

## Youth contributions to peacebuilding during conflict in Yemen

### 1. Introduction

The escalation of conflict in Yemen in March 2015 has led to tens of thousands killed or injured, internally displaced an estimated 2.9 million people,<sup>1</sup> and pushed Yemen to the brink of famine. The bombing of health and water infrastructure, combined with a breakdown in local service provision, has contributed to a cholera outbreak, affecting almost 400,000 people, with almost 2,000 associated deaths.<sup>2</sup> The war's devastating effect on the economy has led to more than 70 per cent of the work force losing their jobs, leaving families to face difficult choices, with girls expected to marry early and young men and boys joining militias.<sup>3</sup>

The conflict has taken a heavy toll on youth activism in the country – a previously vibrant segment of civil society that emerged strongly during the 2011 revolution has been forced to retreat and adapt as their safety is increasingly under threat and the space for engagement narrows. Despite this, youth have continued to play vital roles across Yemen, demonstrating adaptability, pragmatism, and innovation in their responses to the changing context. Youth activists are spearheading local humanitarian interventions in spaces others are unable to reach, contributing to social cohesion and wellbeing within their communities, monitoring human rights abuses, and spreading messages of peace at local, national, and international levels. The international community must constructively work with and support this constituency if there is to be long-term, sustainable peace in Yemen.

This paper forms part of Saferworld's two-year Yemen project, Youth Agents for Peace. It draws on interviews with male and female youth activists based in Sana'a, Hodeidah, Hajja, Marib, Mukalla, Lahj, Ibb and Aden, conducted in July and August 2017, as well as a number of interviews with Yemenis based outside of Yemen. The paper also draws on a review of recent literature, including analysis produced by Saferworld partner organisations Resonate! Yemen and Youth Without Borders, evaluations of Saferworld's programmes in Yemen, and a roundtable discussion conducted in London in August 2017 with international donors, INGOs, and British Yemenis.

Imad Al Hammadi says, "From my point of view, peace is not just coexistence and sending messages that are aware of the meaning of peace. Peace is achieved by loving others and accepting the opinions of every person and it is his right to give his opinion and it is our right to live together And to increase the importance of tolerance and also to convey the knowledge that every human being has opinions, ideas, aspirations, religion and beliefs."<sup>4</sup>

### 2. Changing youth roles

*"Although the word activism is currently problematic in our community, I hope my activism is to serve the people." Akram, Taiz*

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<sup>1</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, August 2017.

<sup>2</sup> From UN 'Key messages on cholera', 23 July 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Oxfam (2016) 'Picking up the Pieces: What Yemenis need to rebuild their lives in a country torn apart by conflict'.

<sup>4</sup> Whatsapp interview: Imad Al Hammadi, Taiz.

The term 'youth' has a fairly amorphous definition in Yemen, usually taken to mean young people aged between 18 and 39<sup>5</sup> but also became closely associated with young people's activism during and following the revolution, when the term 'youth' came to represent a mindset as much as an age bracket.<sup>6</sup> "[Y]ou have people who are in their 50s and they say they are part of the youth revolution", explained Ibrahim Mothana in 2012, "it's those of us who are pushing to establish a civil, democratic state." The majority of the youth we spoke to in 2017 continue to describe themselves as youth activists, and have been engaged in some form of social, political, or community activism since at least the 2011 revolution, if not before.

## 2.1 A youth revolution and a stalled transition

Although young people were involved in activism prior to the revolution,<sup>7</sup> most see it as a watershed moment for their participation. "Before 2011 youth activities were very limited, to some specific areas and activities like community services", says Maged Al-Thabet, director of Taiz-based Youth Without Borders. "After 2011 there was a revolution inside the youth themselves to play more effective roles. They... had the energy and desire to be active actors in political and social life." The change squares and protest camps around the country provided an open space where young people could meet, debate, and learn from each other<sup>8</sup> and the revolution saw the formation of numerous youth-led coordinating councils and advocacy, media, and monitoring groups, including ones by women. Gradually, many registered as local CSOs.<sup>9</sup>

Following a deeply flawed transition deal, most youth continued to distrust state institutions and focused on advocacy and awareness raising, often seeing themselves as a link between the state and the society at large.<sup>10</sup> "The politicians stole our dreams, so I wanted to carry on our dreams in a more structured and institutionalised way so we can deal with the politicians, get involved with the community and amplify our voices", says Akram, 28, Taiz. At the same time, the transition did usher in some opportunities and resources for youth, including a national dialogue process<sup>11</sup> and international capacity building programmes and funding streams. Activists had a degree of access to decision-makers unheard of before the revolution. In hindsight, some of the interviewees referred to this as a "golden era"<sup>12</sup> for youth, where both youth and women were on the national government and the international community's agendas for the first time, and had "ample space to participate in community activities and in politics".<sup>13</sup> This period was not, however, without its challenges – with youth activists pushed and pulled in various directions by different actors, and navigating their own internal political divisions – and by the time conflict accelerated in 2015, a degree of exhaustion was already setting in.

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<sup>5</sup> Alwazir AZ (2012) "Youth" inclusion in Yemen: a necessary element for success of political transition' (Arab Reform Initiative).

<sup>6</sup> Email interview: Mohammed Abdul Qudous Al-Kabsi, 27, Ibb.

<sup>7</sup> 77 per cent said 'Yes' to "Before participating in the protests, did you participate in any public activism? – protests/sit ins 54.6, charity/community work 15.6, newspapers and journals 9, rights activism 8.2, political parties 7.7", from Youth Polling Center (2013) 'Capacities and needs assessments survey: Youth'.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; and interview with Mohammad Al-Shami.

<sup>9</sup> The majority of interviewees preferred CSOs as a framework for their activism; see Yemen Polling Center (2013) 'Supporting youth activism in Yemen: Challenges, priorities and needs'.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p.3.

<sup>11</sup> Including a 20 per cent quota for youth participation and 30 per cent for women.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Abeer Al-Qadsi.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Sarah Al-Faiq.

## 2.2 The impact of the conflict on youth activism

*“I’d say I was more of a youth activist before. Now there is no space for youth activism and the space for freedom has shrunk. I’d have to follow a certain agenda.” Sarah, Resonate*

Unsurprisingly, the war has taken a heavy toll on youth and civil society activities across the country, with the 2015 escalation leading to an almost immediate closing down of physical and also political and social space for youth activism,<sup>14</sup> and drastically reducing resources available to pursue development, political participation, or rights-oriented work. The limited government services that did exist collapsed, and international development organisations cancelled their programmes or switched to emergency humanitarian work. “War and conflict... replaced any political process that the youth might have hoped to engage with”, says Maged Al-Thabet. “It’s no longer in their hands to make any change, or to have any interventions – it reduces them to just watching or observing the situation.”

### **Physical dangers**

Explosive violence compounded by the almost complete collapse in rule of law across the majority of the country has created a dangerous context for activism. Movement is extremely restricted: “In the morning before you leave to work you have to check where the expected places of bombardment... in the last year it has become almost impossible to organise any [activities and] the number of evening activities has significantly shrunk”, explains Sarah Al-Faiq from Sana’a-based Resonate. Even when there is less risk of airstrikes, shelling or ground fighting, the security situation means CSOs moving between locations have to deal with getting permits from militia groups and harassment at military checkpoints. With the regular closures of Sana’a and Aden airports, travel outside of Yemen has been near to impossible for most Yemenis, and visits from internationals have been limited to INGO humanitarian or UN staff.

Conflict actors have also deliberately targeted youth organisations and activists, seeking to crack down on perceived political opposition or general civil society activity. For example, Houthi fighters raided NGO offices and the homes of civil society activists in Aden and Taiz, stealing computers, hard drives, and other equipment integral to activists’ work. An anonymous female activist from Sana’a told us that during an activity making 1,000 peace candles “the armed militias threatened me and interrogated me. They took the camera”. In Hodeidah, activities being conducted under the term ‘peace’ are being shut down or redirected by the Houthi authorities. Threats towards youth activists, as well as their friends and families, from Houthi authorities, Saleh’s National Security, various resistance militias, criminal gangs, and groups affiliated with Al Qaeda are commonly reported, and gatherings frequently face harassment or are shut down, and many activists are experiencing social media profile and email hacks. “Powers on both sides are really strongly going after critics”, explains Kristine Beckerle from Human Rights Watch.

