to understand the conflict dynamics in Yemen and to develop entry points for engagement.

The PBEA programme, 2012-2016, seeks to build peaceful societies by strengthening the role of education in peacebuilding and integrating peacebuilding within the education system.
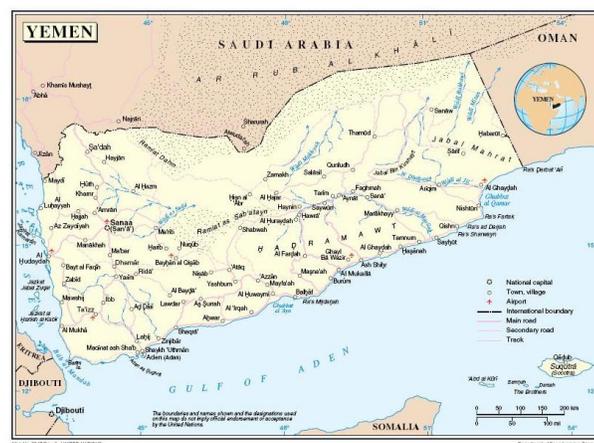
Methodology

Rooted in the United Nation's Inter-Agency Framework for Conflict Analysis in Transition Situations, this report includes adaptations for the country-specific context of Yemen. Data were gathered through a participatory process including interviews, conversations and focus group discussions with key stakeholders in Sana'a and Aden. Participants included government and United Nations officials, international organizations, bilateral donors, diplomatic missions, non-governmental organizations, researchers, political figures and activists. In addition, the findings were informed by an extensive document review. Security concerns and time constraints, however, prevented field visits. While a small number of tribal figures, civil society representatives and activists was consulted, it was not possible to consult with rural populations.

Context

After 33 years in power, President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down in 2011, following 11 months of protests that were primarily led by unemployed citizens in Taiz and – fuelled by a broad sense of discontent – spread across the country. Yemen subsequently embarked on an internationally supported transition process, representing major social and political segments of the country. While hopes for peace and participatory governance rest on the National Dialogue,

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[1] Zyck, Steven A. 2014. Education-Focused Conflict Analysis of the Republic of Yemen, International Development Innovations

the transition process attracted criticism and provided a political forum for long-standing disputes and grievances, especially conflicts between northern and southern Yemenis. Political challenges are exacerbated by growing social, economic and humanitarian crises. Already the poorest country in the Middle East, Yemen has experienced severe economic decline during recent years. Unemployment, poverty and widespread food insecurity have increased and are compounded by water shortages and dwindling oil resources. Acute malnourishment and lack of access to water, sanitation and health care adversely affect marginalized groups such as those who are internally displaced, migrants, youth, and ethnic and religious minorities. Women are particularly affected and face additional challenges of sexual and gender-based violence, child marriage, and denial of civic and political rights.

Regional interests and insecurities also have significant influence. Saudi Arabia and Iran have provided arms and resources to factions within Yemen. Internationally, Yemen has been viewed as a base for terrorist organizations and home to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). As a result, it is the site of many international counterterrorism efforts, including U.S. drone strikes and military support. Insecurity for ships in the Bab-el-Mandeb choke point has also drawn international attention recently.

Underlying causes and dynamics of conflict

Yemen is the site of several ongoing and varied types of conflict, categorized by Zyck[2] as: defined (fixed actors, geographical boundaries, phases); thematic (theme or resource related, spanning broad geographical areas and time); and precarious (acute and unstable, posing significant challenges for peace and stability).

SECURITY AND JUSTICE

- **External influences:** Iran and Saudi Arabia are known to be financing armed groups within Yemen, which sustains internal fighting and destabilization. In addition, deportation of foreign workers in Saudi Arabia and migrants from the Horn of Africa exacerbate the unemployment crisis, increase poverty (as a result of loss of remittances) and cause tensions in returnee communities.

- **Small arms proliferation:** There are more than 10 million weapons in Yemen – a higher than 1:1 ratio per adult male – which facilitates violence and conflict on a larger scale.

