BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH

Sustaining Yemeni Capacities for Social Assistance: Lessons from a Decade of War

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Summary

Yemen has sometimes been held up as an impressive example of how existing social protection systems and capacities can be maintained and supported even during a prolonged war. While providing support to meet immediate life-saving needs is the humanitarian priority in Yemen, aid organisations also want to ensure that recurrent emergency operations are delivered in a way that will support, and not undermine, national reconstruction and rehabilitation for a post-conflict Yemen. Through a literature review and interviews with Yemeni and international stakeholders conducted in 2022 and 2023, this study has interrogated that narrative, examining the evidence on what capacities are being supported, and what that means for the effective provision of assistance through a protracted crisis.

It is important to acknowledge the enormous challenges all actors in Yemen must confront in trying to find ways to help people survive in the face of conflict and other shocks. Widespread conflict, insecurity, and contested governance have made providing assistance extremely hard. The huge scale of need has also necessitated one of the biggest aid operations in the world, creating incentives for control and diversion. In the face of these challenges, focusing on the two main social assistance operations in Yemen – the World Food Programme's General Food Assistance Programme and the World Bank's Unconditional Cash Transfer Programme (implemented by the United Nations Children's Fund and the Social Fund for Development, with the Social Welfare Fund) – this study has found impressive achievements in getting assistance to people, and in maintaining and strengthening Yemeni organisational and individual capacities.

However, while some capacities have been maintained and built, others have been relatively neglected (in particular, valuable capacities for community engagement and accountability, which are vital for achieving more inclusive and conflict-sensitive approaches), whereas others (around the highly politicised issues of targeting and transfer value) have been difficult to tackle. The study found that partnerships with Yemeni non-governmental organisations are narrowly subcontractual and limited to managing distribution, with only a small proportion of funding directly reaching national organisations. Overall, the process of providing external support for 'capacity strengthening' of national actors is somewhat opaque. More coordinated strategic efforts to support local capacities, informed by shared analysis and learning from past endeavours, could help improve future social assistance interventions.

About the authors

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

BASIC	Better Assistance in Crises
CCY	Cash Consortium of Yemen
DFA	*de facto* authority
EU	European Union
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
HCRF	Handicap Care and Rehabilitation Fund
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
ID	identity
IDP	internally displaced person
IT	information technology
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRG	internationally recognised government
KII	key informant interview
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoSAL	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NNGO	local or national non-governmental organisation
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PWP	Public Works Project
RRM	Rapid Response Mechanism
SPCC	Social Protection Consultative Committee
SPIAC-B	Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board
UCT	unconditional cash transfer
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency (Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees)
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

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1. Introduction

This study seeks to understand how the provision of assistance in Yemen can sustain and strengthen national capacities to deliver social protection that protects poor and vulnerable people in need, and promotes their resilience to withstand shocks. The research is part of the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme, which explores how social protection approaches can address the needs of populations more effectively in protracted crises.

In Yemen, there is a great need for poor and vulnerable people to receive regular food and cash transfers – a modality of social protection known as social assistance (see Box 1.1 for definitions of social protection and social assistance). In 2023, the United Nations (UN) estimated that approximately two-thirds of the population (21.6 million people) needed humanitarian assistance and protection services, with about 4.5 million people displaced and facing considerable hardship (OCHA 2023). For the past 10 years of the conflict there has been a substantial international aid response to these severe needs, with total humanitarian funding of US$1–2bn annually. Two critical social assistance interventions with widespread reach have been food and cash assistance provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) to around 13 million people, and the Unconditional Cash Transfer (UCT) programme funded by the World Bank and supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), reaching over 9 million people.

These large-scale programmes span both humanitarian response and more developmental social protection modalities and approaches, and have built on pre-conflict social protection systems. The strategies of key international actors funding and providing assistance in Yemen aim to maintain and strengthen existing systems and structures for social protection, and work in ways that support improved future national social protection systems (WFP 2022; World Bank 2023). However, while international aid agencies broadly agree that in situations of extreme fragility and protracted crises aid should both meet immediate needs *and* strengthen local capacities as the building blocks for national social protection response in the longer term,[1] achieving this in Yemen raises difficult dilemmas.

Yemen presents a highly challenging environment for the provision of social assistance. In 2022 alone, over 3,500 access incidents were reported, affecting provision of assistance to at least 5 million people (OCHA 2022a). Governing authorities and aid actors must cope with the impacts of the protracted conflict, including divided governance, bureaucratic hurdles, restrictions on aid distribution and movement, and systemic risks of aid capture and diversion (ACAPS 2020, 2023b; UNDP Yemen 2021; Vuylsteke 2021; World Bank 2022b).

Since early 2022, *mahram* (male guardian) requirements have been particularly challenging for the daily movement of female humanitarian workers in areas under the control of the *de facto* authority (DFA) (also known as the Houthis)[2] based in Sana'a (ACAPS 2023c). Some *mahram* restrictions have also been reported in the area controlled by the internationally recognised government (IRG)[3] (Thompson and Spencer Bernard 2023).

Engaging effectively with these challenges is made harder by insecurity and violence against aid workers, and a restrictive security management response to insecurity (Harvey *et al*. 2022). The 2022 Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) found a culture of 'bunkerisation' had limited the movement of international staff in Yemen outside of their compounds following tight security management systems, particularly for

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[1] Social protection actors made this statement to the World Humanitarian Summit 2016: 'Humanitarian interventions can be used as a window of opportunity to trigger investments in the development of "nascent" safety nets or social assistance structures. The longer-term aim is to progressively move chronic humanitarian caseloads into social protection systems where possible. To make this a reality, Governments, development and humanitarian actors need to work together to: invest in the development of "nascent" safety nets or social assistance delivery mechanisms, while further strengthening and developing technical and analytical capacity at national and sub-national levels.' (SPIAC-B 2019: 2).

[2] The official title of the Houthi political organisation is Ansar Allah.

[3] ACAPS (2023a) reports that: 'The DFA controls most of the northern and central governorates, while the IRG and the UAE [United Arab Emirates]-backed Southern Transitional Council control southern Yemen'. We use the terms DFA and, to refer to other parts of the country, IRG.

United Nations (UN) agency staff, with reliance on remote and third-party monitoring approaches (Sida *et al*. 2022: xv; see also Harvey *et al*. 2022;; Vuylsteke 2021).

This study examines how Yemeni systems and capacities for providing social assistance have been supported and sustained through the conflict. It aims to fill gaps in the evidence about what has happened to national capacities for social protection during the country's long-running conflict, and whether approaches international donors and aid agencies have taken have strengthened or undermined these capacities.

The report presents the findings of our research, starting with the conceptual framing of the study (section 2), then followed by an overview of social assistance in Yemen (section 3). Section 4 sets out our findings on what capacities have been sustained, built and strengthened; or undermined; or are too difficult to tackle. We finish with conclusions (section 5).

Box 1.1: What are social protection and social assistance?

BASIC Research investigates the provision of social assistance in crisis settings. We are interested in regular transfers to poor and vulnerable people that are provided by both humanitarian and social protection actors, and the interlinkages between them in how people are assisted in protracted crises.

Social protection refers to a set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout their lifecycles, with particular emphasis on vulnerable groups (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004; SPIAC-B 2019).

Social assistance is one form of social protection. The main social assistance modalities for the poorest and most vulnerable people and households are food, cash or in-kind transfers, fee waivers for education and health, and state subsidies. We focus on regular food and cash or in-kind transfers that the beneficiaries receive without having to give a contribution. These transfers can be given either unconditionally or with conditions linking the support to recipients' participation in public works, attending health clinics, or other activities. These transfers sometimes integrate livelihood, nutrition, or other support, and are then referred to as 'cash-plus' programmes. Social assistance in crises can be provided by development or humanitarian actors. Humanitarian assistance uses the same modalities of food, cash, vouchers, and other in-kind transfers as development assistance, but can have different objectives, usually framed around saving lives and alleviating suffering (Slater and Sabates-Wheeler 2021, previously summarised in Carter and Harvey 2023).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

1.1 Research questions

The study explores what has happened to the capacities of key state and non-state actors through the conflict, and how effective international aid efforts to strengthen capacities have been. We look at key state actors (ministries responsible for social assistance, parastatal organisations and local government) and Yemeni non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in the aid response and provision of social assistance.

We also examine tensions between national organisations involved in the provision of assistance that international actors are trying to support, and national authorities involved in controlling and regulating assistance in ways that international aid actors see as problematically inhibiting the principled provision of effective aid.

The research questions for this study were:

1. How effectively have the capacities of key government and local actors for social assistance in Yemen been sustained and supported?
2. How are international actors navigating relationships with authorities in Yemen, and what lessons can be drawn for effective engagement and systems strengthening at national and sub-national levels?

In applying the research questions, we have sought to understand gender equality and social inclusion issues. We have looked at what capacity local and national actors have to respond to gender, and intersecting inequalities in how they provide social assistance, and how international actors have supported them to do this. The main focus is on how gender and social inclusion dynamics influence the capacities of local and national actors (the provider angle), rather than on whether the assistance provided is considered to be sensitive to gender and social inclusion (the recipient angle).

1.2 Methodology

The research was carried out from October 2022 to October 2023, involving a literature review, and interviews with national and international stakeholders.[4]

The study primarily focuses on two large social assistance interventions in Yemen – food and cash assistance provided by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the UCT Programme funded by the World Bank working with UNICEF – and explores whether and how these two operations have supported national capacities (at institutional, organisational, and individual levels). These interventions have involved engagement by WFP, the World Bank and UNICEF with government ministries and government organisation the Social Welfare Fund, with the national parastatal the Social Fund for Development, and with local and national NGOs (NNGOs).

The study started with a literature review (Carter and Harvey 2023), which conducted a search of published material in English (using various keywords in online search engines, academic databases, and key organisations' websites) and documents recommended by experts. This review informed the collection of primary data through semi-structured interviews with representatives from national and international organisations. Key informants were chosen to achieve good coverage of different types of organisations involved in providing social assistance in Yemen. Interviews in Yemen were carried out with permission from the relevant authorities, in person in Arabic with a large number of staff in two key national social assistance bodies, NNGOs, and local councils. Online semi-structured interviews were also held with representatives of international donors, aid agencies, international NGOs (INGOs), and other researchers.

The research process took place over a 13-month period, with selected key informants interviewed more than once, to provide longitudinal insights into the direction of changes and shifts in activities. The interview findings were translated into English where needed, and analysed thematically. We shared a review draft of our findings with key national and international stakeholders in November 2023, and incorporated additional input and recently published literature in February 2024. The situation in Yemen is fast-moving and evolving. The bulk of interviews were done in late 2022 to mid-2023; while some more recent updates are included, events in late 2023 and 2024 were not the subject of in-depth interviews or research.

Limitations and challenges

One limitation to the scope of this study is that we did not research capacity support provided to financial service providers and third party-monitoring organisations. It was challenging to conduct as many remote interviews with staff from international aid agencies as we had hoped due to demands on people's time in a period of intense crisis. The original plan was for a researcher to visit Yemen from the United Kingdom (UK) to carry out in-person interviews and a workshop to discuss emerging findings, but this was prevented by visa delays, and insecurity and political tensions in late 2023 and early 2024.

Table 1.1: Key informant types

Staff	Number
National organisations, state bodies at national and district levels, Yemeni NGOs	105
International aid agencies and donors	17
Others (researchers, consultants, third-party monitoring organisations)	7

Source: Authors' own.

[4] Other BASIC Research work in Yemen includes studies on the politics of social assistance, and interoperability challenges and opportunities. These two papers are forthcoming.

2. Conceptual framing: Capacities for social assistance in crises

There is a broad literature on international aid actors' support for national capacities to deliver effective assistance to poor and vulnerable people in need; spanning development and humanitarian domains, multiple aid sectors, contexts and national actors, there is much relevant learning and experience to draw on.

Slater, Haruna and Baur (2022)'s formative review of the evidence base (undertaken for the BASIC Research programme), however, found that when we narrow down our focus to support to national capacities to deliver social assistance in crisis situations, there is limited substantive in-depth analysis. Moreover, the literature has the following key weaknesses:

- A lack of clarity on what 'capacity' means: whose capacity are we talking about? For what purpose? Related to this, a confusing use of 'capacity' to refer interchangeably to the capacity of systems, structures, personnel, or some combination of these.
- A tendency to focus on technical skills to deliver the social assistance supply chain, overlooking the functional skills needed to navigate political dynamics and relationships (e.g. interpersonal skills, people management, and being 'politically savvy' (Christie and Green 2019: 6)).
- Relatedly, a focus on technical fixes to capacity gaps, such as transferring knowledge through training, rather than understanding how institutional and social norms and values shape performance.

Building on this analysis, we note that the grey literature on social assistance in protracted crises does not always put politics front and centre, with limited (published) analysis of how assistance is controlled and regulated in contexts affected by conflict or contested governance, and of how donors and other aid actors can engage effectively with these dynamics.[5] Moreover, capacity is largely seen as a positive thing that can be built or strengthened to achieve something that there is agreement on – not as something that might be positive or negative (in terms of how capacities to control assistance are perceived, or outcomes for people in need) or as something that is contested (who has capacity to control what).

In Yemen, government actors have substantial capacities to control, regulate and deliver aid: some of these are seen as positive and supported by international aid actors; whereas others are seen as problematic, with the potential for interference, which international aid actors push back against. To counter these problems, we draw on a number of approaches and frameworks from the broader literature to frame our study, summarised here in two parts: (1) understanding the dimensions of capacity; and (2) approaches for strengthening capacities.

2.1 Understanding the dimensions of capacity

Drawing on Slater *et al.* (2022)'s analysis, which highlights the TRANSFORM (2017) framework, we can distinguish between institutional, organisational, and individual capacities:

Table 2.1: Three fundamental capacity dimensions

Capacity dimension	Definition
Institutional capacities	The laws, regulations and procedural requirements for individual entities, and coordination between different parts/levels.
Organisational capacities	The structure, staffing, processes, and systems of organisations.
Individual capacities	The personal capabilities, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and actual behaviour of people in organisations.

*Source: Authors' own. Created using information from Kardan et al. (2017) and TRANSFORM (2017).*

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[5] There are exceptions: for example, for Yemen, see Harvey *et al.* (2022) and Montemurro and Wendt (2021).

It is useful to clarify what we mean by 'systems' in this study, and how systems and capacities relate to one another. This study is interested in systems in two ways. First, understanding the overall **national social protection system**, constituted by a country's social protection legal framework and governance policies and authorities, and individual interventions and delivery processes, is critical (Figure 2.1). Second, **individual operational systems** are also used to deliver social protection programmes (such as management information systems, beneficiary registries, grievance and resolution mechanisms). Both types of systems require capacities at the institutional, organisational, and individual levels. A useful approach is to look at capacity as the 'emergent combination of attributes, capabilities and relationships that enables a system to exist, adapt and perform' (Watson 2006: vi).

The study is also concerned with **how capacities are carried out in real life, and what shapes people's day-to-day performance.** People may be competent in a standardised, controlled environment but face obstacles that impact on their capability and performance in their daily environment (as summarised by Slater *et al.* 2022, citing Holsbeeke *et al.* 2009). For example, if your salary is irregular or inadequate you may be less motivated to perform all aspects of your role to your full capacity; if the internet connection is poor and/or you do not have electricity in your office, you may not be able to file your weekly report to the head of your department; or if your husband does not want you to spend the family's depleted income during a conflict on transport to the office, you may not always be able to get to work.

This focus brings to light the difference between (1) what people can do in principle (competency), (2) what they can do in practice (capability), and (3) what they actually do (performance) (Slater *et al.* 2022, drawing on Holsbeeke *et al.* 2009). Distinguishing between competency, capability, and performance enables appreciation of what can impact on people's capability to apply their skills and knowledge in real-life environments, and how functional know-how and 'soft' skills alongside incentive structures, institutional norms and gender, and other social norms and values underpin performance (Slater *et al.* 2022; Slater 2024).