Although also directed towards men, young women in particular appear to be receiving a lot of intimidation and threats through phone calls and social media,<sup>15</sup> and young women are also more likely to experience sexual assault, early marriage, or having their movements restricted

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<sup>14</sup> “... the war environment limits the capacity and scope of peaceful political tools and helps strengthen the role of armed groups and violence on the ground. The consequences of related repression against public and personal freedoms also limit the options for youth”, Resonate (2015), ‘Implications of the crisis in Yemen on youth political participation’.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with anonymous Southerner.

by family.<sup>16</sup> “Some girls just don’t feel safe at all, and now just stay at home”, says Zuha, 25, Germany.

Young men, including but not limited to journalists, human rights advocates, southern ‘secular’ activists, and Islahis, are at increasing risk of arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, and even assassination at the hands of a number of violent and oppressive conflict actors.<sup>17</sup> After the assassination of his friend Amjad, a young culture and education activist in Aden,<sup>18</sup> Marwan, 22, Aden, explains how threatened he felt: “After Amjad’s death, many of my friends received death threats. I used to teach guitar, now I can’t even post something on Facebook to promote my courses. I now hate the streets in Aden, I am always cautious. When someone walks behind me I feel so threatened and scared.”

### *Economic impact*

Destroyed roads, slow internet, intermittent access to electricity, the difficulty and expense of purchasing fuel, food, and water present huge obstacles to running activities. Abdul-Aziz Morfeq, 26, from the Basement Cultural Foundation in Sana’a estimates that the financial costs of their activities have nearly doubled since the war. While the spirit of volunteerism across Yemen is strong, organisations are struggling to sustain themselves with the limited funding available.<sup>19</sup> “At the beginning youth were able to use their own pocket money to participate and conduct activities, while now it is really hard for youth... as they themselves are struggling financially”, says Sarah. At the same time, youth working on community-oriented projects have found that the needs of their participants have increased, creating a further burden. “Our governorate was struggling even before the conflict, but the conflict has exacerbated the situation”, says Buthaina Al-Selwi, Coordinator for the Hodeidah Girls Foundation. “Now, whenever we go to the field to organise activities people say that they need water and food.”

Dwindling opportunities to generate income have placed a severe burden on youth activism. While delays in government salaries, unpaid for over a year, have placed young people under tremendous pressure to contribute to their families,<sup>20</sup> the loss of internationally funded roles in the development sector has also particularly affected youth activists. When international donors and INGOs suspended their programmes, a large number of jobs and partnership roles that were filled by youth activists went with them. “Donors lost interest and stopped funding projects”, says Abeer, Al-Qadsi, Executive Director of Ijad Foundation, “while other INGOs started implementing their projects directly and stopped funding local NGOs”.

### *Social impact*

The conflict has exacerbated underlying societal divisions and created new ones,<sup>21</sup> rendering Yemen’s social fabric increasingly fragile. Many post-revolution youth activities involved bringing young men and women together across divides, but the war has polarised people to an extent that this has become much harder. “There is a social gap between youth and an increasing culture of calling people by their areas: ‘you are a southerner, a Taizi, a Northerner’”,

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<sup>16</sup> Madigan S, Insights – Care International (2017) ‘Inside conflict: What does research reveal about women’s rights and changing gender roles in Yemen?’.

<sup>17</sup> See Associated Press (2017) ‘In Yemen’s secret prisons, UAE tortures and US interrogates’.

<sup>18</sup> See Al Monitor (2017) ‘In Aden, young activists still live in fear’.

<sup>19</sup> Saferworld (2017) “‘Women nowadays do anything’: Women’s role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen’.

<sup>20</sup> Kais evaluation.

<sup>21</sup> Seumas Milne: “there’s a danger that... politics gets diverted into US-style culture wars about religion and identity at the expense of the battle for social and economic justice”, from *The Guardian* (2013) ‘Tunisia and Egypt need the Arab revolutions to spread’.

says Ola, 25, Taiz. “Sadly, there is also religious division now as we are witnessing for the first time in Yemen: ‘you are Zaidi, or you are Shafai.’” “Before we were hosting political discussions and figures from all sides as a part of cultural scene”, Abdul-Aziz tells us, “and now we don’t”. These divisions and tensions are also playing out in online spaces, and a large number of active youth have retreated from using social media to network and maintain connections.

### 2.3 Fight, flight or adapt

The combined weight of these challenges has meant that a large number of youth activities in Yemen stopped altogether. “As a result of the cultural, social, psychological pressure we divided into many factions” says Ola, “some members who supported the resistance, some joined the Houthis, some left, and others decided to remain neutral.”

Most of the youth we spoke to expressed concern about the numbers of young men from their communities who have been pushed into fighting, as a way of obtaining income. “As there are no jobs, some youth are being recruited to one or other of the conflicted parties either to fight, or to speak on their behalf”, says Mohammad Al-Shami. Maged Al-Thabet argues that it is also the suspension of the political process that has led many young men to feel they have no other alternative to prove themselves as active members of the community than to go and fight, resulting in them going into battle untrained and at greater risk of being killed. It was also noted that some young women have also been drawn into the violent conflict, with “units of women combatants in both the north and south” of the country.<sup>22</sup>

Other youth simply stopped working on their activities because they were no longer relevant to the new context.<sup>23</sup> Many of the more prominent ‘leadership’ youth figures, and those with more financial means, left the country to pursue employment and education opportunities abroad – though most continue to support activities in Yemen from outside (see section 5).

However, a significant number of both young men and young women continue to be actively engaged and adapted their work to respond to the changing context. “Although the conflict has affected the situation negatively and the role of youth and women has noticeably shrunk, there are still youth groups who are active and willing to engage”, explains Abeer. “We are a team of 14 girls”, says Buthaina Al-Selwi. “We’ve worked in the most difficult times. Even when all organisations closed down in Hodeidah, we didn’t stop.”

## 3. Youth approaches to creating peacebuilding spaces in their communities

*“The situation need us to be active and we have to be active as youth, we shouldn’t wait for people to come and help us in Hodeidah, we should be active and do what we can to help.” Buthaina, Hodeidah*

Despite facing tremendous obstacles, Yemeni youth remain convinced of the importance of civic engagement, and that they can play a positive role in their communities during the conflict. “We don’t have all the means to make the contributions we would like, but we are working with what we have”, says Abeer, 30. Many are only able to work in their immediate localities, but are

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Ola, Taiz.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Mohammad Abdul Qudous Al-Kabsi’s project in Ibb preparing for a referendum on the constitution.

engaged in a wide range of activities, addressing different social needs and laying various 'building blocks' for peace.

### ***Humanitarian relief and community organising***

*"We have never carried out any humanitarian or relief work before. However, we had to respond to the growing local needs, we couldn't just sit and wait." Waleed ElHaj, Executive Director of Bader Foundation for Development*

Faced with urgent needs and a vacuum in government services and international support, many youth activists turned their attention to emergency humanitarian efforts – and found they were quicker in their response and able to access locations that larger organisations struggled to reach. For example, providing water tanks and filling them regularly became one of the most popular charitable activities nationally, carried out by both CSOs and local communities with support from youth activists. Many organisations and initiatives also helped provide clothes, food packages, medicine for patients with chronic diseases and first aid kits, and provided tailored support to IDPs (see BOX 2). Khormakser Youth Union in Aden has worked on cholera response in Mahfad District, Abyan, organising a convoy of medical and sanitation supplies in an effort to help people in what they called 'the forgotten district'.

However, many interviewees noted that this type of support is not sustainable. Instead they have started to inject humanitarian initiatives with development and livelihood components, such as developing complementary programmes to support families to establish their own small business like food carts, home delivery kitchens, and Bokhoor and traditional scents projects.

Some youth activists are also acting as trusted focal points for diaspora money, often raised by friends from across the globe running fundraising campaigns utilising their network and social media presence. Monies are channelled within Yemen and from outside Yemen through the Hawala system to overcome the complications and restrictions the Yemeni banking system is experiencing as a result of the conflict. This financing approach is helping local initiatives to support humanitarian and relief responses in rural Yemen.