- **Weak national security capabilities:** National security forces are mostly concentrated in larger urban areas such as Sana'a, which limits their presence and capacity to quell violence that arises elsewhere in the country or to contain the growth of armed groups, including AQAP. Consequently, some factions have been able to expand their control over geographical areas unchallenged.

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[2] ibid

POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

- **Political corruption and exclusion:** Exclusive, elitist politics and traditional patronage networks have replaced broad coalitions and alienated the population. Exclusion and patronage-based politics have limited the development of a national identity, threatened the Government's legitimacy and given rise to violent opposition groups.

- **Inequitable government service delivery:** Absent, inadequate and inequitable basic service provision, particularly in health and education, has worsened economic circumstances for many people, fostered opposition to government, contributed to inter-group competition and increased the attractiveness of armed groups that provide salaries and protection.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- **Inequitable economic development, poverty and rising prices:** Declines in economic growth and rising consumer prices following the uprising have contributed to increased poverty across the country. In recent years, more than half of the population is considered to be poor and food insecure. The concentration of wealth, oil revenues and government resources within a small group of political elites is in stark contrast to the lives of average Yemenis and a considerable source of grievance against the State. Chronic malnutrition prevents children from succeeding at, or even attending, school.

SOCIAL ISSUES

- **Youth alienation and vulnerability to recruitment into violence:** Almost half of Yemen's population is under age 15. High rates of unemployment and poor education among youth leave them vulnerable to recruitment into armed groups. While many youth have no voice politically, economically or socially, militant groups offer them access to resources, influence and a sense of belonging – creating a situation that drives ongoing conflict across the country.

- **Poor-quality education:** The poor quality of education contributes to high rates of unemployment, with highly skilled jobs in the oil and gas sector going to foreigners. The education system in Yemen is also criticized for failing to spark critical thinking skills, which leads to a willingness to accept the ideologies and claims of armed groups.

- **Sexual and gender-based violence:** Women lack civic and political rights, and sexual and gender-based violence, female genital mutilation and early marriage rates are increasing as the economy declines. Girls are being used as currency, sold off to pay

debts, gain protection or compensate host communities. One third of girls are illiterate and three quarters of internally displaced people are female.

NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

- **Natural resource management**: Water tables in Yemen have declined to the point where water supplies in urban areas are anticipated to last 10 to 15 years at most. At least 40 percent of water is used to farm qat, a chewable narcotic plant. Upstream land owners have control of the scarce resource, often sparking violent disputes. Oil reserves are also only predicted to last another ten years. There is hope that liquefied natural gas will provide an economic alternative.

- **Land disputes**: Disputes over land registration and ownership, inheritance, and rapid population growth resulting in subdivided family lands, are all common causes of violence and disputes. The use of public land is also a source of contention.

Key conflict drivers at the subregional and community levels

Yemen is currently experiencing several defined conflicts, each driven by a separate set of factors. For the purpose of this report, four are discussed:

The southern separationist conflict

The secessionist movement in the south is supported by the majority of the area's population, which feels marginalized culturally, politically and economically. The conflict stems from long-standing disagreements over northern appropriation of land and the dismissal of the south's military officers and civil servants after its attempted secession in 1994.

Houthi-Salafist conflict

Although this conflict stems from political and social disagreements, it has become increasingly sectarian and motivated by ideological disputes between the Sunni Salafists and the Houthis, who are predominately Zaydi Shias. Both sides are seen to be receiving outside support from Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively, and therefore have the resources to pay fighters. This has escalated the violence between the two parties.

Houthi-Islah conflict

The conflict between these two groups is rooted in sectarian conflict, as well as competition for young recruits, and has manifested in street clashes. Objections to Islah's moderate Islamic ideology have increased support for the Houthis among those who believe in secular governance, despite the Houthis' religious affiliation. Both groups receive foreign support.

