Policy Briefing

How can aid actors support Yemeni capacities for social assistance?

Much of Yemen’s population needs basic assistance to avoid famine. As well as providing food and cash-based support during a decade of war, international aid actors have sustained and strengthened the capacities of local organisations involved. Yet these efforts have overlooked some capacities – particularly valuable skills for community engagement and accountability, seen as vital for inclusion and conflict sensitivity. As conflict in Yemen continues and aid budgets come under further pressure, this Policy Briefing offers a series of recommendations to improve the effectiveness of donor and aid agency support for local capacities for social assistance.

Key messages

• During the protracted crisis in Yemen, international aid actors have sustained, strengthened, and built organisational capacities and systems for social assistance payments, call centres, and due diligence.

• Aid actors have deliberately built on strong pre-war systems and investments, with support from development actors and financing, notably the World Bank.

• Opportunities are being missed, however, to support a cadre of experienced social workers within government as well as core capacities of Yemeni non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and wider civil society.

• Aid actors could invest in adaptive approaches to working with and through local authorities, supporting their capacities for social assistance provision.

• Above all, effective capacity-strengthening assistance requires coordinated, strategic approaches that engage with the politics of the control and regulation of aid.

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Introduction
Poor and vulnerable people in Yemen are greatly in need of regular food and cash transfers – a modality of support known as social assistance. In early 2024, the United Nations (UN) estimated that 55 per cent of the population (18.2 million people) need humanitarian assistance and protection services, with about 4.5 million people displaced.

Severe needs such as these have prompted a substantial international aid response over the past decade. Two wide-reaching interventions have been the World Food Programme (WFP) providing food and cash-based assistance to around 13 million people, and a World Bank-funded cash transfer programme managed by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) for more than 9 million people. Delivering this assistance effectively is enormously challenging due to conflict, insecurity, contested and divided governance, and efforts by authorities to control aid, with pronounced restrictions in the de facto authority (Houthi)-controlled areas.

Providing support to meet immediate life-saving needs is the humanitarian priority in Yemen. At the same time, aid organisations want to ensure that recurrent emergency operations are delivered in a way that will support, and not undermine, national reconstruction for the country post-conflict. In fact, Yemen has at times been seen as an example of how existing social protection systems and capacities can be sustained even during a prolonged war.

Through a literature review and interviews with Yemeni and international stakeholders conducted in 2022 and 2023, a study undertaken by the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme examined the evidence on which institutional, organisational, and individual capacities are being supported, and what that support means for the effective provision of assistance through a protracted crisis.

“Support of capacities has focused on technical aspects of payment and reporting systems – not on the politics of how assistance is regulated and controlled.”

Institutional capacities concern legal frameworks, policy, strategy, and coordination. Organisational capacities relate to structures, staffing, processes, and systems. Individual capacities are personal knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviour. (Definitions from TRANSFORM.)

Success in strengthening some organisational and individual capacities
National-level organisations, notably the para-statal Social Fund for Development (SFD) and the governmental Social Welfare Fund (SWF), play important roles in delivering Yemen’s large-scale social assistance, as do Yemeni non-governmental partners of WFP. Our study found impressive achievements in maintaining and strengthening Yemeni organisational and individual capacities.

An example of such support has been for the SFD, which works on both sides of the conflict. The Fund took responsibility for implementing components of the Unconditional Cash Transfer (UCT) programme run by UNICEF. This illustrated the value of capacity strengthening ‘by doing’ – moving from competencies (theoretical capacity) to capabilities (capacity in practice), and performance (delivered capacity).

International aid actors also supported robust systems and capacities across other civil society and government bodies, as well as institutional capacities for coordination among national stakeholders. The latter included the nascent development of a national social protection framework.

The resilience and effectiveness of organisational and individual capacities stem partly from years of experience and investment in large-scale cash and food transfer programmes in Yemen – both before and during the conflict.