### **BOX 1. Case Study: The 1000 Bakery**

*"The bakery provides people with the bread they need without harming their dignity, away from the cameras and media campaigns that targets beneficiaries; we target 'usr mutaeafifa', families in need, and we have our guiding principles in our work which is no defamation to anyone that benefits from our initiative." Ammar Murshed, Project Founder*

Ammar's project started with a Facebook post to a 1,000 friends, suggesting each friend contribute 1,000 Yemeni Rials to help open a charity bakery. Within two weeks the first bakery was opened and six hundred donations were made to the project account. The first phase targeted 270 families in Sana'a, and drew more attention by Ramadan with the number of daily beneficiaries reaching 1,200 families. Each family receives a stamp to get bread from a local distributor (local grocery store or mini-market). The 1000 Bakery also created employment opportunities for five of the beneficiaries.

Its success meant the charity bakery was able to replicate the experience, and it is currently serving 300 families in Hodeidah. The team plans on opening a new branch in Aden. "We believe that this bakery or idea of the project is a great achievement because it has a role in promoting community peace, social cohesion and strengthening the social fabric. The Yemenis have sent a message to the world that they are a cohesive people, through turning one person's idea into a

project that serves more than 8,000 people per day”, says Ammar. Although the bakery provides for a large number of people, the team is struggling: “To continue the project we need financial support. It’s hard to sustain the project without funding because the amount of bread we give for free is more than what we sell”, explains Ammar.

## **BOX 2. Case study: IDP Camps – Sana’a and Marib**

Across Yemen, local CBOs and youth initiatives have founded, worked in, and managed IDPs camps, providing immediate assistance; negotiated with local authorities; and fundraised locally. These interventions have happened across the country, in Mukalla, Ibb, Taiz, Hajjah, Hodeidah, and Amman as the main areas of host communities. Some went beyond immediate response, providing psycho-support sessions for children and fundraising for the reconstruction of IDPs homes.

Marib residents living near the front line fled and set up tents and shelters around the valley. The Dam of Marib Foundation, a local youth-led CSO, was able to manage an emergency IDPs response, targeting 4,558 families (27,156 people) in Serwah, Vally, Al-Maghzar, Raghwan, and Marib city and providing water, sanitation, blankets, solar lamps, and emergency shelter materials. The project ran in collaboration with the Sama Foundation and was funded by UNHCR. Through a UNOCHA fund, the Foundation also documented a further 17 IDPs groups in Marib. The absence of an accurate IDP database is one of the main challenges: “It is very hard to have a database when people are constantly moving and changing their locations”, says Sadam Al-Adwar, 26, Dam ‘Sad’ of Marib Foundation. “The very hot weather, and the rough road are also very challenging circumstances that we have to deal with whenever we go to the field to provide services.” However: “Due to our impartiality, the organisations were able to provide services to IDPs of Marib, both in Marib, which is a government-controlled area, and Sana’a, which is controlled by the others,” says Sadam .

Similarly, Bader Foundation started the Eghatha Relief project to respond to IDPs coming from the three main districts within Sana’a (Sawan, Noqum, and Attan) where there was heavy bombardment. “After the negotiations with the capital administrative district ‘Ammant Al-Assema’, we managed to secure the Olympic centre and each family was given a room”, says Waleed Elhaj, 29, *Executive Director* of Bader Foundation. The camp provided essential services, psycho-social support, and a coordination space for many national and international NGOs to respond and support IDPs. Working with INGOs, the project team reported the location to the coalition as a temporary IDP camp to avoid any military action. They have also worked with Yemeni business men to help reconstruct some of the IDP houses that are less damaged, and rented a hotel to host families who are unable to find alternative shelter.

### ***Psycho-social support***

Many Yemenis are struggling with depression, helplessness, and trauma and youth activists have attempted to provide their community with some form of psychological support. In Aden, immediately after the Houthis were expelled, one local organisation,

Wgood Foundation For Human Security, self-funded psycho-social support for women, men, and youth. Another Adeni organisation voluntarily implemented a programme reintegrating child soldiers, providing them with psychological support and basic civic education. In Sana’a, the Bader Foundation and Ijad Foundation voluntarily organised group sessions for young

people to share their experiences. “We didn’t have funds to arrange psycho-support sessions for youth, but we did it anyway. During the sessions, young men were crying more than young women, every single one of them had lost a loved one and experienced fear and loss,” says Abeer.

Some youth-led CSOs received international funding to implement psycho-support projects targeting women and children, mainly in central cities like Sana’a, Aden, and Hodeidah.. Child Safe Zones are safe spaces created by CSOs to help children express their experiences during the conflict and reflect it in painting and puppet theatres. When schools were shut down the safe zones were providing educational lessons to keep children connected to schools. There is also support for victims of gender-based violence (GBV), primarily for IDP women, given the increasing levels of domestic violence since the start of the conflict. Some training courses to educate respondents on issues related to psycho-support responses have been organised: “I trained six youth organisations who are responding to the conflict and targeting vulnerable communities like IDPs and others. Lately, there has been an increasing interest in psycho-support especially from youth. The idea of Safe Zones has become popular, especially for children. However, more work needs to be done to support vulnerable women”, says Afra’a Qahtan, Independent Psycho-Social Support Consultant.

#### *Peace messaging, civic education, and arts*

Youth have been using both traditional and creative means to spread messages of peace across Yemen. In Ibb, Mobaderoon Foundation trained activists on conflict resolution, and in Mukalla, Moutatweoon Foundation started the Atelier of Peace Project to encourage peace messages and co-existence in schools. Other youth groups designed stickers with peace messages and quotes from the Quran, disseminating them on public transport. Saferworld has provided a micro-grant to Ola Al-Aghbari to produce a set of guidelines to educate youth who are new to peacebuilding work on basic concepts of conflict transformation and the main tools that are used to promote peace.

Educational tools are also used for more immediate practical purposes. Given the increasing dangers of landmines, some youth groups have worked on awareness raising campaigns to inform people on their prevalence and how to deal with suspected explosives. In Marib, youth volunteers worked in coordination with local authorities to raising awareness among 31,289 inhabitants, including 7,381 IDPs, about landmines and explosives.<sup>24</sup>

Art and cultural activities have also become more tailored to peacebuilding. In Aden, the city was celebrated through cultural events such as the Aden Exhibition for Architectural Heritage and Aden’s Summer Festival. These events were designed to provide a safe and joyful space for people and to encourage cultural activities as a means to promote peace. There is an increasing artistic presence with singers, painters, filmmakers, and photographers across the country. Several exhibitions took place in Sana’a, and women artists are finding more space to express themselves. Street art, especially graffiti, has become a prominent form of advocacy and awareness raising in Yemen. “Our work is seriously involved in the peace process because it moves people from the sphere of war to another sphere. Arts and culture shows that life is much worth living than being involved in war”, says Abdul-Aziz Morfeq, Project Coordinator, Basement Cultural Foundation.

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<sup>24</sup> Email interview: Sadam Al-Adwar.

Media and new media tools have also been used to combat extremism and promote peace and social cohesion. The Saferworld-sponsored video, 'Let's Co-exist', shows communalities between Yemenis; while 'Hadramtoon' is an animated series that discusses social issues in Hadramout: "I can now comfortably say that we have now reached to every Hadrami house, we reached that by speaking the local dialect and making it WhatsApp friendly", says Badr Bin-Halabi, 39, Producer. Media projects also help build bridges between IDP-youth and host communities youth; the Youth of Peace Foundation trained youth from both communities on filmmaking, presenting the short documentaries they produced to a Sana'a audience.

### **BOX 3. Case Study: You Can Video – Hodeidah Girls Foundation**

The Hodeidah Girls Foundation designed a video project to promote 'Peace, Charitable Acts, and Education', with the peace component as the dominant focus. Forty-seven men, women, and children participated in the production. Prior to promoting the video on social media, the team disseminated it among youth in Hodeidah and organised a screening that was attended by 50 people to get feedback. "We made questionnaires to assess the messages youth received from it, and then we uploaded it to our YouTube channel", says Buthaina Al-Selwi, 26, Coordinator. The video was shot in Hodeidah between January and March 2016, with the team overcoming obstacles including getting shooting permits from the local authorities and raising funding, as despite the project being financed by Saferworld's micro grants, costs increased as part of overall price rises in Yemen. "The video was spread between youth and it attracted their attention... they requested that we also address other issues in a similar way, because the videos are an easy and affective way to drive change among youth" Buthaina told us.

The video is accessible with English subtitles at the organisation's YouTube Channel: [You Can](#).