Figure 2.1: The Social Protection System
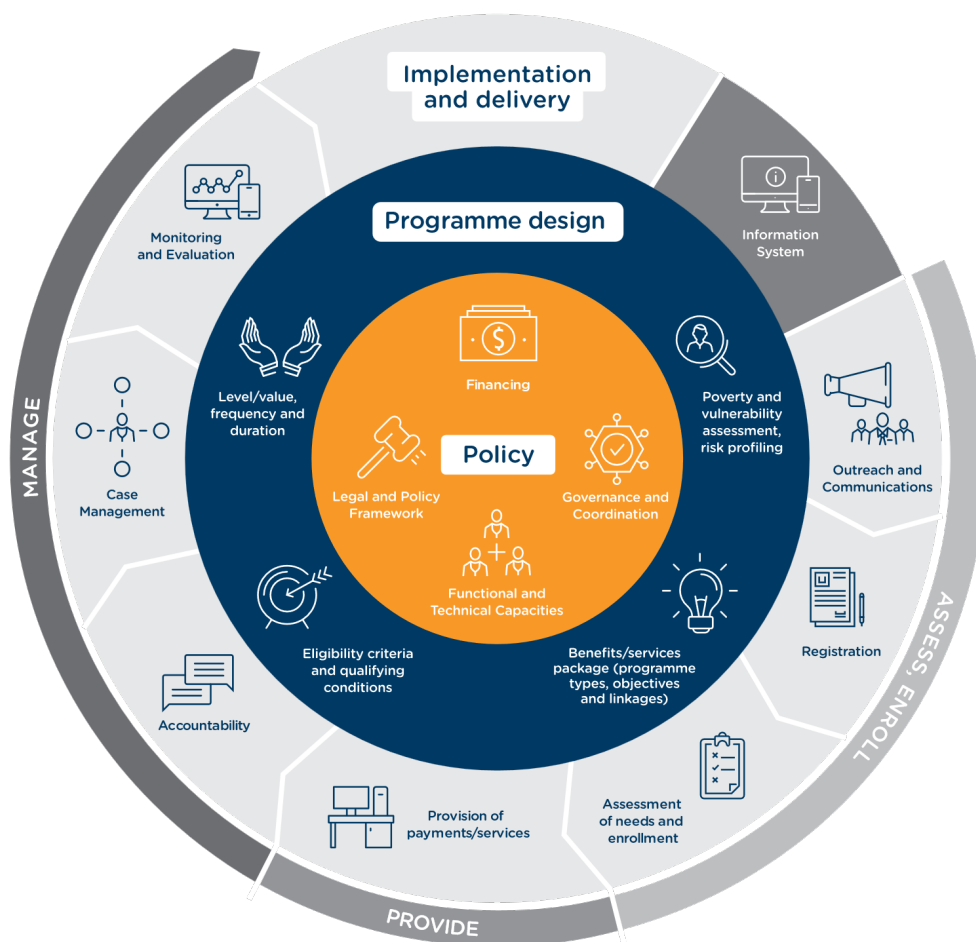
Source: Barca and Jaramillo Mejia (2023: 1). Reproduced under Crown copyright.

2.2 Approaches for strengthening capacities

Bringing together (1) the different levels of capacity (institutional, organisational, and individual); (2) the different types of capacity (competency, capability, and performance); and adding (3) the temporal perspective that capacity needs to be built, applied, and maintained over time, Slater (2024) sets out a three-dimensional approach (Figure 2.2) to investigating capacity to deliver social protection.

This 'helps us understand what to look for when seeking to understand capacity deficits and what might be done about them, in situations of protracted crisis' (Slater 2024: 4), which can inform external support for capacity strengthening (Box 2.1).

Figure 2.2: Capacity cube
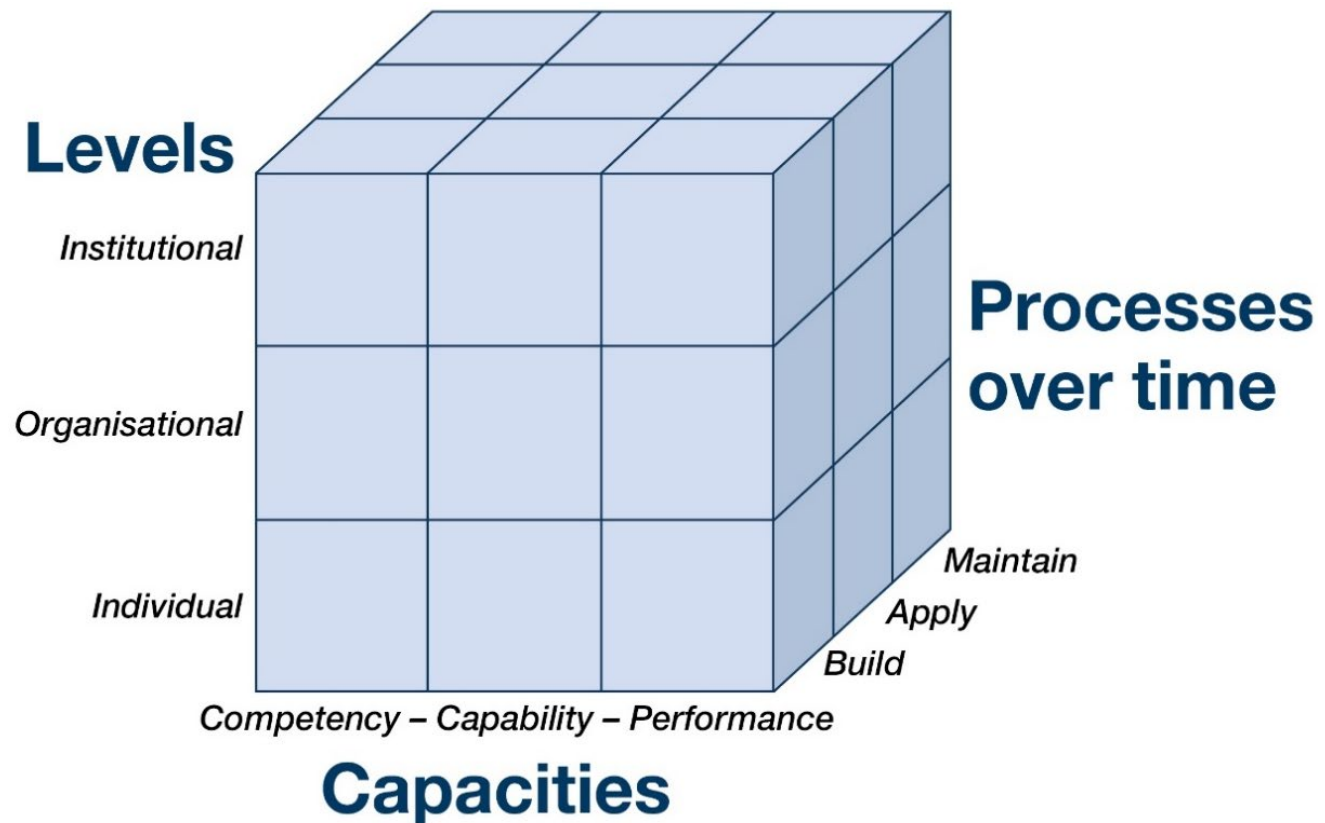
Source: Slater (2024). Reproduced with permission.
Note: The capacity cube draws on John Gaventa's view of power in Gaventa (2006).

Box 2.1: Terminology of capacity strengthening

Strengthening capacities, a process sometimes referred to as capacity development or capacity building, is commonly understood to be 'the process through which individuals, organizations and societies obtain, strengthen and maintain the capabilities to set and achieve their own development objectives over time' (UNDP 2008: 2). Research on this subject points out that terminology matters. Common terms such as capacity building and capacity development are loaded with power dynamics (Bryant 2019; Stephen 2017). Using the term capacity strengthening is to acknowledge 'existing skills and assets that can be enhanced, supported and shared' rather than defining capacity as 'lacking and needing to be "built"' (Bryant 2019).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

3. Social assistance in Yemen

3.1 Background: social protection in Yemen before 2015

Following the 1990 unification of Yemen, the Constitution of the Republic of Yemen enshrined the right to social security for all citizens, and various social protection 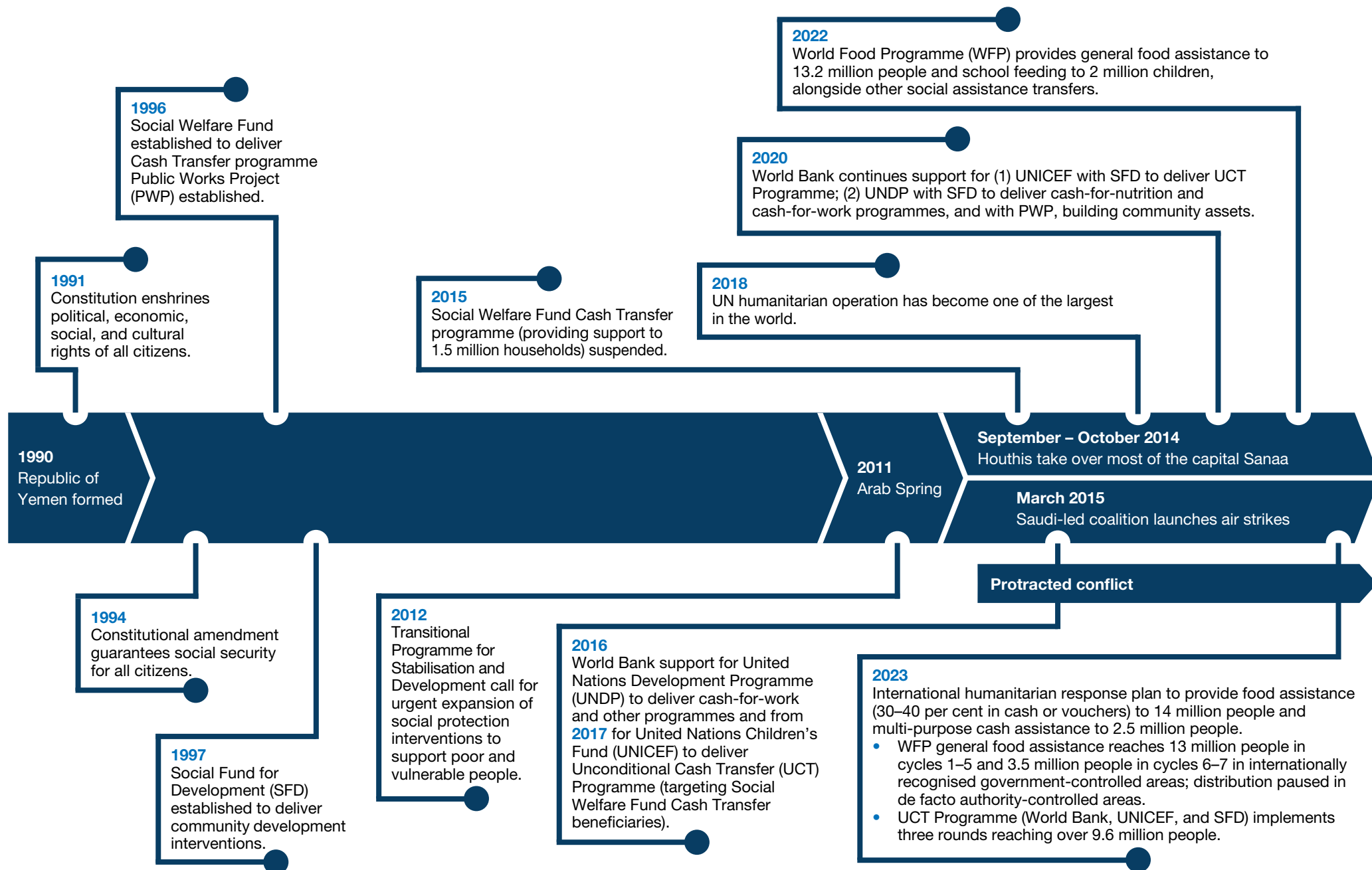organisations and programmes were established in the latter half of the 1990s. In the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring protests and rising poverty, the government made efforts to improve and expand its provision of social protection to poor and vulnerable people. However, there was no national social protection strategy and various ministries and quasi-governmental bodies implemented largely uncoordinated activities (Azaki 2015; Ghorpade and Ammar 2021; MoPIC 2012).

External financial and technical support from donors was important, in particular to the government and quasi-governmental organisations delivering the main social assistance programmes, including the Social Welfare Fund, Social Fund for Development, Public Works Project (PWP), and Handicap Care and Rehabilitation Fund (HCRF) among others. Other support – remittances, *zakat* (almsgiving in accordance with Islamic law), and informal social support mechanisms – have always been critical for many households.

By 2014, the largest social assistance programme, the Social Welfare Fund's Cash Transfer Programme, had helped around 1.5 million households (8–9 million people; 29.1 per cent of the population) (Ghorpade and Ammar 2021; World Bank 2017). It provided quarterly transfers, targeting poor and vulnerable households and individuals through a combination of proxy means testing and categorical vulnerability (e.g. to include people with disabilities) (UNICEF 2021b). A UNICEF survey in 2012–13 found that at least 70 per cent of beneficiaries depended on the cash received to buy food and support their livelihoods, reducing the risk of negative coping strategies and improving access to basic services including health, nutrition, and education (World Bank 2017).

The cash transfer value was doubled to 4,000 Yemeni rials (US$20) per case per month in 2009 following the food crisis (World Bank 2010); in 2014, assistance per individual was equal to 9,000 Yemeni rials (around US$40), while a family of five people received US$80 (KI). Following the escalation of conflict and violence from late 2014, in 2015 the Social Welfare Fund's Cash Transfer Programme suspended payments to beneficiaries (Ghorpade and Ammar 2021).

Figure 3.1: Timeline of social protection and humanitarian response in Yemen (1991–2023)

2022
World Food Programme (WFP) provides general food assistance to 13.2 million people and school feeding to 2 million children, alongside other social assistance transfers.

1996
Social Welfare Fund established to deliver Cash Transfer programme Public Works Project (PWP) established.

2020
World Bank continues support for (1) UNICEF with SFD to deliver UCT Programme; (2) UNDP with SFD to deliver cash-for-nutrition and cash-for-work programmes, and with PWP, building community assets.

1991
Constitution enshrines political, economic, social, and cultural rights of all citizens.

2015
Social Welfare Fund Cash Transfer programme (providing support to 1.5 million households) suspended.

2018
UN humanitarian operation has become one of the largest in the world.

1990
Republic of Yemen formed

2011
Arab Spring

September – October 2014
Houthis take over most of the capital Sanaa

March 2015
Saudi-led coalition launches air strikes

Protracted conflict

1994
Constitutional amendment guarantees social security for all citizens.

2012
Transitional Programme for Stabilisation and Development call for urgent expansion of social protection interventions to support poor and vulnerable people.

2016
World Bank support for United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to deliver cash-for-work and other programmes and from **2017** for United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to deliver Unconditional Cash Transfer (UCT) Programme (targeting Social Welfare Fund Cash Transfer beneficiaries).

2023
International humanitarian response plan to provide food assistance (30–40 per cent in cash or vouchers) to 14 million people and multi-purpose cash assistance to 2.5 million people.
- WFP general food assistance reaches 13 million people in cycles 1–5 and 3.5 million people in cycles 6–7 in internationally recognised government-controlled areas; distribution paused in de facto authority-controlled areas.
- UCT Programme (World Bank, UNICEF, and SFD) implements three rounds reaching over 9.6 million people.

1997
Social Fund for Development (SFD) established to deliver community development interventions.

3.2 Social assistance actors and interventions during the conflict

The main social protection interventions in Yemen that have been put in place since 2014, during the conflict, are social assistance programmes, which provide food, cash, or in-kind support to millions of poor and vulnerable households and individuals. These are delivered by government agencies and parastatal organisations, UN agencies, INGOs, and NNGOs, funded by international donors.