Extremist violence/conflict

AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia cells are regaining strength across Yemen. They are driven by religious ideology, opposition to the West and its allies, and anger over foreign drone strikes, and offer generous salary payments obtained from global extremist networks.

The role of education in peacebuilding

A teacher speaks to a class at Khadega Ben Khwailed School, a child-friendly girls' school supported by UNICEF, in Al-Mokha District, Taiz Governorate.

Deficits in the Yemeni education system are acknowledged to exacerbate unemployment levels, especially among youth. Low standards of education mean that many Yemenis are excluded from highly skilled jobs such as those in the oil and gas sector that rely primarily on foreign workers for skilled and technical positions. In addition, poor-quality education is seen as a contributing factor to the ease by which armed groups are able to recruit members. With rote learning as the standard, most students have no focus on critical or independent thinking, making them vulnerable to groups that espouse ideologies based on largely unfounded claims. Many families choose to send their children to religious schools, hoping they will offer better-quality education than the public system. Many religious schools, however, are affiliated with armed groups or people who use violence periodically in defence of a sectarian agenda. This makes students susceptible to receiving a one-dimensional study of events and ideologies and more likely to become engaged in violence.

Education can play a role in offering Yemenis a forum for community connection. The desire for group membership is a key factor in recruitment into armed groups. By building communities based on mutual goals for families and development, an opportunity exists to take advantage of Yemen's culture of dialogue, engaging stakeholders to come together to discuss issues.

Peacebuilding entry points in education and learning

Peace dividends in education alone will be insufficient to make real changes to conflict dynamics in Yemen. New and innovative approaches that focus on opening up dialogue, supporting advocates for peace and fostering a sense of inclusion, trust and opportunity are needed. Potential peacebuilding entry points in education and learning include:

Political and policy responses

- **Promote higher education sector development** to strengthen capacities for governance, long-term economic growth and women's empowerment.

- **Engage with key regional and local political and religious leaders** to open dialogue between opposing groups, counter extremism and support civic education focused on non-violent political engagement.

- **Expand women's access to jobs and education** to lessen population growth, promote development and strengthen civic and political engagement.

- **Support market-linked livelihood activities in Yemen and abroad,** including the design and delivery of vocational education and training linked to current and projected labour market requirements.

- **Support transitional justice-related institutions** through technical support and materials, focused on dismissals and land commissions in the south.

Structural reforms

- **Develop programming via a 'third tribe' approach:** Yemen has a traditional culture of conflict resolution rooted in the engagement of a neutral third party – the 'third tribe' – for arbitration. Programmatic responses that tap into this existing structure may be more likely to find success.

- **Support women-led peacebuilding organizations:** Women are extensively involved in non-governmental and civil society organizations in Yemen. Supporting these organizations is a key way to promote women's contributions to and involvement in peacebuilding.

- **Engage in integrated development planning processes at multiple levels** in non-political areas. A bottom-up planning process would manage expectations, facilitate dialogue and foster a shared awareness across political, regional and sectarian lines.

- **Pursue highly flexible funding models** to enable local adaptation and ownership of programming and to maximize the positive sociopolitical and peacebuilding benefits of development assistance. Pursue community-driven development to build cohesion and reduce tensions.

- **Investigate options to improve access** to education for students in the south, who are denied access to their schools by roadblocks or civil disobedience at least two days a week.

Individual and interpersonal changes

- **Build on cultural norms of dialogue, empathy and support for the vulnerable:** Yemen's culture of dialogue enables stakeholders to come together to discuss disputes at all levels. Yemenis are generally perceived to be willing to acknowledge the grievances of other groups to which they may be in opposition. They also have a strong culture of empathy and support for the vulnerable, demonstrated through their willingness to support internally displaced people despite endemic poverty and scarce resources. Using a strength-based approach to education could build on these cultural norms to build a sense of nationhood.

- **Foster advocates for peace** by providing training on peacebuilding, conflict resolution, alternative dispute resolution and other relevant skills to youth, women, civil society organization representatives, tribal figures, local council personnel and others.