### **BOX 4. Case Study: Aden Radio?**

to talk to Shaima/Nada

#### ***Entrepreneurship***

The loss of financial security has encouraged creativity, innovation, and tenacity within some of Yemen's youth, especially for those who had access to some financial resources or specific knowledge and skills. Some youth have started enterprises for both financial and social benefits, including providing solar energy services, opening food carts, or designing web and phone apps to connect customers with services or employers with employees. For example, FindAp, provides information on services and service providers in a wide-range of areas, and users are rewarded 50 Yemeni Rials for every service they add, and Ana Mehani, "a social labour market that connects vetted community-based workers with households".<sup>25</sup>

Home-based online businesses run by women have also become more prominent, in part due to the loss in income from male providers. Younger women have turned their interests and hobbies into small businesses, such as providing home-food deliveries and selling cakes, body-care products, and clothing and accessories online. "My sister in Turkey and her friend in Yemen started a business together, she is managing the shipping in Turkey and sending it back to Yemen", says Zuha Yassin,<sup>29</sup> Germany. In Aden, two women have started mobile repair shops, a popular destination for women as they feel more secure in handing over their data and mobile content.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.anamehani.com/>

### ***Human rights monitoring***

Youth in several governorates are monitoring, documenting, and reporting human rights abuses and breaches of international humanitarian law (IHL) related to the active conflict, domestic violence, and GBV. In Lahj governorate, for example, Bassma Foundation for Development documents post-war violations including unlawful killing, bombardments, child abuse, and other human rights abuses, when previously they documented IHL violations during the war.

However, youth are often only able to report on a side that is less threatening to them depending on their location; for example, it is easier to report on coalition violations in Houthi/Saleh controlled areas as it plays into their narrative. In the South, where there are an increasing number of activist detentions by UAE coalition forces, it is much harder to speak out. However, some Southern activists persist, in part because they “see these detentions as deeply detrimental to a future Southern state” that they want based on human rights.<sup>26</sup> For safety, some youth, unable to protest about the situation directly, channel information and documentation to foreign journalists and human rights organisations.

### **BOX 5. Case Study: The *Rasd* (‘Documentation’) Project – Taiz**

Despite starting with few resources, the *Rasd* (‘Documentation’) project run by Youth Transparency and Building Foundation (YTBF) became one of the most credible and trusted sources reporting on and documenting the human rights situation in Taiz. Akram and the team faced numerous challenges including a lack of financial support, difficulties traveling between locations they were documenting, and receiving threats from different conflict actors. Nonetheless, the *Rasd* project is still active: “Seeing what people are struggling from and how things are going, and the impact of our work is the thing that keeps us going. It is important to grant a fair transitional justice, which is why documentation is crucial at this point”, says Akram Al-Shawafi, Co-founder of Youth Transparency and Building Foundation (YTBF) .

Organisations attempting to report all violations face threats from all sides: “We faced so many challenges including campaigns against us and many threats including that we are working for Houthis as a result of some people’s lack of understanding on how documentation activities work”, explains Akram, “The situation in Taiz was very polarised by political actors on the ground, and it was hard to get accurate information and stats on the situation in the city because most local CSOs are owned or follow the agendas of political parties.”

YTBF are also engaging with the Governor of Taiz, local authorities, and military leaders in the areas under government control on the issues of security and the judicial system. Akram notes that the “security and judicial systems are crucial to bringing back life to the city. A lot of people are struggling from the lack of security and there are a lot of violations as a result of their absence”. The team have also organised open hearings with the public hosting government and security personnel to discuss the security challenges in Taiz.

### ***Local mediation and conflict resolution***

Some youth are also now playing a role in local mediation. Prior to the high level of violence in Taiz, a small group of youth activists organised themselves to talk to conflict parties: “We co-founded a team made of activists, doctors from Taiz; we visited all political parties, we met with the Sheikhs in Taiz, as well as public figures. Our aim was to pressure leaders of political parties

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Kristine Beckerle, Human Rights Watch.

to reach an agreement to help Taiz avoid any conflict. Sadly our efforts didn't work", recalled Ola.

In Damt, between AlDhalea and Ibb, youth played a significant role reaching an arrangement with the community, where they agreed not to take part in the conflict and to be a safe haven for IDPs.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, a local initiative in Hodeidah, Al-Khairiah Al-Shababiah Initiative, was able to utilise the knowledge they obtained on conflict resolution and resolve a local land dispute.<sup>28</sup>

### Role of young women

Interviewees had mixed feeling about the positive and negative impacts of the conflict on young women's ability to participate in activism, and it seems heavily dependent on location. "The current situation has reduced the abilities of some women to participate and opened the door for others", says Ola. In larger cities, like Sana'a and Aden, women are successfully leading local CSOs and initiatives and actively participating in peacebuilding activities. "Women now are more vocal and they speak on different issues, even in workshops it used to be mostly either men or older women speaking in events. However, now you see young women actively participating", says Waleed Al-Hajj. In Aden, a women-led organisation, Sawasia Organisation for Human Rights, is working with local authorities to raise awareness of new soldiers and security providers on human rights law, how to treat/deal with suspects and detainees, and how to win citizens trust. In Ibb, women are playing a positive role in encouraging male members of the family to stay away from the conflict.<sup>29</sup>

However, young women in hot zones like Taiz have reduced their activism and visibility for safety reasons. It has also become harder for women from several governorates to join activities in central cities and to participate in trainings and workshops due to the deteriorating security situation. The dire economic status for most Yemeni families has meant that fewer women are able to join voluntary activities as they did prior to the conflict. Similar to young men, women also had to start looking for income sources to support their families, and those who were dependent on their parents were affected by the halt of salaries and the price hicks which meant they lost their monthly stipends they used to get from the parents.

### Differences across locations

Youth activities are affected by location, as this determines access to services, financial resources, and capacity building opportunities. Decades of centralised and inequitable division of resources, education, and opportunities – mostly Sana'a centric – had a great impact on the way local youth were able to respond to the conflict, especially when it came to making their voices/stories heard internationally. Due to language barriers and a lack of experience in documenting human rights violations during active conflict, activists in Aden and Taiz found it harder to communicate their situation to the international community, while activists in Sana'a were able to report the situation easily with better Internet access and fewer language hurdles. "We were voluntarily documenting everything in Aden, we risked our lives to be able to make our voices heard; however, international organisations wanted a Sana'a-based CSO to be the one who gets funded to do the work we were doing", says X

Overall, activities in main cities seem to utilise less traditional tools to convey their messages; besides trainings and workshops, there is support for art, filmmaking, puppet theatre, and other

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Mohammad Al-Shami.

<sup>28</sup> Saferworld evaluation, Kais

<sup>29</sup> Saferworld (2017), *op.cit.*

creative means. In other governorates, workshops and trainings seem to be the main activities for peace messaging; while the focus of interventions in rural areas is humanitarian. Youth who travel from their villages or smaller cities to the centre for education demonstrate a positive attitude, as they voluntarily spread the knowledge and cascade trainings in their local areas. “The special thing is that some of the youth we trained were students in AMEDIST, coming from AlDhalea, Abyan, Ibb, and Hadramout, and after the training they surprised us by taking the initiative and conducting the training in their governorates”, says Athar Mohammed, Co-founder of Alef Ba’a Madania Foundation.

#### 4. Youth activism: contributing to long-term, sustainable peace

*“Reducing the suffering of people – this is one type of driving peace... bring[ing] people together and help them understand each other’s opinions is another type of driving peace and ... involv[ing] youth in social work is also a way of driving peace.” Buthaina*

Although they lack the considerable resources of elite actors, youth activists have demonstrated adaptability, pragmatism, and innovation in their responses to the changing context. The activists interviewed felt their interventions of whatever scale were necessary to deal with immediate needs – such as with the 1000 Bakery (see BOX 1) – and long-term necessities – such as peace messaging. This involvement is critical for Yemen and their own futures; as Athar says, “We see that our existence does make a difference, even if it is in a very small scale.”