Alongside this formal, internationally funded assistance are local mechanisms such as *zakat*, and informal assistance provided through the private sector, social networks, the diaspora, and remittances (ACAPs 2021, 2022; Sanaa Centre 2020). These were largely outside the scope of this study.

Key characteristics of social assistance provision

Carter and Harvey (2023) describe the key characteristics of social assistance provision in Yemen:

- Most formal social assistance is funded by the humanitarian response; only a small amount of development aid is for social protection, which mainly comes from the World Bank.
- Other national and local forms of assistance, including *zakat* and community-based support mechanisms, which provide critical support for many households, are under-analysed and should be further researched.
- Key humanitarian support has been provided through food, cash, and voucher interventions, labelled as 'general food assistance' when provided by WFP, with humanitarian cash defined as either 'multipurpose' or with specific sector objectives.
- Most humanitarian assistance continues to be food aid. There has been a recent push for a higher proportion to be given as cash, but this is a smaller share.
- Multiple actors are involved in delivering the humanitarian response in Yemen: in 2023, OCHA (2023) reported 12 UN agencies, 58 INGOs and 130 national NNGOs across all 333 districts in the country. Government ministries and quasi-governmental bodies are also involved.
- The distinction between humanitarian and development interventions that provide regular transfers (of food, cash, or in kind) to poor and vulnerable people in Yemen has become increasingly blurred as the long-running crisis has continued.

National actors

In terms of national actors, responsibility for overall social protection policy sits with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MoSAL). In DFA-controlled areas, responsibility for the control and oversight of humanitarian aid sits with the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation. In IRG-controlled areas, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation plays a similar role. A Social Protection Consultative Committee led by MoSAL (with UNICEF support) has started to engage with IRG and DFA on developing a social protection strategic framework to advance shared priorities and put forward a roadmap for the recovery of the social protection system (KI).

National government and parastatal organisations play important roles in delivering social assistance. The Social Welfare Fund sits within MoSAL and was established before the conflict to administer the country's only national cash transfer safety net (the Social Welfare Fund's Cash Transfer Programme) (World Bank 2010). The programme was suspended in 2015 as the conflict escalated. When the World Bank-funded UCT programme started in 2017, it took over key elements of the Social Welfare Fund's Cash Transfer Programme, including the beneficiary list and transfer value.

The Social Welfare Fund has continued to have a small role in the UCT Programme but with reduced capacities. There are plans and efforts to strengthen its role and to eventually transfer back responsibility for implementing this programme, which has been delivered through World Bank funding and UNICEF operational management. UNICEF has also partnered with the Social Welfare Fund to implement a cash-plus programme alongside the UCT Programme in selected districts, which aims to enhance UCT beneficiaries' access to services, with a focus on vulnerable groups and children (KI). By January 2024, seven cycles of the cash-plus programme had been implemented, responding to multidimensional vulnerabilities, and maintaining and strengthening the Social Welfare Fund's capacity (*ibid.*).

The Social Fund for Development is a parastatal, non-profit organisation established before the conflict with support from the World Bank to further medium-term social and economic development objectives, including through cash-for-work interventions, and support for small and micro-enterprises, national associations, and NGOs (Azaki 2015; Bagash, Pereznieto and Dubai 2012; World Bank 2010). It reports directly to the prime minister (as chair of the Social Fund for Development's Board) and the minister of MoSAL (vice-chair). Since June 2021, the Social Fund for Development has taken on implementation responsibility for key operational functions of the World Bank-funded, UNICEF-managed UCT Programme, under UNICEF oversight (KI).

Other quasi-governmental funds and organisations that implement social assistance interventions include the PWP, which supports the building of community assets (through World Bank support and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) management), and the HCRF, which with UNICEF support provides cash and case management and referrals targeting the most vulnerable people, among other services. All of these government and parastatal ministries and organisations –MoSAL, Social Welfare Fund, Social Fund for Development, PWP, and HCRF – have offices in both IRG- and DFA-controlled areas of Yemen.

Table 3.1: The Social Welfare Fund and Social Fund for Development

Social Welfare Fund	Social Fund for Development
● Minister of Social Affairs and Labour heads up the board ● Staff are government employees (MoSAL) ● Financial system subject to the procedures and regulations of the Ministry of Finance ● Pre-war, managed the largest social assistance programme in Yemen (Cash Transfer Programme) ● Social Welfare Fund staff currently employed as UCT community facilitators on individual contracts ● Donors intend to return UCT Programme to the Social Welfare Fund when possible ● Also working with UNICEF on cash-plus programmes	● Prime minister heads up the board ● Staff are not civil servants ● Financial system is independent, and subject to periodic monitoring and review by donors ● Pre-war, managed development-focused programmes ● Has support from multiple donors and runs several large programmes ● Took on key implementation functions of UCT Programme since 2021, under UNICEF oversight ● Also implements smaller World Bank cash transfers and other projects ● Aims to maintain political neutrality, operating in DFA- and IRG-controlled areas of the country

Source: Authors' own.

International actors and programmes

A large number of international actors are involved in funding and delivering social assistance. Table 3.2 provides a summary of the main programmes and organisations involved. As described above, WFP implements the largest food and cash assistance programmes in partnership with Yemeni NGOs (referred to in this report as NNGOs)and a parastatal organisation that sits within the Ministry of Education, while the World Bank funds one of the main assistance programmes (the UCT Programme), which UNICEF has implemented in partnership with national actors. UN agencies, INGOs, and NNGOs also implement multiple smaller interventions.

WFP General Food Assistance Programme

In October 2015, WFP launched an emergency operation to assist more than 3 million food-insecure and conflict-affected Yemenis with food, vouchers, and nutrition assistance, as well as food assistance to refugees and migrants (WFP 2016). By 2022, WFP general food assistance had increased in scale in response to growing needs and was reaching 13.2 million people, prioritising those in the most food-insecure areas (populations in Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Phase 4 (Emergency) and Phase 5 (Catastrophe)) (WFP 2023d). General food assistance is provided in different modalities: in 2022, 11.8 million people received food aid (of whom, 2.3 million originally received vouchers, which were phased out in 2022) and 1.4 million received cash support (*ibid.*). WFP delivered this with 19 cooperating partners (including INGOs and NNGOs), four traders, and one financial service provider, through 3,434 food distribution points, 336 voucher outlets, and 199 cash-based transfer redemption sites (*ibid.*).

Funding shortages and other challenges have affected this intervention. In August 2023, WFP announced that without securing additional funding, as many as 3 million people in the north and 1.4 million in the south would no longer receive general food assistance, leaving 6.6 million in the north and 2.2 million in the south still receiving support (WFP 2023a). The size of rations was also affected. The transfers were designed to provide families with approximately 80 per cent of their minimum dietary needs, but funding shortages meant actual rations provided were smaller for most of 2022 and 2023. In September 2023, WFP reported that rations were 41 per cent of the standard food basket per cycle (WFP 2023c). In 2022, assistance went from being provided monthly to a 45-day cycle (*ibid*.).

In November 2023, WFP distributed general food assistance to 5.3 million people (2.85 million in the north and 2.42 million in the south), and projected a dire funding situation of only 7 per cent funding of the net requirement of US$1.3bn for January–June 2024 (WFP 2023e). In December 2023, WFP announced that it was forced to pause general food distributions altogether in DFA-controlled areas, although it would continue its resilience and livelihoods, nutrition and school feeding programmes for as long as the agency had secured funding (WFP 2023b; KI). In sum, in 2023 for cycles 1–5, WFP food assistance reached 13 million people across the country; and for cycles 6–7, 3.5 million people in IRG-controlled areas, with 9.5 million people affected by the pause in areas under DFA control (WFP 2024).

Table 3.2: General Food Assistance and UCT Programmes

	General food assistance	UCT
Lead agency	WFP	World Bank
Implementing organisations	WFP, NNGOs	UNICEF, Social Fund for Development
Objectives/aims	WFP country strategic outcome 1: 'Food insecure people affected by crises across Yemen, have access to lifesaving, safe and nutritious food all year.' (WFP 2023d: 16)	'The project aims to provide immediate support to food insecure households through unconditional cash transfers (UCTs)' (World Bank 2023: 8)
Expenditure/budget*	US$952m (expenditure 2022: includes general food assistance and emergency food assistance to 401,000 people through the inter-agency Rapid Response Mechanism; does not include direct and indirect support costs)	US$123m (funding for two payment cycles in 2023; a third payment cycle started in late December 2023 and continued to 2024, covered by previous funds; does not include UNICEF management costs)
Geographic coverage	All 21 governorates and 1 municipality	All 21 governorates and 1 municipality
People/households supported	13.2 million people (2022)	1.41 million households, reaching around 9.35 individuals on average in 2022 and in 2023.
Eligibility/targeting	Food-insecure people, prioritising the most food-insecure areas with populations in Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Phase 4 (Emergency) and Phase 5 (Catastrophe)	Pre-conflict Social Welfare Fund beneficiary list; original criteria: 'combination of poverty-targeting – using Proxy Means Test (PMT) – as well as categorical targeting – elderly, female-headed households, orphans and disabled' (World Bank 2023: 16), plus qualifying conditions (beneficiaries must have no other source of income that might compensate for the assistance or relative legally responsible for sponsoring them) (KI).
Modality	Food (11.8 million people), cash (1.4 million people) (2022)	Cash
Value (household minimum dietary needs)	41% (2023)	10–11% (2022)
Assistance cycle	Approx. 45 days (2022)	3 annual payments (2023)
Source	WFP (2023d)	World Bank (2023); KIs

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

UCT Programme

In the initial years of the conflict, food insecurity was widespread and a cholera outbreak heightened the urgency of need; the Social Welfare Fund's Cash Transfer Programme, the largest pre-war safety net in the country for poor and vulnerable households, suspended payments to beneficiaries in 2015. Given this context, when the World Bank re-engaged in Yemen in 2016, the focus was on starting the UCT Programme to get support out to families in need. The UCT Programme started in 2017 under the Yemen Emergency Crisis Response Project, funded by the World Bank and implemented by UNICEF (which had experience of working with the Social Welfare Fund and its cadre of social workers to deliver other cash support) (World Bank 2017). The UCT Programme maintained the beneficiary list and transfer value parameters of the Social Welfare Fund's Cash Transfer Programme's pre-war design (World Bank 2017). Key informants noted that the initial focus of international aid actors was on getting the cash support out quickly to families, which took place within three months of the UNICEF and World Bank agreement being signed.

Between 2017 and 2023, the UCT Programme maintained operations across all governorates, reaching around 1.42 million households (representing around 9.35 million individuals); it continued to be funded by the World Bank and implemented by UNICEF, with other donors providing additional support (World Bank 2023). Given rising prices, the programme's transfer value in 2022 was estimated to be worth 10–11 per cent of the basic food basket (*ibid.*). From 2021, some of the operational functions of the programme were transferred to the Social Fund for Development to manage as UNICEF's implementing partner. In the longer term, the intention is to return the UCT Programme to the Social Welfare Fund when conditions allow (*ibid.*).

Other social assistance

Multiple actors provide other social assistance interventions. Donors include the UK, European Union (EU), Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, United States, and the World Bank. They are implemented by a variety of UN agencies (e.g. the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNICEF, UNDP, UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), WFP) and INGOs (e.g. the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development, CARE International UK, the Danish Refugee Council, Emirates Red Crescent, the Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam, the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen, Save the Children).

International actors implement this assistance in partnership with government ministries, quasi-governmental social assistance bodies, and NNGOs. These programmes often target specific vulnerable populations, such as people newly affected by localised shocks; people affected by malnutrition; internally displaced people (IDPs); schoolchildren; pregnant and lactating women; children with disabilities; and the Muhamasheen, a minority community affected by discrimination (OCHA 2023). Some organisations provide cash transfers in return for beneficiaries' participation in community works; there are also cash-plus programmes that link cash transfers with complementary communication, case management, and service referral.

Table 3.3: Examples of other social assistance provision

Lead agency	Activity	Source
Building Resilience through Integrated Community-based and Humanitarian Systems Transformation and Leadership in Yemen (BRIGHTLY) – Consortium led by CARE International UK with Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam, Save the Children International, and seven Yemeni NGOs (funded by the UK FCDO)	Cash transfers to up to 40,000 households per month, with increased funds to national partners over the lifetime of the project; activity start: 2024	FCDO (2023); FCDO and Mitchell (2023)
Cash Consortium of Yemen – Danish Refugee Council, Norwewgian Refugee Council, Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development, and IOM (funded by EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid, and the United States Agency for International Development)	Four lines of support (221,000 people targeted in 12 governorates 2020/21): ● Cash transfer for flood-affected populations (one-off) ● Cash transfer for newly displaced people (up to 3 months) ● Cash transfer in support of Covid-19 suppression measures (up to 3 months) ● Multi-month transfer (up to 6 months) to the most extremely vulnerable people	CCY (2020)
UNHCR	Multipurpose cash and rental subsidies (1.23 million IDPs) in 20 governorates and cash grants (4,400 refugees) (2021)	UNHCR (2022)
UNICEF with the Social Welfare Fund and HCRF	Cash-plus programme (230,000 people); other nutrition assistance (300,000 children with severe acute malnutrition benefitted from outpatient therapeutic programmes, and about 1.5 million pregnant and lactating women received iron supplementation) (2022)	UNICEF (2023a)
WFP with Ministry of Public Health and Population, Ministry of Education, local authorities, and NGOs	Nutrition support (2.2 million children, and 1.9 million pregnant and lactating women and girls across all districts); school feeding (2 million children in 19 governorates); food assistance for assets (443,000 people across 16 governorates) (2022)	WFP (2023d)
United Nations Population Fund (lead Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) agency), WFP, UNICEF, and IOM	RRM: within 72 hours of displacement, immediate response rations (WFP); basic hygiene kits (UNICEF) and transit kits (United Nations Population Fund); WFP assisted 401,000 people through RRM (2022): RRM target/reach in 2023 was 500,000	WFP (2023d; KI)
World Bank with UNDP and the Social Fund for Development	Cash-for-nutrition programme for pregnant and lactating women, and/or children aged under five years, and mothers with children with disabilities up to the age of 17 years (to reach 111,600 women and around 153,000 children; target: December 2026); cash for work (78,000 direct beneficiaries and 327,000 indirect beneficiaries – family members of direct beneficiaries – of wage employment; target: December 2026)	World Bank (2023)

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

Note: This is not a comprehensive mapping. Not all social interventions are included. The numbers of beneficiaries are either numbers of people reached or project targets, and are not from the same year.

3.3 Challenges to effective social assistance

Multiple challenges affect the delivery of social assistance that meets the needs of poor and vulnerable people in Yemen. The aid response has to cope with and respond to ongoing conflict and insecurity, divided governance, access restrictions, aid diversion, and mismanagement. Yemen's political economy is characterised by rent-seeking and clientelism; aid is a valuable resource in the country's struggling economy, and the protracted conflict multiplies opportunities for diversion and capture on all sides (Harvey *et al*. 2022; US Department of State 2022; WHO 2019; World Bank 2022b).

Authorities across Yemen impose restrictions on aid, with an increasingly centralised and restrictive approach in DFA-controlled areas (Harvey *et al*. 2022). In practice, this results in time-consuming and expensive administrative processes; for example, negotiating weekly field travel permits and the challenging visa process for new international staff. In DFA-controlled areas, severe restrictions on monitoring and evaluation impede data collection and understanding the impact interventions are having at community level. Humanitarian aid agencies have struggled to mount a collectively effective response to these restrictions (Sida *et al*. 2022; Montemurro and Wendt 2021).