Neglect of other key capacities, particularly for community engagement and accountability
However, some capacities have been relatively ignored – in particular, valuable capacities for community engagement and accountability, which are vital for achieving more inclusive and conflict-sensitive approaches. Others concerning the highly politicised issues of
targeting (the selection of beneficiaries) and transfer value have been difficult to tackle. The study found that partnerships with Yemeni NGOs are narrowly sub-contractual and limited to managing distribution, with only a small proportion of funding directly reaching national organisations.

Unlike the SFD, capacities have been less well supported within the SWF, which is housed in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Staff have not been paid and struggle to do their jobs, particularly in the north. A valuable cadre of social workers who can engage with communities at local levels has been neglected. Sub-national government bodies, notably local councils, play important roles in how assistance works at local levels, but their capacities have largely been overlooked.

Capacity-strengthening efforts risk being too shallow

The process of providing external support for capacity strengthening of national actors is somewhat opaque, as are the outcomes achieved. Published documents tend to refer to training and numbers of participants, but lack detail on the type of training or capacity support offered. There are few analyses or evaluations of impact. Although examples exist of in-depth capacity assessments and structured capacity development plans, these often go unpublished and are not shared among organisations working in social assistance. More coordinated and informed capacity-strengthening efforts could help to improve future social assistance interventions.

Connections are also lacking between capacity-strengthening approaches at local level and efforts to negotiate humanitarian access. Aid in Yemen is highly controlled with authorities applying restrictions on aid agencies on all aspects of assistance including monitoring, assessment, and permissions to travel. Support of capacities has focused on the technical aspects of payment and reporting systems and has failed to engage with the politics of how assistance is regulated and controlled.

Funding preferences undermine skills-building

Strategic, long-term funding to local actors barely exists. As a result, important skills and capabilities for effective assistance are being undermined or lost. Skills valued by the aid system to ensure compliance (such as management information systems and reporting) are being privileged over the softer skills needed for effective engagement at community levels. Aid actors are missing opportunities to support capacities vital for making assistance effective and accountable, particularly at local levels. The neglect of the SWF and its network of locally embedded social workers, the limited roles played by Yemeni NGOs, and the lack of support to wider civil society – these are all missed opportunities.

Throughout the protracted conflict, Yemenis have continued to work, often unpaid and even in some cases using their own money to run workplaces. This demonstrates important personal, professional and organisational values, and the resilience of those values in times of crisis. But key competencies that have not been supported are atrophying over time.

The aid system’s modus operandi favours donor funding to UN agencies and international NGOs over national actors. Thus, overhead budgets for social assistance programmes rest largely with international organisations. The project-linked short-term funding received by the SFD and national NGOs constrains investment in more sustainable organisational development.

“Resilience and effectiveness of organisational and individual capacities in Yemen stem partly from years of experience and investment in large-scale cash and food transfer programmes in Yemen.”
**Policy recommendations**

To improve support of Yemeni capacities for social assistance, donors and aid agencies should consider the following:

**Continue support to Yemeni actors involved in social assistance.** Build on successes with the SFD and other organisations in sustaining elements of a social protection system through a decade of war. Protect capacities and investments made to enable national actors to take greater leadership in providing assistance and developing social protection policies.

**Broaden capacity support across government and civil society.** Social workers, Yemeni NGOs, wider civil society, and local councils could all play stronger roles in ensuring assistance reaches the people who need it most.

- Find a balance between supporting skills required for technical donor reporting systems and capabilities needed for engaging with people locally, and community-level accountability.
- Explore ways to use the SWF’s network of locally embedded social workers, building on its role with the UCT programme and the UNICEF cash-plus programme.
- Seize chances to work with more civil society initiatives and community-based social networks. Fund more national NGOs through longer-term partnership initiatives.
- Develop more adaptive approaches to involve local councils and other local-level governance actors.

**Invest in engaging strategically with the politics of assistance at national and local levels**

- Analyse how authorities exercise control over aid processes and develop strategic, coordinated efforts to improve access to better monitor, target, and deliver assistance.
- Include a broader range of government actors in discussing how to improve targeting, transfer values, and the accountability of social assistance.
- Continue to support the development of policy including through the Social Protection Strategic Framework.

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**Further reading**


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