The impact of their interventions is evident in a number of ways. They help communities cope with the direct effects of war in the short term; help address consequences of conflict that are less visible, such as psychological trauma and societal fragmentation; and help develop a new generation of leaders who will be able to offer peaceful alternatives in future. Youth recognise that these interventions are helping establish a culture of peacebuilding through awareness raising, capacity building in community and youth initiatives, and by building networks. These experiences and analysis of the situation embolden youth to “define their goal and national interests and to employ the social media and other cultural expressions so as... to reform social mobilization [cautiously] in times of danger”.<sup>30</sup>

##### **Keeping youth from joining conflict**

*“Rehabilitation harnesses their energy on the positive side instead of being dragged by others to take up arms and participate in wars. Our actions, although simple, contribute significantly to the construction and manufacture of peace.” Anon, Sana’a*

One of the overriding objectives expressed by youth activists is to provide alternative visions and options to young people, to keep them away from conflict. Across the country, youth activists saw every project as a conflict prevention activity – as opportunities to dissuade young men and women from becoming combatants or being drawn into identity-based politics and violence.

Economic opportunities, such as those from the 1000 Bakery, not only provide people with food and jobs, but these paid jobs provide income that help prevent young men from fighting. Sarah Al-Faiq explains the difficult choices being made by young people: “His mum was a civil servant, and as a result of... not being paid, she started working as a housekeeper. [He] then became a fighter... because he thought when he dies his mum would get a martyr’s salary. He died and his mum got nothing.”

<sup>30</sup> Whatsapp interview with Abdullah Qasem, 37, Executive Director of STEP Human Development Organization, Taiz.

Similarly, cultural and educational activities provide avenues for youth engagement towards more constructive futures, away from conflict. In Aden, Marwan Aidaroos noted the importance of not only attending cultural events, but meeting open minded friends: “This will help them be more tolerant and move them away from extremism.” With similar motivations, Abdullah Al-Ghurabi, 24, continued education activism after leaving Yemen for Canada, building the first online educational platform in Yemen called ‘EduYemen’, “keeping youths busy with educational sources online can prevent them from getting involved in any activities that can harm them and causes more violence in the region.”

This commitment to deterring young people from joining the conflict means youth activists have become role models, providing an alternative vision of agency and empowerment to that of violence. Acting not because it is a choice but because it is vital, youth leading CSOs often use their own money to keep organisations running: “I sold my personal gold to continue our work because I saw how important our work is”, recalls Abeer Al-Qadsi from Ijad Foundation. “We’ve got to do it, otherwise no-one will do it. If we don’t engage with youth, we’re losing more of them to the battlefields. [We are] selling [our] own things because we value the lives of others.”<sup>31</sup>

#### *Maintaining social cohesion and community relationships*

Long-term peacebuilding relies upon community cohesion, and these youth activities help sustain relationships that could easily deteriorate under the strain of continuing conflict. Being part of and working with communities establishes trust between youth activists and local people, creating space for cooperation: “When you go and speak to the people and ask them ‘what are your needs?’ it means a lot to them”, says Athar.

Through bringing different community stakeholders together, even activities that look fairly basic on the surface are actually working at multiple levels. By working collaboratively on projects, there is potential for the activity safe space to lead to dialogue beyond the immediate task, helping to form and maintain community relationships that can contribute to securing peace in the long term, “identify mechanisms and leaders for handling disputes, and create the channels that can ultimately feed local interests and concerns into national processes”.<sup>32</sup>

In some ‘post-conflict’ areas within Yemen, where local disputes can be resource-based, if communities have the mechanisms to resolve disputes, they can mitigate the influences of further conflict: “As the significance of local communities has increased due to the war, conflict resolution on a national scale must build upon these dynamics”.<sup>33</sup> These alternative forms of community organisation and planning and decision-making inclusion at the local level have been shown to contribute to building social relationships at the local level, even when damaged by conflict – for example, in Eastern Congo and Sudan – and can re-emerge within community networks using community-based approaches.<sup>34</sup>

Youth initiatives have also maintained or established positive relationships with local authorities, beyond merely negotiating access or space to operate, such as Sawasia’s work with the security sector in Aden, raising awareness on human rights law and handling detainees (see

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<sup>31</sup> ? where from?

<sup>32</sup> Search for Common Ground (2017), ‘Pathways for peace and stability in Yemen relies on addressing local divisions’.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Pouligny B, (2005) ‘Civil society and post-conflict peacebuilding: Ambiguities of international programmes aimed at building ‘new’ societies’, *Security Dialogue* 36, (4), cited in Haider, H (2009) ‘Community-based approaches to peacebuilding in conflict-affected and fragile contexts’.

section 3). This kind of local level relationship between state and communities may be more feasible than at the national level – especially when there is a practical need for cooperation as in the case of landmine clearing in Marib. Akram, Taiz, notes that youth activists and authority cooperation has enabled them to learn about “how they can work to monitor government activities and issue good governance. Youth now have a voice in the community and it is up to them to assume it”. Youth involvement in local decision-making at this stage in the country’s conflict can lay the groundwork for more participative and inclusive politics - while broader community-based approaches do not necessarily translate into greater participation and inclusion, in Yemen many youth activists have had these values as a core *raison d’être*, and have the capacity, if supported, to feed them into the manner in which they work .

### *Creating a constituency and resources for peace*

Revolutionary hopes combined with the realities of adapting to deal with the conflict – developing skills and accruing resources through necessity – have shaped a number of youth activists as empowered citizens at the local level and potentially as a new generation of national leaders who will be able to offer peaceful alternatives in future. Ola and others recognised that although small scale community activism contributes to local peacebuilding, for future peacebuilding efforts she would need to influence national and international decision-makers, “spending the time with the locals in the field is important, but influencing the bigger picture is more important at this point”. Youth’s skills and experience have already resulted in some successful outcomes, such as gaining UNICEF support for the Ajial Al-Ghad Childhood Initiative to implement a children’s peace project.<sup>35</sup> Youth activists have also stepped in to fill gaps where there are specific needs. The traumas inflicted by the conflict have created demands for civil society to work on mental health projects, leading to initiatives such as Child Safe Zones and projects that work with IDPs and women, as discussed in section 3.

Youth activities have been notable and resulted in a body of resources that can be preserved and utilised for future peacebuilding purposes. As Kristine Beckerle observes, “There is a lot of info being produced by activists – hard copy Arabic reports chock full of info – [with] no one putting them online or translating. Already [they have] begun collecting evidence for transitional justice issues.” This evidence could be crucial as part of a peace process which deals with transitional justice. Thus gathering and archiving vital documentation is necessary for long-term sustained peace; as Akram argues, “Any peace agreement without granting justice for the victims will only lead to more conflict in future”. However, adequate resourcing to safeguard this knowledge is needed. Mohammad Al-Shami highlighted the resource gap, “In general, there are no study centres, there are no libraries”, with Ola noting that research centres are essential, “so if we documented the situation now and publishing policy papers and research, if it didn’t help us now it will help in the future”.

Many youth activists have also been able to maintain some minimal links to other youth groups across the country; and an ambition to work at a national scale and spread peace messages further than their immediate communities already exists. Projects like the Hokokioon for Peace work across Aden, Abyan, and Sana’a, training human rights activists to “promote how human rights can protect people from extremism”, sharing success stories through social media in order “to promote peace and co-existence between the three governorates”, says Athar. The demographic importance of youth means spreading and consolidating the concepts of

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<sup>35</sup> Evaluation (Hodeidah)

coexistence, peacebuilding, tolerance, reconciliation and acceptance among them is one of the most important steps in building the modern civil state.<sup>36</sup>

Despite youth activists' commitment and enthusiasm, they also recognise the scale of the challenge – structurally and personally. Although youth are demonstrating how they are invested in the future of the country, they are often excluded by formal entities; some INGOs do work with them but as Waleed notes, “we need more youth involvement as many entities do not accept the idea that youth should be involved in the peacebuilding/making process”. Keeping positive and carrying on with the activities is difficult, but necessary, as Zuha explains, “These stories represent the spirit of youth, but it’s not the whole picture. I don’t feel like peace is belonging to Yemen anymore... But maybe these small initiatives will help society [and] will make peace come back to Yemen, but it takes a long time and a lot of support”. Considered, holistic, and long-term support to the youth who are carrying out the activities that are sustaining Yemen more than two-years into a war are needed. They are the peacebuilders, and without their commitment, the country would be facing even more difficulty.

## 5. International support for youth and peacebuilding in Yemen

*“It’s really important that donors target youth. Even if it’s silly activities. Without any sources of income or any opportunities, they will be victims of violence. Never give up, work together, peace can be achieved” Maged Al Thabet.*

All the youth interviewed for this paper see positive roles for international donors and international NGOs in Yemen, and reported continued positive working relationships with a range of European, UN and North American organisations, despite the challenges in finding funding and partners for their work. However, it was definitely felt strongly that youth are no longer a priority target group for international organisations, and that the level of relationships and trust that existed prior to the conflict have diminished. “Even the INGOs have to rebuild the trust with the youth, because at the beginning of the war they disappeared from society. They have to study more the needs of the youth: it’s not like before”, says Zuha.