The large-scale aid operation has been facing severe funding shortfalls in comparison to assessed need;[6] the amounts of food and cash that people receive as assistance have been cut back and millions of people in need do not receive aid. Moreover, the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (2015–June 2021) found 'the quality of humanitarian aid in many areas was unacceptably low' (Sida *et al*. 2022: xiii). People in Yemen are widely dissatisfied with the aid response. A 2022 Humanitarian Outcomes survey found that: 'The majority of those who received aid said it mostly failed to cover their priority needs, and in general, respondents believed that the aid provided was not getting to where it is most needed' (Harvey *et al*. 2022: 7). Particularly at risk are children, as well as women and other marginalised communities affected by historical systematic discrimination (especially the Muhamasheen) (OCHA 2023).

This situation has led to an interlinked set of issues that limit the effectiveness of the social assistance provided. These include outdated beneficiary lists; inadequate transfer values; lack of interoperable aid systems; and little data on aid reach and impact (Carter and Harvey 2023).

An overarching conundrum for aid actors in Yemen is how to navigate tensions between humanitarian principles and development modes of engagement focused on state ownership. These are common dilemmas international actors face in conflict settings where the internationally recognised government is party to the conflict and a *de facto* authority governs a large proportion of the population. Humanitarian 'principled engagement' needs to walk a tightrope between supporting the affected state in its 'primary role in the initiation, organization, coordination, and implementation of humanitarian assistance within its territory' (UN Resolution 46/182 of 1991 (UN 1991: 50)), while ensuring the neutrality and independence of the humanitarian response (Cunningham 2018; Harvey 2009).

Relations between authorities in DFA- and IRG-controlled parts of Yemen, and the main donor governments are complicated by the fact that several donors are active parties to the conflict or support one side in the conflict. In IRG-controlled areas, weak and under-resourced state institutions lack power and authority, while the Houthi regime has greater centralised control. In IRG-controlled areas, public sector salaries are paid with delays; in DFA-controlled areas, salaries to government employees were suspended in 2019, with partial, irregular payments since then (World Bank 2022a).

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[6] In 2022, only 55 per cent of the annual humanitarian response plan was funded (OCHA 2023).

4. What capacities have been sustained, built, strengthened, or undermined?

This section summarises our findings on the approaches and activities of international actors to strengthen national capacities for social assistance, drawing on key informant interviews (KIIs) and a document review. Focusing on the two largest social assistance interventions in Yemen – WFP's General Food Assistance Programme and the World Bank-funded UCT Programme – we explore how these two operations have supported national capacities (at institutional, organisational, and individual levels).

International aid actors in Yemen set out in their country strategies that they intend their interventions to support national capacities for a future state-owned social protection system (Box 4.1). While providing support to meet immediate life-saving needs is the humanitarian priority, aid organisations also want to ensure that recurrent emergency operations are delivered in a way that will support, and not undermine, national reconstruction and rehabilitation for a post-conflict Yemen.

Box 4.1: International aid actors' strategic approaches

WFP in its interim 2023–2025 Country Strategic Plan states that, 'WFP will lay the ground for future social safety nets and extend the use of its expertise in assessment, targeting and beneficiary management into the social protection domain' (WFP 2022: 2).

In its Country Engagement Note for 2022–23, the World Bank underlined its 'fundamental objective' of 'institutional preservation' with a focus on 'a more sustainable institution-building and system-oriented approach to deliver support' (World Bank 2022a: 15). As well as engaging with local authorities, a key element of this vision involves support to bottom-up approaches involving community-based and civil society initiatives, to support social cohesion and local-level accountability, which is 'essential for sustainable peace and development (*ibid*.: 20). The World Bank has sought to preserve national institutions while operating at arms-length through UN agency partnerships.

UNICEF aims to support the development of national systems and policies for social protection within and outside implementation of the UCT Programme as part of a strategy 'to provide direct life-saving assistance and at the same time undertake programming along the humanitarian–development nexus to create a coherent approach to meeting critical needs' (UNICEF 2023c: 1).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

This section is organised into three parts, which summarise: (1) which capacities have been maintained and built; (2) what has been undermined, lost or missed; and (3) what has been too difficult to tackle.

4.1 What has been maintained and built

Technical capacities and systems for social assistance delivery and reporting

Early in the humanitarian response to the Yemen conflict, the World Bank made a strategic decision to sustain the original design parameters of the Social Welfare Fund's Cash Transfer Programme as a way to 'maintain the future seeds of a social protection system', according to an international aid actor. Key informants saw the World Bank taking this on when other donors were not in a position to do so as having been critical to maintaining national capacities and systems for social protection. Given the World Bank's fragility and conflict policy, which prevents direct operational engagement with government in Yemen, the organisation has supported aid interventions in Yemen through UN agencies as grant recipients; in the case of the UCT Programme, through UNICEF.

Key programme parameters from the Social Welfare Fund's Cash Transfer Programme were deliberately kept in the UCT Programme without change, notably the beneficiary list and transfer value. Other operational changes were driven by a risk-informed approach in light of the ongoing conflict. For example payment delivery was switched from the post office (Oxfam 2013) to banks (World Bank 2023). The project design also included investments in establishing strong management and financial operational systems, different layers of monitoring, and feedback mechanisms, in order to be confident that aid was reaching people on the beneficiary list effectively and in a timely fashion. Achievements in strengthening systems key informants highlighted include the introduction of a management information system for case management, grievance redress and safeguarding, systematised monitoring and reporting processes, and a call centre to manage community feedback and complaints. These systems and the processes involved in operating them have been managed by a UNICEF Project Management Unit in Amman, Jordan, which has developed significant human resources and experience in UCT Programme operations (UNICEF 2021a).

As UNICEF gained experience in managing the UCT Programme and started to see results in systems strengthening, its focus began to shift to how to bolster national capacities for implementing the programme. The approach has been to sustain the role of key national social protection actors who were active before the war, described by one key informant as keeping these organisations 'on life support' during the conflict years through funding and technical support. In this vein, the decision was made to start a gradual transfer in 2021 of some functional responsibilities of the UCT Programme from UNICEF to the parastatal Social Fund for Development. UNICEF and the World Bank phased the transfer according to their assessment of the Social Fund for Development's capacities. UNICEF continues to be responsible for exchange rate management, third-party monitoring, fraud investigations, oversight and reporting to the World Bank, and the management information system, as well as contracting and managing payment agencies. A key informant reported that the handover had been successfully completed by the end of 2022, with the Social Fund for Development taking over facilitation, the grievance redress mechanism, and payments. In 2023, as the situation evolved on the ground, management of the payment agencies was given back to UNICEF.

The Social Welfare Fund, which managed the pre-war Cash Transfer Programme, remains involved in implementing the UCT Programme in a limited capacity. The organisation reports being involved in central coordination efforts with authorities and governors, while Social Welfare Fund staff are employed by the Social Fund for Development on short-term contracts as programme community facilitators at district level. Their responsibilities include raising awareness about the programme, organising and developing plans for disbursement sites, and following up disbursements, as well as resolving any problems facing the movement of disbursements, such as the transfer of money, in coordination with the local authority (KI).

The Social Welfare Fund has raised concerns over this approach, lobbying for greater involvement. The World Bank has stated that it sees the handover to the Social Fund for Development to be an interim step in a process which will see the return of the UCT Programme to the Social Welfare Fund when conditions allow (World Bank 2023). In 2022, UNICEF undertook in-depth capacity assessments of the Social Welfare Fund and developed a detailed capacity-building plan that focused on key UCT functions and broader social protection policy responsibilities. In early 2023, this resulted in a multi-year capacity-building and engagement plan for the Social Welfare Fund (KI). During 2023, implementation of the first phase started, with a focus on strengthening the Social Welfare Fund's organisational and individual-level capacities, while UNICEF's work on the Social Protection Strategic Framework advanced the work on strengthening the institutional capacity of the Social Welfare Fund and core social protection actors (*ibid.*).

NNGOs, which may operate at national or more local levels), also play roles in social assistance, with capacities in delivery and community facilitation. NNGOs that help deliver WFP food, cash, and voucher assistance are essential to the massive logistical operation involved. The funding NNGOs receive from WFP to undertake this work has maintained and built up their operational capacities (including hardware – offices, cars, equipment – and human resources) and technical skills (through dedicated training). Key informants reported that NNGOs largely remain in limited subcontractor roles focused on managing distributions.

Table 4.1: Summary of roles in the UCT Programme

	Before escalation of conflict (up to 2015)	During the current protracted crisis	Future national social protection system
Social Welfare Fund	Managing the Cash Transfer Programme	Staff employed as UCT Programme facilitators, and limited roles in coordination and case management	Intended return of UCT Programme to Social Welfare Fund
Social Fund for Development	Set up to manage community-driven development programmes	In 2021/22, took on operational management of some UCT Programme functions (under UNICEF supervision)	Organisational and individual capacities for social assistance and coordination of the Social Fund for Development's role with other actors for social protection beyond assistance (e.g. economic empowerment, community development, etc.)

Source: Authors' own. Created from KIs' input.

Social protection policy

Efforts to engage with authorities in DFA- and IRG-controlled areas have begun on the policy side of social protection. Since 2021, UNICEF has supported the establishment and activation of the Social Protection Consultative Committee (SPCC) (KI), led by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, with participation from other line ministries, UN agencies, NGOs and the private sector (UNICEF 2022b). The focus has been on providing space and enabling consensus on a vision for what social protection in Yemen should look like, and building a common understanding of social protection concepts (KI). In 2023, the committee started working on the development of a strategic framework. These efforts have involved parallel processes in DFA- and IRG-controlled areas. UNICEF wants to end up with one vision that addresses the needs of poor and vulnerable people wherever they reside. To mobilise actors in that direction, UNICEF is providing expert advice and guidance to support authorities across the conflict to work towards a common vision, leveraging coordination and response to ongoing humanitarian needs while strengthening national systems (KI).

Key informants described the UN approach as being focused on working on technical issues with line ministries. There have been efforts to develop joint ministerial groups, engaging with them on assessment design, explaining processes and showing the fairness of methodologies. Given political sensitivities around working with Houthi authorities, key informants have shared how the critical skill has been to find ways to engage but not empower, with the UN emphasising its joint responsibility with the government to assist and protect people. An objective has been to strengthen the role of partners working at technical levels to regain mandated responsibilities for services and resist being undermined by the security/coordination apparatus within governing authorities (KI).

Operational responsibility combined with financial and technical support

The experience of the Social Fund for Development in taking on responsibility for implementing components of the UCT Programme shows the value of capacity strengthening by 'doing'. The organisation's staff perceive the learning generated by day-to-day operational experience to have in turn inspired and informed further strengthening of the organisation's core systems and processes.

The UCT Programme has supported the Social Fund for Development to build up organisational and individual capacities to implement parts of the operation. There has been investment in infrastructure, systems, and human resources. Looking first at organisational capacities, the UCT Programme rents three large offices, two in Sana'a and one in Aden, with facilities and equipment provided by UNICEF out of World Bank funds. A centralised team working on the UCT Programme is based in the Sana'a offices, with three support staff in Aden and five hubs at governorate level.[7]

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[7] The Social Fund for Development's UCT Programme team reportedly includes 25 core staff on fixed-term contracts, and other short-term staff, including 86 staff working in the call centre; 85 staff responsible for case management, with 165 case management assistants; 28 field monitoring consultants (temporary staff); and 1,700 facilitation and outreach workers, of whom 600 are contracted Social Welfare Fund staff (KIs).

In interviews, staff highlighted the investment in various systems required to implement the UCT Programme, including the management and information system, with strong data protection protocols and processes. A grievance and redress call centre has been established with a toll-free hotline (as reported in UNICEF's stakeholder engagement plan (UNDP and UNICEF 2023))[8] and a case management system, with data logged by beneficiary back to the first payment cycle. The large number of beneficiary calls received and dealt with is considered a positive indicator that UCT Programme clients feel able to call the centre and trust that their issue will be dealt with (KI). UNICEF retains oversight and a critical hands-on role for serious issues, handling cases of suspected sexual exploitation and abuse, and fraud (UNDP and UNICEF 2023).

Box 4.2: Social Fund for Development UCT grievance and redress call centre

UNICEF has supported the Social Fund for Development in developing a substantial grievance and redress call centre, which has a team of 86 call centre agents and supervisors, working with over 250 case managers and case manager assistants, supervisors and assistants focused on redressing grievances. In areas with limited or no network coverage, field staff are deployed to talk in person with beneficiaries and save complaints on mobile devices, which are uploaded to the management information system when connected to the internet.

Over payment cycles 10–13 (payment cycle 13 was in June–July 2022), 107,948 grievances were received, addressed, and closed; 77 per cent of complaints were related to beneficiary issues such as 'mismatching of names, lost or damaged IDs, not found on beneficiary list, unable to attend the Project site, deceased, minor without a representative' (UNDP and UNICEF 2023: 34). The second most common category was service quality (17 per cent of complaints), with complaints including 'long waiting times, delay in receiving information, no priority for vulnerable groups, no female officers, no cash available, no staffs available, no adequate facilities' (*ibid.*). UNICEF reported that, on average, complaints in payment cycle 13 were resolved within 5–13 days, but some required longer (over 30 days), such as suspected fraud cases, which need third-party investigation.

Source: Authors' own. Drawing on information from UNDP and UNICEF (2023: 32–34).

Staff key informants highlighted both the technical and functional skills required to implement the UCT Programme, and how perceived gaps were met by training and support. For the UCT Programme, Social Fund for Development staff have had substantial (and ongoing) training from UNICEF and the World Bank (alongside capacity-strengthening support from other donors). Key informants highlighted UCT Programme safeguarding policies and procedures that are enforced by the Safeguarding Unit within the Social Fund for Development, complemented by dedicated staff training on protection, sexual exploitation, and anti-corruption efforts.

Moreover, Social Fund for Development staff pointed out that the organisation has its own capacity-strengthening agenda: current priorities include consolidating more authority in branches and strengthening the organisation's financial system. A spillover effect of the UCT Programme is that experience with the complaints handling call centre has led the Social Fund for Development to work on developing a free call service for its other programmes.

In sum, giving the Social Fund for Development operational responsibility for some functions of the UCT Programme, alongside funding for salaries, offices and equipment, and financial and technical support for systems strengthening and training, has strengthened the organisation's ability to deliver social assistance in a highly challenging, insecure operating environment. Within the Social Fund for Development there is the perception that this has involved an important shift from having senior jobs filled by international staff to

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[8] This refers to the stakeholder plan for the World Bank's Yemen Emergency Social Protection Enhancement and Covid-19 Response Project, which contains the UCT component managed by UNICEF and other components managed by UNDP. UNDP is not involved in the UCT Programme.

building the experience and responsibility of national staff within the organisation, and enabling on-the-job learning from running key systems and processes.

A key element in being able to build this programme team has been the organisation's ability to recruit staff independently. It was set up to allow for competitive recruitment – in contrast to the Social Welfare Fund, which is staffed by civil servants through MoSAL. A challenge brought up in the staff interviews is lack of job security as the majority of the employees are on short-term consultancy contracts, with some renewed with every payment cycle. This is linked to the programme's dependency on external funding from donors. However, young staff who have studied abroad (in subjects such as engineering, pharmacy, and interior design) may also be inclined to see social work as a temporary stopgap until they can find permanent jobs in their field. Staff with more qualifications and experience also felt that salaries were not commensurate with their knowledge and skills.

'In thinking about capacities, you need to look at actual systems for working implementation – not just what training has taken place. For instance, [the Social Fund for Development] now has a call centre with 80+ people able to do 130,000 calls a quarter and making tens of thousands of verification calls.'

KII, Social Fund for Development.

Box 4.3: Social Fund for Development individual capacities

- The core UCT Programme staff include long-term Social Fund for Development employees as well as new recruits. Staff have a mix of functional (leadership, management) and technical (information technology (IT), management information system, English, smartphone app) skills. There is a financial team with capabilities in accounting, procurement, and electronic systems.
- The call centre and case management staff tend to be young, highly educated professionals, with good management, English language, and IT skills; some have been employed since 2017 on short-term renewable contracts, recruited from the University of Jordan when the programme was run from Amman.
- A key component of the Social Fund for Development's work on the UCT Programme is community-level facilitation: 'In the thirteenth payment cycle, SFD [the Social Fund for Development] in their capacity as Facilitation engaged over 118,000 people, including local actors and beneficiaries, from 38,719 villages/communities which represent 98.79 per cent of total 38,822 villages/communities covered by the Project' (UNDP and UNICEF 2023: 24). The Social fund for Development has a long history of working with communities and local authorities on social assistance interventions. The facilitation staff, who work with authorities, local communities, and beneficiaries (600 of whom are original Social Welfare Fund employees), are employed on periodic contracts, with experience in dealing with local communities, and have received training in electronic applications and MS Excel, with implementation training at the start of each payment cycle.

Source: Authors' own. Created using data from KIIs.

The perception international aid actors and other key informants reported to us is that the organisation is considered a success story: international key informants value the Social Fund for Development's operational know-how, access, and coverage, and its ability to operate independently. Factors key informants perceived to be behind the organisation's success include:

- The organisation's ability to maintain its quasi-governmental balancing act, with political buy in in DFA- and IRG-controlled areas, which has protected that space.
- The strategic decision to transfer existing resources and systems over to the Social Fund for Development's management (including former third-party management staff and case management staff who previously operated in Amman), and to draw on the Social Welfare Fund's experience in facilitation and fieldwork, thereby enabling the Social Welfare Fund to leverage antecedent individual and organisational capacities.

- Charismatic and strong leadership that helped build trust with donors.
- Effective, competitive recruitment and salaries, which have attracted and retained capable staff.
- Training and capacity strengthening, and strong reporting and transparency have helped maintain good relations with donors, including through investment in fiduciary systems and auditing.
- Support from multiple donors.

Box 4.4: From pockets of effectiveness to mainstream public sector capacity

The Social Fund for Development could be seen as an example of a 'pocket of effectiveness'. Common features of effective institutions in fragile contexts identified by Hickey (2019) that the Social Fund for Development shares include formal organisational autonomy and norms of professionalism. There is a need, however, to be careful about uncritically accepting this portrayal of success. Questions remain over sustainability and what will happen to capacities if donor funding starts to dry up. The funding modalities are short term, perpetuating insecure job tenure for the organisation's employees, and resulting in short cycles of investment in organisational capacities. Support from multiple donors is important for diversified and more sustained funding, but the Social Fund for Development's rapid growth and the absence of comparable public sector capacity run the risk of both premature load bearing (Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews 2010) and of becoming 'too big to fail', one key informant suggested.

Research by Effective States and Inclusive Development found 'little evidence that [pockets of effectiveness] can play an important role in delivering on the more difficult policy challenges involved in securing inclusive development (Pritchett and Woolcock 2004), and some evidence of negative spillovers whereby the high levels of financial and human resources required to run [pockets of effectiveness] are subtracted from the broader public service' (Hickey 2023: 212). Learning from donor investment in stand-alone implementation units echoes that warning, with impacts on 'brain drain' if 'islands of excellence' (Therkildsen 2008) do not feed into mainstream public sector capacity.

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

Dedicated capacity-strengthening initiatives

In our interviews, NNGO partners of international organisations reported a lack of access to appropriate capacity-enhancing activities, confirming other research findings on the limitations of capacity support provided in Yemen to local actors (Sida *et al*. 2022). For example, a 2022 localisation baseline assessment led by the Civil Society Organizations' Initiative for Localization and Optimization of Response Mechanisms in Yemen found that: 'Only 11.3 per cent of national organisations expressed that they "always" or "mostly" have targeted funding for building capacity' (Tamdeen Youth Foundation *et al*. 2022: 47) (compared with 44.5 per cent of the international organisations that took part in the survey).

There have been positive experiences. As noted above, Social Fund for Development staff reported extensive training through the UCT Programme on a range of skills and functions including English, MS Excel, SPSS statistical software, developing field monitoring tools, occupational safety, reporting, mine risk, security, and fraud management. However, staff identify the need for ongoing training, including to strengthen capacity on how to communicate with beneficiaries in communities, in addition to principles of social work. The Social Fund for Development was originally a development-based organisation and has pivoted to take on the emergency UCT Programme. The perception is that it has managed this successfully. However, employees perceive the need for training on crisis and emergency management, skills for quickly dealing with emergencies, and dealing with affected communities.

Social Welfare Fund key informants also reported useful training from UNICEF through their partnership on a cash-plus programme that aims to support stronger links between cash transfers and other services, targeting people with disabilities and the Muhamasheen. In 2022, UNICEF trained 650 Social Welfare Fund social workers in Sana'a on case management and referrals as part of this programme. Training focused on how to implement the project, including reporting, safeguarding, and communication skills, with plans to roll it out in IRG-controlled areas too. Staff described the training as focusing on functional aspects of implementation; one key informant described it as useful for beginners in community work, noting that case management was at the heart of the Social Welfare Fund's original (pre-war) Accreditation Unit work, but international organisations have since framed this in new terms.

In general, our research found it hard to dig beneath the explanation that 'training' was supporting capacity. There are reports of the number of participants trained, with some explanation of the technical skills covered, but there is a lack of published information on the outcomes and impacts of the training.[9] Nor is much information published on how the training was conducted (whether it was a one-off or repeated; what modality was used, e.g. online or in-person; the type of learning and assessment approach, etc.), and if it was linked to mentorship or other learning support.

It Is not known how much individual aid agencies share among themselves on training approaches within the social protection sector in Yemen to learn from each other's experiences, although there is the opportunity for collective learning through the humanitarian cluster system. For example, as co-lead of the Community Engagement and Accountability to Affected Populations Working Group UNICEF has trained cluster partners on accountability to affected populations, including on developing a collective feedback mechanism based on humanitarian agencies' existing approaches (UNICEF 2022a). Also, in 2023 UNICEF developed and delivered broader safeguarding training for Social Welfare Fund and Social Fund for Development (KI).

In interviews, NNGO representatives also raised the need for opportunities and support to use and apply the training they are given. The risk is that NNGOs build capacity from their core budget and invest in their staff, but then that qualified staff use this experience to find work at international organisations that offer better salary packages. Moreover, while there are examples of international actors undertaking in-depth capacity assessments of national partners and developing structured capacity-building plans jointly with national organisations (e.g. UNICEF's approach to supporting the capacities of the Social Fund for Development and Social Welfare Fund), our research found that NNGOs also experience capacity support that is ad hoc, uncoordinated, and not strategic (mirroring findings from the 2022 baseline localisation assessment (Tamdeen Youth Foundation *et al*. 2022)). Without a participatory assessment or consultative approach to identifying capacity gaps, there is a risk that technical or grant management training may not align with the gaps and needs civil society organisations identify themselves (Colburn 2021). A regional survey by the CALP Network in 2023 was a positive step towards filling this gap (Volpe and Nassar 2023). Box 4.5 summarises feedback we received from local organisations on the core competencies of social assistance actors, and local organisations' priorities for capacity-strengthening initiatives. It also includes the capacity support gaps local actors reported in the CALP Network's survey in 2023.

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[9] For example, UNICEF (2022: 6) reported that 'UNICEF provided PSEA [prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse] training to 143 staff in the Grievance Redress Mechanism (GRM) call centre: ten UNICEF case managers and 133 staff from the Social Fund for Development (SFD). The PSEA training ensured that all staff are capable and aware of the processes for handling sensitive sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) complaints, including multiple reporting channels, the option of reporting anonymously and accountability protocol for referral pathways to connect survivors with needed SEA services.' In another example, WFP (2023c: 10) reports strengthening the capacities of local NGOs and local authorities, including through 'trainings to enhance both assistance delivery and to ensure the adherence to humanitarian principles in the implementation of WFP activities'.

Box 4.5: Local actors' perceptions of social assistance capacities and capacity gaps

National actors interviewed for the study perceive that the core skills and competencies required for providing social assistance interventions in Yemen include: working and communicating with communities and local authorities; working under pressure and having the ability to problem-solve and be flexible; conflict sensitivity; management skills; reporting skills; and English language ability.

Key informants from the Social Fund for Development, the Social Welfare Fund, and Yemeni NGOs identified a number of areas where they would welcome more training and support. They encompass organisational systems and support, and individual technical skills and more functional capabilities, including:

- How to work in a hostile environment; crisis and emergency management skills.
- How to cope with and respond to requests and pressure from communities in desperate need of help.
- Communicating with affected communities and community outreach.
- Understanding humanitarian principles and how to apply these on the ground given the complexity of the context.
- Training on rules and policies of humanitarian programmes and international aid agencies, especially for employees who have moved from the private sector.
- How to do a community assessment and implement targeting.
- Data analysis and problem-solving skills.
- Conducting surveys and monitoring and evaluation.
- Gender and advanced protection training.
- Proposal and report writing; MS Excel and English skills.
- Budgeting skills.
- Project management, logistics, and fundraising.
- How to design and develop a national social protection system.
- Managing RRMs for emerging needs.
- Purchase management.
- Designing applications related to use of technology in cash transfer projects.

Source: KIIs.

In a separate exercise, the CALP Network's Locally Led Response Community of Practice in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2023 surveyed donors, consortia, and local actors to assess their perceptions of capacity-building gaps and needs in the region. Two surveys were administered: in one, local actors were given a checklist to self-assess capacity-building needs. Their responses highlighted gaps in capacity support: the 97 respondents (31 per cent of whom were from Yemen) reported a long list of capacity needs across due diligence components, delivery processes and technical know-how, and operations and grants (*ibid.*). The most commonly shared priorities were for capacity building on policies on media and communication (89 per cent of respondents); grant writing (87 per cent); 'data protection and GDPR' (83 per cent); 'identification of most appropriate modalities to deliver transfer values' (82 per cent); and 'questionnaire development (e.g., running and analyzing multi-sector emergency)' (82 per cent).

Source: Authors' own. Drawing on information from Volpe and Nassar (2023).

In consultation with NNGOs, the Yemen Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) has developed a localisation strategy for 2024–26 that includes a commitment to provide multi-year investment in the institutional capacities of local and national responders (with the measurable target of at least 50 per cent of funded NNGO projects, including a budget for scaling up internal capacity – from a baseline of 8–13 per cent – that is to be measured through an annual survey) (OCHA 2024). The strategy also aims to coordinate 'collective and specific actions from humanitarian actors including donors, INGOs, NNGOs, UN, HCT, local authorities and clusters' (OCHA 2024: 32). It includes the intention to undertake a joint single-capacity assessment and develop a capacity development plan that multiple donors, UN agencies, and INGOs can fund.

However, across other parts of government and local organisations this is less evident, and there is more of a focus on training and less on organisational change and transformation. The focus on training – and on technical skills rather than wider capabilities – contrasts with some of the skills that staff say they need, such as communications, working in communities, and other functional capabilities. There is also little sign of linkages between the training being provided and relational approaches to capacity strengthening that involve power analysis; and participatory processes of organisational change, which the capacity literature suggests should be a key part of strengthening capacities.

'We get training but then we don't apply it to our work.'

KII, national organisation representative.

'NNGOs are like a training centre for international organizations. We spend time, money, and efforts to build capacities and then we lose them because we can't offer [the] same salaries.'

KII, national organisation representative.

'They build our capacity only on how to report financially and narratively, monitoring the activities. Capacity building is not based on assessment needs/gaps of our organization, or a strategic capacity strategy to leverage our capacity to a new level.'

KII, national organisation representative.

Box 4.7: Key takeaways

Sequencing investments between sustaining existing systems and building new capacities. Given Yemen's protracted conflict and governance divide, there is no simple route to providing social protection to support populations that face repeated acute shocks alongside chronic poverty. International actors have played an important role in sustaining some aspects of pre-conflict social protection systems and capacities, and attempting to build new capacities. This sort of hybrid approach has merit, but careful attention is needed to identify when it is the right moment to invest in new capacities or the development of new policies.

Impressive organisational capacity has been built in the Social Fund for Development, but elsewhere the focus has been on training and technical skills rather than organisational growth. The organisation appears to represent a rare pocket of effectiveness within Yemen, able to work across the political and administrative divide, and where sustained multi-donor support has enabled strong organisational as well as individual capacities to be maintained and strengthened.

4.2 What capacities have been undermined, lost, or missed?

Detached efforts

Aid actors' approaches to strengthening national and local capacities for social assistance range from engagement with ministries and local authorities to support to government and parastatal organisations, and NNGOs. But there appears to have been limited discussion about how these different approaches and dimensions of capacity strengthening relate to each other. Localisation efforts (Box 4.8) tend to focus narrowly on financing NNGOs, neglecting questions on engaging with different parts of the state at national and sub-national levels, and with broader elements of civil society.

Box 4.8: Localisation

International actors in Yemen have committed to work with and support local organisations in line with global commitments on localisation made through the Grand Bargain in 2016. These commitments included providing at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding as directly as possible to local and national responders; removing barriers that prevent partnerships with local organisations; supporting local organisations' inclusion in coordination mechanisms; and increasing investment to build their institutional capacities.

Both globally and in Yemen, this localisation agenda has proved hard to achieve. Work by Baguios *et al.* (2021) highlights that localisation – a process that has the end goal of locally led practice – is about more than resourcing. They set out how:

> truly reducing encroachment on agency and demonstrating respect for ways of being requires a more radical change. International actors need to rethink their roles (and, in some cases, even take a step back) so that local actors can pursue genuine locally led development. For example, this might mean reduced funding channelled through intermediaries
> *Ibid.* (52).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

Coordination of externally led efforts relating to institutional preservation and capacity strengthening has been limited. That has meant opportunities have been missed to explore linkages between the role of Yemeni NGO implementing partners and Yemeni government and parastatal organisations in how assistance is delivered. Other opportunities have been missed to learn from and identify complementarities among the multiple different food, cash, and in-kind transfer programmes aid agencies and INGOs have implemented.

Key informants reported recently renewed efforts to improve coordination between social assistance interventions, and to strengthen a collective approach to capacity development of national organisations. One coordinating forum is the Cash and Market Working Group (which includes WFP, UNICEF, the Food and Agriculture Organization, Cash Consortium of Yemen (CCY) and REACH Initiative among other partners) (KI; OCHA 2023). In 2023, the Cash and Market Working Group included among its priorities: 'Promoting localization of cash assistance by carrying out capacity building initiatives with local actors' (OCHA 2023: 40). Key informants also highlighted the SPCC and its work on developing a strategic framework for social protection in Yemen. Coordination on cash and social protection, however, too often missed food aid, which still constitutes the majority of assistance. Despite these renewed efforts, a recent report for the CALP Network found a 'conspicuous absence of robust coordination and alignment among humanitarian cash actors, including consortia such as the CCY, and development and donor organizations' (Beyond Group 2023: 51).

Other efforts include revitalising discussions on interoperability between interventions in 2023 (these are explored further in the separate BASIC Research study on interoperability in Yemen). Also, the HCT localisation strategy for 2024–26 includes commitments by international humanitarian actors to coordinate on strengthening national organisations' capacities (OCHA 2024). In addition, there are hopes that the Yemen Partners Group (which includes Gulf donors as well as Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Development Assistance Committee donors) and its technical advisory body, the Yemen Partners Technical Team, can help operationalise a collective strategic and sequenced effort across peace, humanitarian, and development interventions, including capacity building (OCHA 2023; Thompson and Spencer Bernard 2023). These initiatives require sustained prioritisation and resourcing, and to achieve progress on capacity efforts, a shared long-term vision among donors, UN agencies, and INGOs to guide externally led efforts for capacity strengthening of national organisations.