Due to the intensity of the conflict, there has been a great deal of attention paid to the establishment of a national level peace process, and responding to emergency needs – both of which are a huge priority for youth, but have also come at a cost to longer-term thinking and relationships on the ground.<sup>37</sup> It is crucial that the international community do not put working with youth activists into a ‘post-conflict’ category, forgotten or side-lined while an overall deal may or may not be successfully brokered.<sup>38</sup> By following a ‘wait and see’ approach, international organisations risk losing the relationships that are at the heart of what they do – and will be harder and harder to rebuild further down the line.

A broad view on what contributes to peacebuilding during a conflict is also necessary, one which goes beyond narrow focuses on negotiation processes, and looks towards multi-faceted, small but joined up innovative initiatives that contribute in different ways to building the

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<sup>36</sup> Email interview: Mohammed Abdul Qudous Al-Kabsi. 27, Ibb.

<sup>37</sup> RT: Miranda (Mercycorps): Capacity/relationships have gone.

<sup>38</sup> “Recognize that planning for a postconflict future, while important, should not be the top priority. Follow the World Bank’s lead in finding ways to work on the ground through local partners.” “In aid and stabilization preparations, plan and budget for armed hostilities to continue, even in the event of a peace deal or cease-fire arrangement” Peter Slaisbury <http://www.agsiw.org/bickering-while-yemen-burns-poverty-war-and-political-indifference/>

structures and relationships needed for long-term peace in different ways. Support for the kind of civic activism outlined in this paper has the potential to transform lives at the community level and beyond. To assist youth activists to continue their work, and to help maintain space where it can take place, this support must be holistic and attentive to fast changing needs, and involve both practical and political measures.

Below we outline some suggestions for international donors and NGOs who are looking to provide greater or improved support to youth who are active in their communities in Yemen:

### **1. (Decentralise and) work locally**

For the past decade or more, a key problem has been that international support to civil society has been heavily centralised, particularly when it comes to youth programming, the bulk of which has happened in or around the capital city of Sana'a.<sup>39</sup> "Sometimes donors force you to work in certain places. It is something we would like to see changing as there are a lot of activities and projects happening in Sana'a while other governorates need more attention", says Waleed. This pattern has been exacerbated by the conflict, during which access to areas outside the capital has been restricted, movement of people to the capital has been restricted, and many internationals have followed a national emergency response model that has deprioritised areas moving out of intense conflict. "In Aden in 2015, internationals were not open to transitioning back to post-conflict and instead funded humanitarian work in the North", says Jonathan, former Yemen Director for Mercy Corps. "We didn't deal with the trauma created by six months of chaos." The design of international interventions and support needs to take into account legacy that this centralised approach has had on the youth activists, particularly those in the south of the country and in more rural locations, considering the geographical disconnects it has exacerbated, and the (sometimes perceived) lag in skills and experiences in certain areas of the country.

As the conflict in Yemen leads to greater fragmentation and social cohesion at the local-level continues to disintegrate, working locally, maintaining local relationships and being driven by local needs analysis is increasingly vital. "There are many conflicts that need to be analyzed and understood with local tools", says al Kathiri. "No national or international process can be successful and sustainable without targeted support to local level efforts to address [conflict] divides," notes Search for Common Ground.<sup>40</sup> Projects such as Badr Bin-Halabi's work as a visual media activist could have been done from Jordan, but he is committed to working from Mukalla regardless of practical difficulties: "Hadramtoon as one of our projects, hav[ing] almost reached to every Hadrami house; mainly because it speaks in the the Hadrami dialect, it reaches to their homes with the messages." Greater efforts should be made to reach out to youth in rural locations, and to engage with local government authorities in areas where they are still a functioning, positive presence<sup>41</sup> – and emerging youth leaders are well positioned to take this forward.

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<sup>39</sup> "The Sana'a-centric outlook of the international community threatens to overlook urgent peripheral concerns and fosters a dangerous disconnect to concerns of Yemenis outside the capital" from Saferworld 'Public protest and visions for change'

<sup>40</sup> Violence and the humanitarian crisis now reach all Yemenis, diplomatic attempts at peace negotiations and ceasefires in 2016 were unsuccessful, and social cohesion at the local-level continues to disintegrate. Yet the current situation in Yemen is not ripe for a military or high-level diplomatic solution to take hold because it will be undermined by the existing and deepening conflicts at the local level. Societal divides – tribal, sectarian, regional, and political – are deepening and remain the critical lever for peace and stability. Search for Common Ground, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> See POMED and Sana'a centre

## 2. Work flexibly

INGOs need to “forget the culture of the project” when it comes to youth programming, says Mohammad Al-Shami, a long-standing youth activist currently working for the UNFAO. Supporting youth work in such a complex, hostile, and dynamic environment requires a degree of flexibility that many current international programming models do not have, and ensuring that international support is not pushing youth activists into pre-existing frameworks. This includes: allowing space for youth activists to try things that might fail; flexible workplans and budgets that can be adapted and altered at the last minute, with contingency funds for security; the ability to support small, innovative actions that may not achieve direct, tangible (or classically ‘measurable’) results; funding that is absorbable by smaller entities and doesn’t place too heavy an administrative or compliance burden<sup>42</sup>; and funding and evaluation cycles that allow for relationships to be developed and changes to be measured over time.

A number of international organisations, including Saferworld and Yemen Peace Project have found that providing seed funding – in the area of \$500 to \$1000 per activity – to individual activists and small collectives has worked well to support local peace work, and have had multiplier effects including bringing in more sustainable resources, and more youth volunteers. Will from Yemen Project explains that such seed funding or microgrants is a more effective and efficient model, rather than creating projects in-house and paying international staff – “we find Yemenis who want to work in these areas [of justice, accountability and democracy] and offer technical and administrative support. Everything other than US policy can be done through microgrants”.

### **BOX 6. Case Study: Building Peace using Whatsapp**

With mobility drastically reduced and so many organisations, both local and international, unable to carry out their normal operations, Yemeni youth are increasingly turning to their smart phones to organise and share ideas. Saferworld is piloting a project using WhatsApp’s wide reach as the most popular online communication tool in Yemen to deliver remotely a course on *Participatory Peacebuilding Course*.

More than 100 participants from across Yemen were formed into online WhatsApp groups (out of 750+ who applied), creating communities where volunteer moderators from Saferworld, local partner organisations, and affiliated youth have been guiding participants through a series of lessons delivered through interactive discussions and activities, photos, audio, video clips and infographics. The idea of the course is to mobilise local knowledge and expertise, share knowledge and experiences, and offer new skills and materials relating to local level peacebuilding, including elements on self-care and personal resilience. Each group was put together to ensure a variety of backgrounds and viewpoints, with the idea of maintaining links between youth activists across political and geographic divides.

The course has been particularly successful at building a safe space and facilitating productive engagement with youth, with a very low drop-out rate from participants, and may provide a model for participative remote training that could be applied by other organisations. Surprisingly perhaps given the remote nature of the course, the moderators observed that trainees were most motivated about the more interactive and less technical activities. The

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<sup>42</sup> Women-led initiatives usually require only small amounts of funding; donors should therefore redesign the mechanisms for making funds available in order to suit the needs of those smaller entities.

Women nowadays do anything.”

Women’s role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen

participants found talking to other people with different viewpoints particularly beneficial and felt that the course helped them rethink the way they look at themselves and others and be more receptive to forming and sharing new ideas.

### **3. Devolve decision-making and support youth to manage risk**

In order to support small, dynamic programming at a very local level during conflict, greater trust needs to be given to local partners and implementers, with greater devolution of decision-making and programme design duties/powers. Mohammad Al-Shami worries that one of the reasons this is not happening is INGOs own strategic positioning for continued funds: “if they are not looking to leave the country, they don’t build the capacity of local organisations, and they create a culture of dependency so they can keep their work on the ground”. However, the role of the intermediary organisations, national or international, who work between local activists and the major INGOs and donors shouldn’t disappear, says Leonie Northedge of Saferworld. “Activists shouldn’t have to be institutionalised and become like CSOs, and should be supported by the mid-level organisations – but this is a difficult argument because it’s an additional layer of management and it’s expensive.”

In complex, hostile environments, this middle layer is also crucial to helping local activists manage risk. Concerns have been raised over international deferral of risk to local organisations – situations where international organisations “rely on local people to carry out work in the world’s war zones while their own staff remain holed up in bunkers”,<sup>43</sup> or the relationship with international actors in itself can pose a risk. However, the overwhelming sense from our conversations was that the majority of youth activism would be happening anyway, with or without international assistance, and that youth activists are evaluating their own risks on a day-to-day basis, although care should always be taken to ensure internationals are not pushing activities in their own directions. “Instead the approach is to mitigate risk by training in security”, say Sawsan from Internews, including on digital security and other risks, and making funds available so that activists on the ground can request support to deal with problems encountered or to get mental health support. NGO security platforms should also be better tailored to suit the needs of local Yemeni staff and partners, as they currently remain focused upon and embedded within international humanitarian entities rather than among national and local organisations that are so often present at the front lines.<sup>44</sup>

### **4. Support platforms and resources for peace**

The ongoing conflict means that youth activists are finding themselves faced with increasingly complex and changing environments to work in, and many of our interviewees felt that they or their peers had skills gaps, particularly those based outside of Sana’a. In particular, they identified a need for more Arabic resources and more technical support on areas such as personal risk management, conflict analysis, conflict sensitivity and do no harm, human rights documentation, use of media and social media during conflict, civic education, business and project management skills, resource mobilisation, psychosocial support, child protection, conflict resolution and transformation, accountability, local governance, and DDR.<sup>45</sup>

A lot of fantastic resources are also being created by local Yemeni groups that could be collated and disseminated more effectively. “Setting up a website and posting stuff online or a database where people can add their work sounds technical but could be really useful”, says Kristine from HRW. The evaluation of Saferworld’s Participatory Peacebuilding course (BOX xxx) highlighted

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<sup>43</sup> *The Guardian* (2017) ‘Bunkers, blackmail and bureaucracy: aid agencies accused of outsourcing danger’, 22 June.

<sup>44</sup> Presence and Proximity: Zyck

<sup>45</sup> Saferworld (2017) *op.cit.*

a desire to learn from other Yemeni examples (over and above examples from other Middle Eastern conflicts, such as Syria) and the value of peer to peer learning, recommending that INGOs take time to research case studies of peacebuilding initiatives that are already taking place in Yemen. Internationals can also play a role in funding and facilitating ‘neutral’ spaces where activists can come together and maintain links, and support peer-to-peer learning both on and offline. Saferworld and others are also trialling innovative ways of supporting activities when face to face meetings and activities are not possible, through participatory e-learning and xxx (see BOX xxx).

Youth activists themselves are a critical resource for peace. “INGOs should involve youth in their work”, says Buthaina, “INGOs [tend to] hire experts and send them to the field, but the youth in the local level work harder and double that effort.” Since 2011, a number of different INGOs and Yemeni NGOs, including Search for Common Ground, NDI, Mercy Corps, Chatham House, Yemen Polling Centre, YLDF, have developed cadres of youth leaders, advocates, facilitators, and mediators. Efforts should be made to reconnect with these groups, see who is engaged in peace-oriented work, and help them acquire any additional skills necessary to work in the current conflict context, and run Training of Trainers sessions so that the skills these youth have built are cascaded.

#### **5. Consider livelihoods and education opportunities**

When designing interventions, it should also be recognised that involvement in community-based programmes can be time-consuming, taking participants away from economic activities,<sup>46</sup> and that even participation in online activities (requiring data) can leave activists out of pocket. While it is important that peace-oriented work retain its spirit of volunteerism (which is clearly evident across Yemen),<sup>47</sup> thought should be given to covering costs, including to ensure that youth activists are not excluded if they are less well off. For those local CSOs and initiatives running larger programmes, it is vital that their overheads are fully recovered and that there is a degree of stability to any funding and associated salaries coming in, even if the amounts are not huge – for the long-term work required, long-term funding cycles are also needed. The employment created by international development projects should not be considered a by-product or a lesser priority, but an important lifeline to highly skilled workers who have strong links to the communities. “People carrying out the work need support as well as the end-beneficiaries”, says Rebecca from IA, and the short-termism of projects means this kind of work can’t be sustained.

“Peacebuilding will come out of livelihoods”, says Helen Lackner, an expert in development work in Yemen, and peacebuilding work should maintain links to economic interventions and job creation more broadly. A burgeoning area for both income generation and community work is social enterprise, and more work could also be done with youth activists to help them with capital support and acquire relevant business skills. Zuha, currently based in Lebanon, says she is thinking of doing a masters in entrepreneurship in conflict zones – “th[e youth] can find their customers and find their markets and there are plenty of opportunities to open small businesses, including IDPs in the camps”, but they need greater financial support to get started.

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<sup>46</sup> Haider *op.cit.*

<sup>47</sup> Buthaina: Although voluntary work may not provide you with any financial income, there is a lot of knowledge and skills one can gain from volunteering. Personally, if I didn’t engage in voluntary work and social activism I would have spent a lot of my money on courses and on trying to learn different things. So don’t focus on money, because there is much more value in volunteering than just the financial benefit.

The huge decline in formal educational opportunities due to the conflict was mentioned as frequently as livelihoods by the interviewees, with many youth having dropped out from high school or university because it became unaffordable. International governments and foundations should increase the numbers and variety of scholarships available for Yemenis inside and outside of Yemen, and online, as well as supporting international academic exchanges and specialist centres at Yemeni universities, such as the Women Center for Research and Training at the University of Aden, the Gender and International Development Research Centre at Sana'a University and the various journalism schools around the country. Existing international scholarships such as the UK Chevening and the US Fulbright should pay particular attention to the needs of students from conflict zones, and ensure that efforts are made to reduce additional barriers to participation (such as ensuring language qualifications being requested are accessible in different places in Yemen, or online) and specialist mental health support is made available during the course.

### **6. Work with young women**

The different security risks for young women, together with assumptions about their ability to participate and the general urgency and complexity of working in a conflict environment, means that young women are often at risk of being overlooked or side lined. Sawsan from Internews, who are working on [xxx], is particularly concerned that women's voices are not heard in this kind of work – “we usually work with young men – our programme must be diverse.” Yet in many places, young women are actually at the helm of local projects and initiatives [something about [targeting them here]

Additional mechanisms and funds should be made available to address particular barriers faced by women (such as needing to travel with a male family member, childcare, or requiring particular timings or spaces for events) to ensure continued equal representation of young women in youth work – [something that was really good pre-conflict] All programmes should be informed by full gender and conflict analysis<sup>48</sup> and seek [not only to, but to build o] Donors can assist by recognising the additional capacity required to do this, particularly larger programmes of work, and [something] <sup>49</sup>

### **7. Work with Yemenis outside Yemen**

Often overlooked is the immensely important role played by Yemenis who are outside of Yemen – both the established diaspora population and those who have left or been exiled from the country more recently. Large numbers of the youth we spoke to in Yemen mentioned external support coming in to their work in the form of small aid shipments, remittances, sponsorship<sup>50</sup> facilitating international links to set up small export/import businesses and other job-creation projects, visa support, education programmes,<sup>51</sup> and informal counselling support.

Also discussed frequently was the important role that youth activists who have managed to flee the country can continue to play in linking back to the work on the ground and raising the

<sup>48</sup> Insert link to Hannah's thing here

<sup>49</sup> Report by Oxfam and International Alert funded by the FCO, [Now is the time: Research on gender justice, conflict and fragility in the Middle East and North Africa](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/development-blog/inside-conflict-what-does-research-reveal-about-women-s-rights-and-changing-gender-roles-in-yemen). <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/development-blog/inside-conflict-what-does-research-reveal-about-women-s-rights-and-changing-gender-roles-in-yemen>

<sup>50</sup> Buthaina: We have Yemenis outside Yemen who contribute to a programme of adoption that we run, some people send money to help adopting orphan kinds through providing financial support.