There also appears to be scope for further attention to and support for the role of local councils in social assistance, and review of potential linkages between social assistance interventions and other programmes working to strengthen local council governance. Coordinating, and even channelling humanitarian support through local councils is argued to have the potential benefits of supporting local solutions, kick-starting local economies, 'and most crucially, maintaining the institutional structures that will likely play the most significant role in post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction' (Baron *et al*. 2016: 3, 14).[10]

Efforts to work with local authorities would need to be informed by a careful conflict-sensitive approach underpinned by in-depth knowledge of local power dynamics, and how these shape inclusion and exclusion in communities (Birch *et al*. 2022). International actors are supporting local governance authorities to perform core functions and deliver basic services through interventions such as the three-year (2020–23) US$27m EU-funded Strengthening Institutional and Economic Resilience in Yemen (SIERY) project implemented by UNDP.[11]

Box 4.9: Local councils in Yemen

Local (or district) councils, which approve local policies, plans and budgets, are responsible for providing basic services to people in Yemen (Al-Mawari 2018; Baron *et al*. 2016). Yemen has 21 governorates and one municipality, which are divided into 333 districts (Al-Mawari 2018). The 2000 Local Authority Law allowed for the first direct elections of the local councils in 2001 (Al-Iryani, Coombs and Salah 2021). These institutions, which before the war had limited autonomy from central government and struggled to garner independent revenue sources, have seen little or no central budgetary or administrative support during the conflict (ibid.). The functioning of local government today varies governate by governorate, with tighter political control in DFA-controlled areas and a mixed picture for other areas, including unprecedented authority in oil-producing governorates (Marib and Shawa), and revenue shortages and political in-fighting in others (Aden) (ibid.). Across Yemen, the prevalent:

> rent-based system of local governance has become more personalised and ad-hoc. Effective authority over local services and the power to collect revenue now resides with the actors who have the military means to enforce their claims
> Rogers (2019: 7).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

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[10] Research from Syria has similarly recommended 'renewed engagement with local governance bodies to account for new realities of a) remote management and b) insider links and networks of local governance that work differently to international nongovernmental organisations' (Dadu-Brown and Dadu 2018: 1).
[11] Read the SIERY project summary.

In DFA-controlled areas, council representatives interviewed had not participated in social assistance provision, except to approve ('stamp') the list of beneficiaries submitted from various organisations, or at times helping organisations to find warehouses to store in-kind assistance. In IRG-controlled areas, councils interviewed had received training from INGOs and NNGOs on how to do aid distributions, and protection and gender and social inclusion. They had been approached by international aid organisations to advise them on selecting vulnerable beneficiaries; for example, one INGO approached a local council to ask for a list of people who had chronic illnesses so that they could be given food aid.

Council representatives interviewed identified the risk that aid agencies working with community focal points without council coordination could exacerbate social tensions; for example, if external organisations arrived to support IDPs and not host communities, who are facing increased hardship because of high inflation and the rising cost of living.[12] Council leaders also raised concerns over the lack of aid exit strategies, perceiving that short-term projects can create dependency and undermine community capacity. Other concerns include the risk that cuts in the value of benefits and the number of beneficiaries could cause social unrest, and that more thought should go into how to support people's livelihoods and resilience alongside providing food handouts.

Atrophy of Social Welfare Fund capacities

Today, the Social Welfare Fund is a shell of its former self. Before the war, the organisation was a large, capable institution with a cadre of social workers and case managers. The suspension of its leading role in the Cash Transfer Programme and associated lack of funding has left it with limited resources to withstand the negative impacts of the conflict. The Social Welfare Fund's organisational structure mirrors the country's divided governance, resulting in a split institution. Offices are closed or empty, with outdated IT systems and a lack of basic infrastructure. Staff have left or have spent many years with intermittent work and salaries, resorting to other part-time income-generating activities.

The involvement of Social Welfare Fund staff in the UCT Programme during the conflict years has been limited to supporting facilitation of the programme in communities through short-term contracts, due to strict donor conditions on paying public sector workers' salaries through aid financing. In particular, key informants perceive the organisation's cadre of social workers to be an overlooked and a neglected capacity resource. Staff interviewed said that in 2014 before the conflict the Social Welfare Fund delivered the Cash Transfer Programme to 1.5 million households with a staff of 1,511 employees (of whom 27 per cent were women).

The organisation's headquarters were in Sana'a, where 190 employees worked, with a decentralised organisational structure of 22 governorate branches and 214 district offices. The Social Welfare Fund therefore had an extensive branch network reaching out to every district, and staff in villages carrying out facilitation. Social Welfare Fund staff are civil servants, their salaries paid by the government of Yemen. When the IRG made Aden the temporary capital city of Yemen in 2017, relocating the head offices of government ministries there from Sana'a, the organisational structure of the Social Welfare Fund split to form two head offices: one in Aden under the IRG and the other in Sana'a under the DFA. This means that the Social Welfare Fund has a divided management structure: there is an executive director in Sana'a and another executive director in Aden, along with respective separate departments, policies, and procedures.

The Social Welfare Fund offices in DFA-controlled areas are reduced to two buildings that the organisation owns outright (rented offices at branch and district levels have closed or returned to local council use). The Sana'a head office suffered slight war damage in the early years of the conflict and UNICEF provided support for the building's rehabilitation in 2017. The Social Welfare Fund has not been able to afford to keep services (electricity, water, internet) running in these two offices; support from UNICEF has provided small solar-powered generators, with one source reporting that funding was provided in 2023 to maintain these.

The inability to pay for water, electricity, and internet affects staff who report to the office on a shift basis. A female staff member said that she walks to the nearest mosque to use the bathroom as the one in the Social Welfare Fund office has no water. Others mentioned that the office used to be very dusty; now senior staff are personally contributing on a monthly basis to keep it clean. It also affects beneficiaries, who sometimes

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[12] Research by Jalal and El Taraboulsi-McCarthy (2020) explores tensions and solidarities between host communities and IDPs.

come to the main office asking for documents to be generated from the database, but this is not possible when there is no power.

The unused computers sitting on desks under dust covers in the big rooms in the Sana'a office are a physical reminder of the Social Welfare Fund's 'golden days' of extensive training and equipment (when the organisation received an operational budget from the government, as well as grants from international donors such as the EU, the Netherlands, UK, United States, and the World Bank). The IT systems are now outdated and need maintenance. There are plans for World Bank support to improve this situation by providing equipment in 2024.

The conflict has similarly affected the offices in IRG-controlled areas, although they benefit from being given a small operating budget from MoSAL and, as in DFA-controlled areas, support from UNICEF, which allows the Social Welfare Fund to keep the offices running with modest infrastructure. The Aden office has seven staff members in a MoSAL building (replacing the previous branch office). They started with the executive manager and the Beneficiary Development Unit, expanding to include staff functions for finance, monitoring and evaluation, policy, legal affairs, and IT. Key informants reported not having enough computers (and no laptops), and a lack of support for rent and internet access. Since 2023, UNICEF has funded a solar energy system for the headquarters in Aden and Sana'a (KI).

Social Welfare Fund staff in DFA-controlled areas have been in a particularly difficult situation, along with other public sector officials, not having received regular salaries since 2017. In interviews, staff explained how they used to help poor people to get assistance and now they themselves need assistance. Some have sold cars, land, and assets to survive. The staff at the Sana'a office have established a rota to report to the office on a shift basis. They struggle to afford the transport costs to get to work, at times borrowing money to do so. One staff member reported having arguments with her husband over whether she should use their (little) money for this, given that the office was not fully functioning. Salaries in IRG-controlled areas have not kept up with the rate of inflation and staff no longer receive the additional allowances that used to help them get by. They are struggling to meet their basic needs and have to resort to doing casual labour.

'I opened my own small business as a makeup artist from home to be able to survive.'

KII, Social Welfare Fund.

'A male staff member shared his story that prices are going up crazily and the salary is even less than US$50, so he is working as a casual farm labourer to feed his children.'

KII, Social Welfare Fund.

Individual Social Welfare Fund employees have made the most of opportunities to sustain their skills and learn new ones to keep abreast of developments in the social assistance field, but these are intermittent, short term, and with little guarantee of professional development or regular incomes in the future. Opportunities to sustain and strengthen their capacities in social assistance have been through short-term contracts to work supporting facilitation of the UCT Programme, and on the cash-plus projects funded and jointly managed by UNICEF and the Social Welfare Fund.

From the start of the UCT Programme in 2017, Social Welfare Fund staff were contracted as individual consultants to work on the facilitation component, given their experience with communities, local government, and local leaders. After the transfer of some programme components to the Social Fund for Development, a memorandum of understanding signed by UNICEF, the Social Fund for Development, and the Social Welfare Fund set out the framework for Social Welfare Fund work on the facilitation component. Since the Social Fund for Development took on these functions, staff from the Social Welfare Fund have been used in facilitation and outreach (a total of around 600), and in a mentoring process, with Social Welfare Fund staff shadowing Social Fund for Development staff in various roles.

Social Welfare Fund staff in DFA- and IRG-controlled areas report taking turns to work with the Social Fund for Development, to share benefits (income and training) among themselves. This work has included training in technical skills (such as using MS Excel, using mobile apps, reporting, case management, protection, and risk management). Social Welfare Fund staff described how their participation in the UCT facilitation component has helped them and their families to survive. At the same time, some staff reported a loss of identity and respect. They may be more experienced than their Social Fund for Development managers, with more experience of the UCT Programme, many of them having worked for many years in the social assistance field. Moreover, whereas previously everyone knew who they were as representatives of the Social Welfare Fund, now when they go out into communities they go as Social Fund for Development contractors and have lost their former recognition and respect.

'There are Social Welfare Fund staff across every district and they do have strengths in community engagement.'

KII, Social Fund for Development.

'I was going in uncertain of how to continue to support my family; now I gain income, learn new things as I wasn't good in using the technology. I was so depressed before.'

KII, Social Welfare Fund.

'The war affected me as an employee and a father. The years 2017–2018 were among the worst years that I have experienced. Salaries stopped the source of my family's livelihood. I was disappointed. After that, I worked on short-term contracts, renewable as a facilitation officer at UCT Programme. I took refresher courses and courses in the new work mechanisms, and I got money to help me meet the cost of living.'

KII, Social Welfare Fund.

Resourcing capacities

Finance for the UCT Programme and the other cash transfers still flows through UN agencies, and there is little donor appetite to transfer large budgets more directly to local partners. Overall, direct funding to local organisations in Yemen is a minor share of the total humanitarian response. This mirrors international actors' lack of progress worldwide on meeting their commitment to channel at least 25 per cent of total humanitarian funding to local organisations in a manner as 'directly as possible'.[13]

NNGOs are affected by a lack of long-term core funding that global evidence shows 'is more likely to foster sustainable outcomes and local ownership' (OECD 2023). In Yemen, research by Colburn (2021) found that project-by-project negotiations on overheads[14] led to tensions between local and international organisations, heightened by the context of inflated higher costs for security, safeguarding, and transportation. Frustration with 'ballooning costs' without commensurate increases in overheads to local organisations is heightened by widespread perceptions of 'very high international NGO overheads', alongside highly visible large outlays on expensive UN security apparatus (e.g. armoured vehicles and securitised buildings) (Colburn 2021: 31; Sida *et al.* 2022: 95).

Key informants in our study observed that international organisations are transferring the risk of working in the most remote and difficult locations and negotiating access with authorities to national civil society organisations without adequately funding this risk. An international key informant highlighted the 'wholesale risk transfer – from donors to the UN and UN to NGOs'. In March 2023, civil society organisations in Yemen called for donors and intermediaries (UN agencies and INGOs) to apply their commitments on providing overheads to NNGOs consistently, including asking donors to request that UN agencies and INGOs they fund have policies that support the payment of local organisations' overheads (ADO *et al.* 2023).[15]

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[13] 'Direct funding to local and national actors, as a share of total humanitarian assistance, remained static at 1.2% in 2022' (Development Initiatives 2023: 74).

[14] Development Initiatives (2023: 2) notes that: 'There is no standard term or definition for "indirect costs" or "overheads". Broadly they refer to the costs outside normal programme implementation costs that an organisation needs to deliver its mission as a whole. They are calculated as a proportion of direct project expenditure.' The terms 'overheads' and 'indirect costs' are often used interchangeably.

[15] Civil society organisations in Yemen have called for increased funding. Globally, there has been a push to ensure local organisations providing humanitarian assistance should be paid overheads to cover indirect costs.

For illustrative purposes, a rough calculation of the sums involved is that the global humanitarian response of US$2.33bn in 2022 had overheads of US$163m (when calculating overheads at the standard rate of 7 per cent); assuming that Yemen is similar to global trends, then 1.2 per cent of the overheads would have gone directly to local actors (Development Initiatives 2022), about US$2m. Total overheads since the start of the conflict probably amount to over US$1bn. With fairer sharing of overheads with national partners these resources could have done more to contribute to strengthening national organisational capacities. However, there is very little transparency about how much is being shared. Recent analysis of the value for money of more locally led assistance programming found significant potential for cost savings to be achieved through greater localisation (Cabot Venton, Pongracz and Alabsi 2024).

Partnership approaches

Not all international organisations providing social assistance in Yemen engage with local civil society organisations or NGOs, or are only at the start of moving in this direction and developing localisation approaches. Some donors and international agencies have limited appetite for the risk posed by moving to more locally led partnership approaches, given concerns over capacity, diligence, compliance, and anti-terrorism legislation. In the CALP Network's survey of the MENA region in 2023, the 12 participating donor and consortia respondents reported concerns about funding local actors, as well as valuing their strengths (Box 4.10).

Box 4.1: CALP Network's MENA perception survey of capacity-building gaps and needs

The CALP Network's Locally Led Response Community of Practice in the MENA region in 2023 surveyed donors and consortia and local actors, to assess their perceptions of capacity-building gaps and needs in the region. Two surveys were administered; in one donors and consortia were asked to identify gaps. The findings are indicative: 12 responses were recorded among donors and consortia.

As reported to the survey, donor and consortia respondents value local actors' geographical access, contextual knowledge, and cost-effective implementation, but they are 'unsure about the local actors' capacity to handle large-scale grants, their accountability and transparency processes, and their technical knowledge', with two-thirds of respondents put off by lack of policies (e.g. code of conduct, sexual harassment policies, whistleblower policies, etc.) and due diligence limitations. Revealingly, 44 per cent of donor and consortia respondents did not think local actors played a pivotal role in targeting humanitarian assistance; 77 per cent doubted local actors' impartiality when there were tensions related to community, ethnicity, or gender.

Source: Authors' own. Drawing on information from Volpe and Nassar (2023).

Local actors working with the World Bank and UNICEF on the UCT Programme and with WFP to deliver general food assistance report that, while their organisational and individual capabilities have been strengthened by the daily practical experience gained in carrying out their roles in delivering social assistance, their restricted role as service providers limits their capacity development, and their input into intervention design and adaptation. Some national key informants perceive that the training provided focuses more on execution of programme activities rather than the strategic development of staff and the organisation.

This is a Grand Bargain commitment, with accompanying Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidance (IASC 2022). Yet, global research has highlighted a 'lack of donor coherence in incentivising international aid organisation partners to change', including some donors not having policy positions in relation to international partners passing on overhead costs to local partners (Metcalfe-Hough, Fenton and Manji 2023: 64; Development Initiatives 2023).

International aid agencies report on the value that their partnerships with local actors provide. For example, WFP (2023c: 10) notes that: 'WFP's achievements in 2022 were made possible through the relationships fostered with its local cooperating partners', which 'brought a deep understanding of community needs and local contexts, [and] geographical proximity to beneficiaries, as well as complementary technical knowledge'. However, this does not appear to be reflected by local actors' reported perceptions, who do not feel valued as partners.