<sup>51</sup> Support can come in many ways, including initiatives such as that by Abdullah in Canada who continued education activism after leaving Yemen by creating online education platforms so youth can be engaged with that instead of being driven to conflict.

voices and stories of Yemenis in international spaces. “Yemenis outside could be a bridge between the grassroots activists in Yemen and the international organisations in the countries of their residence”, says Rasha. “Those of us outside Yemen are a support network”, says Maged, “in being able to communicate with others, to travel, to speak about the issues, about youth, all contribute to supporting activists on the ground.” [Projects like al Madaniya and the Yemeni art base, and the films made by the Liverpool Arab Arts Festival, reach].

While it is important not to tailor too much programming towards a more ‘accessible’ group of people,<sup>52</sup> Yemeni exiles and diaspora can provide an incredibly important link to work on the ground. [For countries like Somalia and Syria, their diaspora are a lifeline, and have xxx]. But these groups also require support: Yemeni diaspora in the UK are concerned about rising social and political divisions within their communities as a result of the conflict, and are keen to do peace and conflict transformation work within the diaspora themselves; and there are mounting reports of Yemeni youth exiled or studying abroad unable to cope with the levels of trauma and disconnect, sometimes taking their own lives (see next section).

### 8. Provide psychological support

“Right now we have an entire generation of youth that have been terrified or terrorised by this war and who have been going through one of the most devastating psychological impacts imaginable”, writes prominent youth activist Farea Al-Muslimi.<sup>53</sup> This was a concern reiterated by many of the Yemeni youth we spoke to, who were highly concerned about the increasing rates of trauma, anxiety, depression, self-harm and even suicide among youth, including/in particular youth activists involved in community and peace-oriented initiatives and Yemeni youth in exile or studying abroad.<sup>54</sup> “We were so hopeful”, said Marwan from Aden, “but when they assassinated the governor Jaffar, I cried like I never did for a government official, they killed hope in us. Then they killed Amjad. I was with him the evening before, can you imagine what kind of psychological status I’d be in after I saw my friend’s face full of bullet holes”.

Despite the stigma that exists around mental health issues for Yemenis, a number of our interviewees identified the need for both psychological support for themselves and their peers, as well as the need for advanced training for youth who are involved in frontline work and providing services to others who are traumatized by the conflict, and often find themselves in positions of facilitating trauma counselling themselves. Such support could come in the form of mental health clinics and counselling services, but also through learning self-care techniques and collective and community approaches to dealing with trauma that may be more suitable in the Yemeni context.<sup>55</sup> These mental health lifelines should also be extended to Yemenis outside

<sup>52</sup> Mohammad: One of the most of the crucial thing is they should stop talking on behalf of the people inside. Everything is different, the methodologies and facts. Even for me, there are things where I used to think this thing could be done here or there but what is gaining on the ground is different and what ppl outside do is coming from measuring. They can still talk on behalf of the youth but it should be representative and actually coming from the ground. They need to start verifying their knowledge from the ground. One of the main issues is that youth outside use their knowledge to generate income, so they would sometimes ally their analysis to what these agencies want. INGOs need to start reaching to people from inside Yemen. I can’t really ask them to do something because they are already in a difficult situation. But they can keep doing art events, advocacy.

<sup>53</sup> <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/12/yemen-saudi-arabia-houthis-isis-al-qaeda/>

<sup>54</sup> *psychological and mental health issues were also mentioned frequently in Saferworld’s research on women. Women nowadays do anything.”*

*Women’s role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen*

<sup>55</sup> **RT: Fatima (Internews):** *trauma – need for long term work (Syria work) – but danger of ‘awakening the monster’. Therapy is expensive – funding is short term if at all available.*

*RT: Joke: trauma research being carried out.*

of the country. In the feedback given from participants in Saferworld's Participatory Peacebuilding course, the sessions on collective memory, storytelling and personal resilience were especially highly rated. Zuha told us of the group sessions her medical organisation was running in Yemen, which brought community members together in single sex safe spaces to express their feelings, play games and do therapeutic activities like weaving and storytelling – attendees “can work with families and friends and play the same games”.

### 9. Provide political support and human rights protections

International governments and organisations need to exert more pressure on the conflict actors in Yemen – including but not limited to the Houthi and Saleh forces and the UAE troops – to lift the restrictions placed on civil society groups, restore press freedoms, release all detained journalists and civil society activists, and end all forms of torture, arbitrary detention and human rights abuses. Strong, public condemnation is needed, alongside an independent international investigation of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law on all sides. Protection grants and emergency funds should be made more easily available for those human rights defenders at most risk – currently many international human rights organisations rely heavily on confidentiality to protect their local partners,<sup>56</sup> but more support needs to be available to [get people out of the country]

Political and diplomatic support for youth activists to be part of national and international decision-making processes should also be prioritised. While this should not be at the expense of working locally, it should be recognised that youth who are active in their communities are a key and active constituency for peace and are able to reflect important local youth concerns at a national level. Any high-level peace arrangement that may be established in the next few years will be unsustainable unless it gives meaningful weight to the participation of civil society women and youth<sup>57</sup> and allows space to address the political grievances that gave rise to the 2011 youth revolution.<sup>58</sup> “Peacebuilding means recognition of all social groups in the community, especially youth and women, and bringing representatives of these groups to one table... [P]olitical leaders and the international community should recognise the different social groups... and engage them in the peacebuilding process and allow them to actively participate in the political process...” says Sameh. A repeat of the GCC deal, which re-centred power and decision-making around the old elites, must be avoided. *“Although excluding civil society groups may streamline peace negotiations that are already complex enough, the absence of their voices and interests at the negotiating table can prove fatal to the peace agreement during the post-conflict peacebuilding phase. From Arusha to Oslo, the focus on elite interests in peace negotiations often leaves the populace at large without perceived stakes in the agreed peacebuilding frameworks, weakening the ability of governments and transitional authorities to reach a sustainable peace.”*<sup>59</sup> *Surveying a wide variety of different peace processes, a strong correlation was*

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**RT: Susana:** *trauma – activists can learn self-care techniques (tai chi) – from south American research (diff to western indiv based therapy), had activities such as weaving, multicultural, looking at community perception. Dealing with community trauma in this way.*

<sup>56</sup> Kristine HRW

<sup>57</sup> I call for the comprehensive inclusion of all Yemeni parties in the peace talks and to give serious space for the participation of civil society, women and youth.  
<http://www.mwatana.org/en/3052017626>

<sup>58</sup> POMED this paper argues that the United Nations-led negotiations are flawed and will not succeed unless they are broadened to address additional underlying issues that initially gave rise to the unrest. POMED, Nadwa al Dawsari - Breaking the Cycle of Failed Negotiations in Yemen

<sup>59</sup> Civil Society and Peace Negotiations: Confronting Exclusion Anthony Wanis-St. John

*found between active civil society participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace during the peacebuilding phase. Cases in which civil society groups actively engaged in peace negotiations seemed to enjoy more sustained peace in the peacebuilding phase. Mediators may choose to limit civil society participation to reduce the complexity of peace negotiations and thus facilitate a deal, but in doing so they may be sacrificing future peace at the altar of expediency.”<sup>60</sup>*

**Akram, Taiz:** *“They need to get closer to youth and they give them attention, youth have the capacity to create solutions. Including the UN, especially that they are all now dealing with the old elite groups and not listening to youth. Youth in Yemen have lost trust in the UN and its capacity to solve the Yemeni conflict. Leave the conflict made by politicians, and elite conflict and care about Yemen as home and 25M. Yemeni so follow the voice of youth not the voice of elite politicians.”*

#### **10. Share, coordinate and make youth work visible**

International organisations supporting peace and development oriented work in Yemen are slowly increasing in number again after the initial onslaught of conflict. Given the complexities of supporting this work during hot conflict, and the small scale of such interventions, much more coordination and sharing needs to happen between INGOs to draw out best practice in Yemen, and to connect up between youth activities in different areas of the country, and those with different thematic focuses. Donors in particular can play a role in building in time and space for this to happen – [example of the Dutch model?]. [Why this coordination is important?]

It is also vital that collectively we share stories of the positive roles that youth are playing locally, and get a variety of Yemeni youth voices and Yemeni-authored materials out to a bigger stage. “There is youth energy everywhere but there is nothing to help them to go up to be heard by conflict actors and by the international community”, says Maged Al Thabet, “in this period of time and in this conflict, I wish that international organisations can take the hundreds of voices of youth to national, regional and international levels”.

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<sup>60</sup> Civil Society and Peace Negotiations: Confronting Exclusion Anthony Wanis-St. John