NNGOs interviewed also perceived little interest from international partners in their feedback on their implementation experiences. These findings chime with other research that has highlighted the overall lack of locally led decision-making in the humanitarian response in Yemen (Colburn 2021; Elkahlout *et al*. 2022; Tamdeen Youth Foundation *et al*. 2022). Local organisations feel they are usually treated as contractors rather than partners, and given precise terms of reference and process standards which they are charged to deliver. There are few opportunities to discuss challenges or issues beyond those included in standard measurement tools from the UN and INGOs; when local organisations try to give feedback, they report getting little response from international organisations (KIs). A positive step is the recent initiative by the Yemen Humanitarian Fund to improve the representation and participation of local partners on the fund's advisory board and allocation review committees (OCHA 2022b). Another initiative reported to this study is the SPCC's engagement of NNGOs to share insights and foster coordination (KI).

> *'WFP treats cooperating partners just like logistical outlets… "Be here, trucks will show up; do a distribution and leave".'*
>
> KII, international organisation.
>
> *'We tried to negotiate with them on updating the list, because some cases are not eligible to be on the list or some new cases need badly to be on the list. But at the end of the day, we are just 'contractors' from WFP's point of view.'*
>
> KII, national organisation.

Moreover, recent reviews of localisation approaches have identified a missed opportunity to support community-based social networks and more deeply rooted civil society organisations, as opposed to rewarding newly formed NGOs set up to tap into aid funding. Local actors interviewed perceive that organisations with stronger principles and experience in community and development work, volunteering, and long-term commitments to social welfare in Yemen have often been sidelined in a competitive landscape for international funding that favours newly established organisations able to navigate complex diligence and compliance requirements.

Historically, alongside more informal community-based social solidarity initiatives, civil society groups have been the first responders in times of crisis in Yemen (e.g. the Humanitarian Forum Yemen and the Wedyan Association). These mechanisms are based on indigenous traditions of collective action, charitable giving, and consultative practices (Colburn 2021). More formalised NGOs thrived after the 2011 Arab Spring, and aspirations rose for an opening up of political participation and more active civil society involvement (*ibid*.). At the start of the war, many of these NGOs collapsed, but the number of registered NGOs has grown in recent years, as well as continued community social support.

However, international aid funding and budgeting processes affect which types of local organisations can access support and gain experience. UN and INGO funding processes require NNGOs to be able to navigate complex systems and online registration processes, as well as complicated due diligence and eligibility standards (*ibid*.). The need for local partners to cover operating costs in advance (Sida *et al*. 2022) and delays in payments from international agencies may also stop smaller organisations from being able to take on contracts (KIs). It is also hard to get access to funding opportunities: a limited number of NNGOs receive the bulk of their funds from international organisations. One women-led organisation, which has been supporting children with disabilities since 2012, with assistance from the HCRF, described how struggles to access consistent and sufficient funding led to the closure of its main centres, with children greatly affected by the halt in services helping them to walk, speak, and learn.

Community engagement and accountability

The capacity for effective engagement with people at local level is critical for programme implementation and accountability in multiple ways, not least because of the key link between community engagement and achieving an inclusive, conflict-sensitive approach. Close and trusted relationships with communities are critical for understanding local conflict and peace dynamics, as well as the informal support networks that many people depend on for survival, and how an aid intervention interacts with these (deliberately or inadvertently) (Box 4.11).

Box 4.11: Why is it important for aid actors to engage with and bolster informal support networks?

A qualitative study by Mercy Corps in Taiz (Kim et al. 2022) aimed to help aid actors understand how social connections support coping and survival in Yemen. Through extensive interviews with those directly affected and others with firsthand knowledge of the issues at hand, the study explains that improving this understanding is critical to:

● Ensure aid interventions do not undermine people's informal survival and coping strategies.
● Avoid targeting criteria that inadvertently fuel or heighten social tensions; for example, categorical approaches to targeting based on displacement status led to increased tensions between IDPs (recipients of the aid) and host communities.
● Understand and monitor how community committees operate – given that aid actors rely on community committees to lead the selection of beneficiaries; these committees can support accountability to communities but are also vulnerable to local interest pressures and capture, resulting in exclusion.
● Check that communications about assistance are consistent and people understand them, setting out clear parameters on sharing aid, to avoid disrupting existing social support networks or causing social tension.

Source: Authors' own. Drawing on information from Kim et al. (2022).

This understanding is vital for aid actors to ensure that social assistance reaches the most marginalised people and is conflict sensitive, in that it does not create new tensions or exacerbate existing ones, and may even seek to support peacebuilding pathways (Birch *et al*. 2022). Social Fund for Development noted challenges in respecting beneficiaries' confidentiality and data protection rights, while at the same time ensuring effective community participation to reduce weak targeting and fraudulent practices, and protect people from exploitation and exclusion.

WFP operates a community feedback mechanism to enable people to directly contact the organisation and enhance accountability. It received 130,000 calls to the community feedback mechanism in 2022, close to twice as many as in 2021, as WFP continued community sensitisation. Most of the calls were general inquiries or asking for guidance (42 per cent), followed by requests or expressions of preference (37 percent); complaints accounted for 21 per cent of calls. Overall, 98 per cent of cases had been resolved or closed by the end of 2022. Locations assessed to have high protection risks were closely monitored, including through a beneficiary verification mechanism. Through the mechanism, WFP conducted 263,000 calls to programme participants to verify they had received their full entitlements, and that the provision of assistance was conducted in line with WFP standards (WFP 2023d).

However, our research has shown a relative neglect of skills and capacities for community engagement and accountability. The skills valued in staff hired by the Social Fund for Development and international agencies have been English, technical report writing, and IT related. The skills of older people who are less proficient in English, but who have significant experience of engaging people at community level, have been sidelined. Skills and capacities to ensure that systems tick the right boxes for donors – diligence, safeguarding, well-written reports, payment systems, call centres, and third-party monitoring – have been prioritised. Less evident is investment in the skills needed for engagement with people at local level, and community-level accountability.

Box 4.12: Key takeaways

Marginalisation and lack of high-quality, strategic long-term funding to local actors means that important skills and capabilities needed for effective assistance are being lost or undermined. In their neglect of the Social Welfare Fund and its network of locally embedded social workers, in the limited roles allotted to Yemeni NGOs, and in their lack of support to wider civil society, international aid actors are missing opportunities to better support vital capacities necessary for assistance to be effective and accountable, particularly at the local level. The skills the aid system values to ensure compliance (such as management information systems and reporting) have been privileged and the soft skills needed for effective engagement at the community level neglected.

During the protracted conflict, Yemenis have continued to perform work responsibilities under difficult conditions, often unpaid and even in some cases using their own money to maintain workplaces. This provides an insight into the daily environment that shapes people's capabilities (what they can do in practice given real-life conditions) and performance (what they actually do day to day) (Slater 2023). It demonstrates the importance of personal, professional, and organisational values, and the resilience of those values in times of crisis.

Referring back to the capacity cube framework (Figure 2.1), some people have valuable competencies that cannot be put into practice because of lack of support. Lack of funding means that salaries cannot be paid and organisations that have people with needed competencies can no longer function. And those capacities are atrophying over time as funding declines and skills are lost.

The current modus operandi favours donor funding to UN agencies and INGOs over national actors; overhead budgets for social assistance programmes largely remain with international organisations. The project-linked short-term funding that the Social Fund for Development and NNGOs have received constrains investment in more sustainable organisational development. This trickles down to short-term staffing arrangements, which do not give individual employees job security beyond each payment cycle.

4.3 What has been too difficult to tackle?

A good social protection system and programmes have a robust targeting strategy and design that are implemented, monitored, and improved on in response to feedback and learning. They also provide an adequate transfer value to achieve their objectives and enable effective community engagement and case management to support accountability. We have examined how international actors' support has sustained, strengthened, or undermined national capacities to deliver (1) effective targeting and (2) adequate value of social assistance support, both of which are critical to achieving the desired impact of social assistance interventions.

Targeting

The targeting of assistance in Yemen remains deeply problematic, contested, and politically fraught. There are concerns that social assistance is not reaching those most in need and communities do not always understand how it is targeted. Given the limitations on poverty and vulnerability data in Yemen, and lack of coordination between interventions on targeting, there is huge uncertainty over inclusion and exclusion, and who is receiving one, both, or neither of the major assistance programmes (Ghorpade and Ammar 2021; McLean 2020; Nimkar 2021; Sida *et al*. 2022).

Limited access and restrictions on aid monitoring mean that international actors only have a partial picture of who is receiving social assistance and the impact of this support. Some households may be beneficiaries of both WFP and World Bank transfers. Given the low value of transfers compared with the high level of needs, a focus on deduplication may not be a high priority for some; others advocate for a move to a unified social registry to avoid duplication and support adding new cases (KIs).

Given the widespread and evolving needs in Yemen, some people, including the most vulnerable, may not receive any support. The protracted crisis has had multiple, severe impacts on the population, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities, and resulting in newly vulnerable and poor people in need of assistance, with loss of livelihoods, a large number of conflict-related injuries and disabilities, and an increase in the numbers of widows and female-headed households. However, as one key informant pointed out, technical effectiveness is not the only concern in Yemen when considering how to improve social assistance targeting, as complex and challenging political, social, and operational factors are also involved.

Both the WFP General Food Assistance Programme and the World Bank-funded UCT Programme started with a beneficiary list from the pre-war Social Welfare Fund Cash Transfer Programme (Box 4.13).

Box 4.13: Beneficiary list of the pre-war Social Welfare Fund Cash Transfer Programme

The Social Welfare Fund Cash Transfer Programme's list of beneficiaries was last updated in 2014, before the war (Nimkar 2021); the last comprehensive survey was in 2008 (World Bank 2010). When the Cash Transfer Programme was first set up, inclusion on the Social Welfare Fund list was shaped by tribal bias, as well as political considerations, corruption, and weak rule of law. There is a history of political and tribal influence over the distribution of aid resources in Yemen: tribal affiliation plays a crucial role in Yemeni society and has long had a strong influence on politics, power dynamics, and resource distribution (ACAPS 2020).

In 2008, a series of reforms were introduced to improve the targeting and effectiveness of the Cash Transfer Programme. These measures included shifting to poverty-based targeting, offering development interventions to beneficiaries, and introducing a graduation process for the programme, through a beneficiaries' development unit. The Social Welfare Fund adopted a proxy means test-based targeting approach, conducting a nationwide household survey in 2008 to re-evaluate existing beneficiaries and identify eligible new cases. The organisation undertook annual verification of beneficiaries, with community visits to assess the eligibility of new cases, and check if there were any changes to the eligibility of existing beneficiaries that would require removing them from the list (KI).

Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.

As reported to this study, WFP has regularly updated, adjusted, and cleaned the list through cooperating partners to respond to shifting humanitarian needs. WFP in 2022/23 provided food assistance to over 13 million people (more than 40 per cent of the population). Starting with the pre-war beneficiary list and adding to it to cover growing humanitarian need, WFP's last major retargeting exercise was in 2019 (Sida *et al*. 2022). There have been efforts to undertake a major retargeting exercise using biometric registration. In IRG-controlled areas, the exercise was paused in late 2021; WFP received approval to partially resume the exercise in July 2022 (WFP 2023d). In those areas, WFP completed registration of 3.5 million people in 2023 and at the start of 2024 was in the process of re-targeting based on criteria agreed with the authorities. In DFA-controlled areas, an agreement to start a registration and re-targeting process was signed, with the hope of starting a pilot exercise in three districts in early 2024 (KI).

Some key informants interviewed perceived the slow progress on being able to negotiate an agreement with authorities to update the targeting assistance as a critical bottleneck to providing more effective assistance. NGO implementing partners were frustrated at their inability to make adjustments to who was targeted. Data protection was a key priority for WFP: based on a privacy impact assessment, the organisation in 2022 finalised the Data Protection Action Plan to ensure personal data would be protected in line with WFP corporate minimum standards (WFP 2023d; KI).

Turning to the UCT Programme, one key informant described the intervention's targeting as 'hugely politicised'. Since UNICEF started implementing the UCT Programme in 2017, the priority was to use the Social Welfare Fund list to resume delivery of aid as quickly as possible, given high levels of need and ongoing conflict. Since then, reportedly there has been some checking and cleaning of the list, removing beneficiaries who are deceased or who have left the country, but some are still on the list who are not

collecting payments. Meanwhile, the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the period 2015–June 2021 found that people in Yemen little understood aid targeting mechanisms: 'The evaluation heard time and again from affected populations that they did not know how to access aid, or how to get on the "lists" that led to assistance' (Sida *et al.* 2022: xiv). However, key informants reported to this study that the use of the pre-conflict list and the legitimacy it carries has been key for the UCT Programme, with monitoring showing communities' acceptance of this and an understanding of who is targeted.

Key informants highlighted international actors' lack of appetite to open up the 'Pandora's box' of retargeting the UCT Programme, given broad-based need and the highly sensitive, politically charged context. In a country where around three-quarters of the population is in need, any decisions on how to target aid will be contentious. Given the challenges to conducting a transparent targeting exercise that would prevent inclusion and exclusion errors, sticking with the old list has become seen as 'the lesser of the two evils' (KI).

There are also questions of ownership – and the appropriate role of an external actor in changing a Government of Yemen list, although the Social Welfare Fund stressed its willingness to work with international actors to update beneficiary lists and include people already on a waiting list. Key informants noted growing willingness among agencies, donors and Yemeni authorities to discuss how to tackle targeting challenges in 2024. Recent investments in the enabling environment – such as 'enhancing engagement and investment in national systems and institutions and leveraging impact (cash plus) and better coordination of [the social protection] sector' – are seen as 'key pre-requisites to advance inclusion that is socially and politically acceptable, and operationally feasible' (KI).

Yet, the targeting of the main social assistance programmes has long been stuck because it is too politically difficult and contested to make any substantial changes. This means a critical dimension of social assistance capacities has also been neglected. The capability to understand, engage with, and respond to difficult targeting issues in an appropriate, conflict-sensitive manner – a core capacity of any national social protection system – is not being developed. The progress WFP made in late 2023 and early 2024 on re-targeting raises some hopes that efforts to re-target assistance are becoming unstuck.

Key informants raised the importance of capabilities to respond to the following interrelated challenges:

- Reports that the various warring groups politicise and influence inclusion – key informants mentioned that some names on aid lists were 'fake' or 'do not exist', while some names were wrongly registered as IDPs when they were not displaced. This mirrors findings from other research (Sida *et al.* 2022; Vuylsteke 2021).
- The unknown but likely substantial overlap and duplication between beneficiary lists and inability to make progress on efforts at deduplication or strategic layering of assistance – Donors and international agencies have called to move to a better continuum of support, layering interventions and being able to link people who get cash through the UCT Programme to other projects. But limited coordination and system interoperability are a big obstacle. For example, the CCY intended to provide a bridge (three months' assistance) to longer-term support following initial displacement; but integration or referral to other programmes has been very difficult as beneficiaries cannot be added to the WFP general food assistance list. Instead, the CCY in 2023 piloted referrals to the Social Fund for Development Small and Micro Enterprise Service programme, with CCY supporting consumption needs. The plan was for a very small-scale test involving a few hundred households.
- The concern that verification of beneficiaries through using identity (ID) cards risks excluding vulnerable beneficiaries, especially women, and women in rural areas in particular – one key informant noted that many beneficiaries, especially women, do not have national ID cards. Accessing fundamental services, such as education, aid and social assistance, and legal protection requires having identification documents, such as national ID cards, birth certificates, and marriage certificates. However, because of societal and cultural norms that limit their mobility and autonomy, many Yemeni women encounter significant challenges and financial barriers in obtaining these. As reported to this study, the UCT Programme has established a mechanism to provide community ID cards free of charge to prevent exclusion.

Smaller, internationally led interventions have responded to new vulnerabilities; for example, UNICEF cash-plus programmes that target children with disabilities and Muhamasheen families (Box 4.14). Also, the smaller and less political CCY programme has developed a vulnerability assessment tool, with authorities accepting the need to prioritise giving limited resources to the most vulnerable people. It has entailed a long process of meetings and negotiations, with tools being highly scrutinised, in particular in DFA-controlled areas where getting agreement on targeting tools included a referral to the national security agency. The smaller scale was perceived to allow CCY to be more flexible.

Box 4.14: UNICEF cash-plus programmes

UNICEF has supported the Social Welfare Fund and HCRF to implement an integrated (cash-plus) social protection and services scheme with a focus on vulnerable children. UNICEF reports having provided two cash-plus payment cycles in 2022, supporting 19,403 households. This involved complementary support to beneficiaries, via case management and referral pathways, to access services (health; nutrition; water, sanitation and hygiene; child protection; education). UNICEF prioritises supporting children with disabilities and Muhamasheen families. In partnership with HCRF, in 2022 UNICEF provided humanitarian cash transfers to 13,087 households/families with children with disabilities (reaching 14,270 children with disabilities, 42 per cent of whom were girls), and in partnership with the Social Welfare Fund delivered an integrated social protection package to 60,657 Muhamasheen individuals and children with disabilities, adolescents, and their families, which included case management, awareness raising, and community engagement.

Source: Authors' own. Drawing on information from UNICEF Yemen (2023).

Transfer values

Essential social protection capacities include making political decisions about the best use of scarce resources. A live debate in the social protection sector in many settings including Yemen where the available funds are not sufficient to meet needs, is whether to prioritise breadth or depth; that is, whether to increase the number of beneficiaries and reduce the amount per beneficiary, or whether to reduce the overall number of beneficiaries and increase the amount per beneficiary. This debate has been heightened in Yemen as the years of conflict have extended, and both needs and the cost of living have risen. The two largest social assistance programmes both face difficult dilemmas.

With budgets affected by the Ukraine war, and associated global food and fuel price inflation, WFP has had to cut rations repeatedly; as mentioned above, in 2023 rations were at 41 per cent of the standard food basket (WFP 2023c). The reduced amount of rations spread among the same number of beneficiaries means ration sizes are increasingly no longer fit for purpose in terms of stated household food security objectives. Consequently, the limitations authorities set on revising the caseload of more than 13 million people who qualify for general food assistance is becoming an increasingly significant issue. More recently, funding cuts have led to reductions in the number of beneficiaries. Reporting in February 2024, WFP has recently agreed with the authorities to gradually reduce the caseload from 13.2 million beneficiaries to 9 million through a targeting and registration process, with the end goal of providing the standard food ration to targeted households (KI).

The value of the UCT Programme transfer has been frozen at pre-conflict levels, with some top-ups. In 2017, when the programme was restarted with World Bank support, the benefit amount was estimated 'to meet about 46 percent of the cost of the minimum food basket (for a family of five)' (World Bank 2017: 12). Temporary top-ups were added to the transfers to respond to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; when this ended in 2022, given inflation, the UCT transfer covered approximately 10–11 per cent of the basic food basket (World Bank 2023).

In the initial years of the emergency response to the conflict, attention was focused on ensuring the UCT Programme was able to deliver transfers to beneficiaries. Following a de-escalation of the conflict in 2022 and the first nationwide truce in six years (Loft 2023), space began to open up to look at design issues.

UNICEF and the World Bank have reportedly been looking into how to update the beneficiary list and improve transfer adequacy, with investment in strengthening inclusion, including through piloting digital payments to support beneficiary access to national ID cards and financial literacy sessions (KI).

A fundamental disconnect

Most strikingly, missing from international actors' published strategies on and approaches to assistance is any acknowledgement of the dilemmas they face in their engagement with authorities responsible for controlling and directing assistance. Particularly in northwest Yemen, from local to national levels the Houthi DFA regime has substantial capacities to control how assistance is delivered. Aid actors' engagement with these state capacities is largely about negotiation, trying to reduce risks of diversion, and pushing back against perceived interference that threatens humanitarian principles of independence and impartiality.

This creates a dichotomy, whereby aid agencies are attempting to preserve and strengthen some parts of the state while pushing back against what they see as unacceptable interference from other parts. Analysis of humanitarian access in Yemen has documented multiple bureaucratic constraints aid agency efforts face in providing assistance. Aid groups are required to obtain a complex set of permissions from multiple authorities for the movement of staff and goods. Regulation of aid operations is particularly pronounced in DFA-controlled areas. Aid agencies have to get permission from the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation for all new projects, to carry out any assessments or monitoring, and for staff travel anywhere.

The need for new sub-agreements for NNGOs to implement individual programmes is time-consuming, leading to operational delays (KI). Harvey *et al*. (2022: 9) note:

> the humanitarian community was likened by an aid official to the proverbial frog in hot water – aid groups accepted Houthi terms in exchange for access, and the restrictions on their operations grew gradually, until they found themselves seriously impeded and lacking leverage to effectively push back.

In IRG-controlled areas, control over aid is still a challenge but bureaucratic constraints are less severe. However, the fragmentation and contestation of authority present particular problems, with the need to negotiate permissions and agreements at local level and respond to shifts in authority.

A stream of government directives relate to aid operations. Human Rights Watch reported the Houthis had issued 383 directives regulating aid groups between January 2019 and August 2020, many either demanding the sharing of protected information, or imposing restrictions on staff movement and procurement processes (Human Rights Watch 2020). Reports have noted instances of arrests and intimidation of humanitarian workers, suspension of aid deliveries, denials of movement, seizures of property, and occupation of premises (OCHA 2020; UNSC 2021).

In DFA-controlled areas, authorities have transferred power from line ministries and provincial authorities to security-oriented institutions, reflecting a 'deliberate intention to extract resources from humanitarian organisations, play a more robust role in controlling and directing humanitarian programmes in line with their internally developed strategies, and place these organisations under tight security constraints' (Yemen Analysis Team 2021). Aid actors are also severely constrained in getting permission to carry out needs assessments, monitoring, and surveying, severely limiting the quality of data that is available to inform programme planning and design. Third-party monitoring processes are also subject to authorities' efforts at control; authorities have arrested and threatened monitors, seeking to control their reporting (Harvey *et al*. 2022).

Targeting of beneficiaries is particularly sensitive and prone to interference. A study found 'interference with beneficiary lists' as the single most frequently mentioned example of challenges to the principle of independence (Montemurro and Wendt 2021: 17). Political directives over women's freedom of movement make it difficult for female aid workers to work and for women in need to get help. Requirements for Yemeni women to travel with a *mahram* (a male family member) have disrupted access to aid and services for women and girls in DFA-controlled areas (ACAPS 2023c).

In response to these growing constraints, aid actors have attempted to coordinate negotiated responses to push back against restrictions. Despite recent improvements in coordination having catalysed more effective

negotiations with authorities (Sida *et al*. 2022), stronger coordinated negotiation is still regarded as needed to enable assistance to be effectively and accountably provided.

Achieving progress on parts of the social protection agenda that are currently stuck – notably, targeting and transfer values – would require facing up to the dichotomy between building local capacities for assistance, and pushing back against state control and interference in aid processes. Negotiations about how social assistance is controlled and targeted need to engage with the political questions of how power and authority are exercised, and so be about capacities for controlling aid as well as the technical questions of how it is delivered. Aid actors could better analyse how authorities are exercising control and opportunities to influence those processes, to create better outcomes for people in need of assistance.

Box 4.15: Key takeaways

Preserving institutional capacity is necessary, but is not sufficient. Eventually changes are needed that require engagement with the political economy of assistance. Social assistance actors in Yemen have struggled to negotiate political agreement with authorities to adjust who is targeted for assistance or to adapt transfer values. This suggests that there are limits to sustaining systems and that eventually changes are needed. Greater attention is needed to find the right balance between protecting existing systems and generating the political will to make changes. Over time, simply aiming to maintain existing systems is not sufficient.

International aid actors are working on improving data that will help inform these kinds of policy decisions; without evidence, it has been very hard to understand the impact of interventions and the profile of beneficiaries. UNICEF in November 2023 published the findings of a multiple indicator cluster survey (UNICEF 2024).* A household budget survey (conducted by the United Nations Population Fund with World Bank funding) was planned for 2023/24. Further progress on strengthening assessment and analysis processes to push forward with adjustments to targeting and transfer values will be critical.

However, national actors currently have little input into critical decisions about transfer values and how to make the best use of resources, despite their local knowledge, which could be used to inform effective approaches. The strategic and policy capacities to make these fundamentally political decisions about targeting and transfer values are not part of the capacity-strengthening agenda, and international aid agencies are still the ones making those decisions.

*Read about the [survey findings report](#).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Yemen has sometimes been held up as an impressive example of how existing social protection systems and capacities can be maintained and supported even during a prolonged conflict. This paper has set out to interrogate that narrative, and to examine the evidence on what capacities are being supported and what that means for the effective provision of assistance through a protracted crisis.

It is important in doing this to acknowledge the enormous challenges facing all the actors in Yemen trying to find ways to help people survive in the face of conflict and other shocks. Widespread conflict, insecurity, and contested governance have made providing assistance extremely hard. The huge scale of need has also necessitated one of the biggest aid operations in the world, creating incentives for control and diversion. In the face of these challenges there have been impressive achievements in getting assistance to people, and in maintaining and strengthening Yemeni organisational and individual capacities.

Support from international aid actors has successfully sustained and strengthened some national organisational and individual capacities for delivering social assistance. The Social Fund for Development, as a national parastatal organisation able to work on both sides of the conflict, has been effectively supported to develop organisational and individual capabilities; robust systems for the delivery of assistance and capacities have also been supported across other civil society and government bodies. There have also been efforts to support institutional capacities for coordination among national stakeholders, including work on the nascent development of a national social protection framework.

In examining how capacities have been maintained, it is also vital to recognise the significant pre-war investment in social assistance capacities. The resilience and effectiveness of organisational capacities did not come out of nowhere, but are the accumulation of years of experience and investment in large-scale cash and food transfer programmes before and during the conflict.

The process of external support for 'capacity strengthening' of national actors is somewhat opaque. Published documents tend to refer to training and detail numbers of participants, but lack information on what training or capacity support has been provided, with few analyses or impact evaluations. Although there are examples of in-depth capacity assessments and structured capacity development plans, these have not often been published or shared between organisations working in social assistance. More coordinated and informed capacity-strengthening efforts could help to improve future social assistance interventions. These could include:

- Doing more to coordinate and develop strategic approaches to support for national capacities for social assistance – Consider the role of other initiatives and groups in encouraging and coordinating efforts on capacity development, and how best to provide sustained support for these over the longer term (e.g. initiatives such as the HCT Localisation Strategy 2024–26 and the Yemen Humanitarian Fund Localisation Strategy; convening forums such as the Yemen Partners Group and the Yemen Partners Technical Team; the Cash and Market Working Group; and groups such as the CCY).
- Conducting more research and rigorous evaluation of capacity-strengthening approaches, and assessing the strengths and limitations of particular modes of capacity support (such as training, technical assistance, and learning by doing).
- Sharing lessons learned from capacity-strengthening initiatives across organisations and across sectors.

Partnerships with Yemeni NGOs are still narrowly subcontractual and limited to managing distributions, with only a small proportion of funding directly reaching national organisations.
Donors and aid agencies should focus on developing more equitable partnerships with Yemeni organisations involved in social assistance, and move away from short-term project-based relationships that impede capacity development. This could include:

- Strengthening the understanding of partnership principles among national and international partners;[16] and exploring how to support and empower (without co-opting) local organisations' own efforts to organise and lead partnerships with international organisations (as identified in the localisation baseline assessment by Tamdeen Youth Foundation *et al*. (2022)).
- Investing in participatory capacity assessments and capacity development plans that support national actors in identifying their capacity needs and choosing capacity-strengthening strategies; and responding to the views on capacity gaps that national actors have already provided (e.g. to this research and to the CALP Network's MENA survey in 2023 – see Box 4.5).
- Supporting and encouraging NNGOs contracted by aid agencies to deliver social assistance, giving them greater input into social assistance programme design, strategy, and policy questions, including on issues such as targeting and transfer value.
- Linking training to doing, giving national actors the opportunities and support to use and apply the training they are given.
- Providing the resources for more equitable partnerships and a more significant role for national actors, including through:

  o Increasing transparency in how overheads are shared, and exploring the potential for greater sharing of overheads to enable national actors to strengthen capacities.
  o Providing national organisations with dedicated capacity-strengthening budgets that allow for strategic investment in core organisational capabilities rather than ad hoc project-based implementation functionality.
  o Providing more flexible and core funding to Yemeni organisations.
  o Considering how to move away from short funding cycles that lead to a lack of job security within national organisations and constrain investment in sustainable organisational development.

- Investing in capacity-strengthening strategies and tools in Arabic.[17]

Opportunities to better support a broader range of civil society and state organisations at different levels have been missed. Valuable individual skills and organisational capacities in the Social Welfare Fund and other state bodies beyond the Social Fund for Development and with local councils are largely being neglected, although the Social Welfare Fund is benefiting from involvement in UNICEF's cash-plus activities. In particular, more could be done to sustain and strengthen valuable capacities for community engagement and accountability, which are vital for achieving more inclusive and conflict-sensitive approaches. Efforts should be made to engage with and support the capacities of a broader range of state and civil society actors involved in social assistance. These could include:

- Balancing support for skills required for technical systems that are important for reporting to donors, with more support for skills needed to engage with people at local level and to support community-level accountability.
- Exploring opportunities to leverage the Social Welfare Fund's network of locally embedded social workers, building on its role with the UCT Programme and the UNICEF cash-plus programme.

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[16] The HCT Localisation Strategy 2024–26 includes a commitment to: 'Increase mutual understanding of partnership principles among national and international partners through training and familiarization of both parties on effective partnership requirements and commitments, including promoting examples of good practices/success stories', with the target by the end of 2026 that '80% of funded projects [should have] included partnership training or regular consultations/monitoring activities fostering effective partnerships' (OCHA 2024: 35).
[17] The 2022 localisation baseline assessment made a similar recommendation (Tamdeen Youth Foundation *et al*. 2022).

- Complementing continued support for the Social Fund for Development with support for the Social Welfare Fund and encouraging the development of strategic cooperation and coordination between these two critical institutions working in the field of social protection.
- Identifying opportunities to work with more civil society initiatives and community-based social networks, as well as funding more NGOs, through longer-term partnership initiatives. The HCT Localisation Strategy 2024–26 includes a commitment for international humanitarian actors to partner with smaller NNGOs, including more women-led organisations. This could involve supporting organisations that have less experience of accessing international funding in developing their capacities to meet due diligence and other eligibility criteria.
- International actors engaged in providing assistance could also do more to engage with local councils and other local-level governance actors, and to better understand how internationally financed assistance relates to informal social assistance and formal mechanisms outside the aid system, notably *zakat*.

Aid actors need to join up approaches to building local capacities to deliver assistance with efforts to negotiate humanitarian access, and push back against authorities' restrictions. The hardest challenges relating to capacities for targeting, transfer values, and accountability have so far largely been pushed to one side. Until those are tackled head on and the politics of social assistance more fully engaged with, the systems that are being supported will remain narrowly technical. For assistance to be more effective, accountable, and locally led, there is a need to better understand and more effectively negotiate with the state bodies that exercise control over aid, and to invest in engaging with people at the community level. This could include:

- Investing in analysis of how authorities are exercising control over assistance and opportunities to influence those processes.
- Engaging key state bodies, notably the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation and Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, in debates about social assistance, as well as negotiations over access.
- Aid agencies and donors proactively engaging with a broader range of government actors over how targeting, the adequacy of transfer values, and accountability of social assistance could be improved.
- Continuing to support the ongoing dialogue through the SPCC and the developing Social Protection Strategic Framework, which provides a platform for government and non-governmental actors to discuss social protection policy, programme design, capacities, and systems.

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