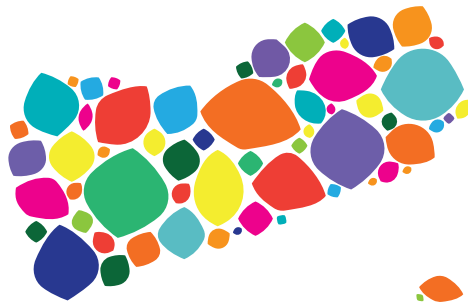




Development Assistance in Yemen: A Cautionary Tale from Al-Mahra

Commentary by Ameen Mohammed
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Cover Photo : Overview of Al-Ghaydah, the capital of Al-Mahra governorate, seen April 27, 2020. Sana'a Center Photo//Ahmed al-Ashwal



The Yemen Peace Forum initiative is a track II youth and civil society platform facilitated by the Sana'a Center and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This interactive initiative seeks to both invest in building and empowering the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society actors and to engage them in critical national issues. Building on the Sana'a Center's core goal of producing knowledge by local voices, this initiative seeks to develop and invest in young policy analysts and writers across Yemen.

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Even before the current conflict, Yemen's development needs were vast.^[1] The escalation of the war in 2015 worsened many of the country's pre-existing systemic and infrastructural deficiencies. This makes Yemen a prime target for international development assistance, both now and especially in any post-conflict scenario. However, good intentions and money are insufficient to ensure that development projects, even those that are badly needed, will be accepted and successful in the communities they are meant to benefit.

The following is a cautionary tale from Al-Ghaydah, the capital city of Al-Mahra, Yemen's easternmost governorate. Based on interviews with local officials, residents and private sector actors, it relates how a project to install a sewage system and treatment plant in the city using foreign funding was initiated before faltering and ultimately aborted. While the specific dynamics of development assistance will vary by region and initiative, the general lesson is widely applicable: development projects that do not curry meaningful local engagement and buy-in will likely face resistance and fail.

[1] "Yemen, Human Development Indicators," United Nations Development Programme, n.d.a., <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/YEM>

AL-GHAYDAH'S WASTEWATER CHALLENGES

In 2004, the last year a census was conducted in Yemen, the population of Al-Mahra was estimated at just under 90,000 and projected to grow 4.5 percent annually.^[2] The majority of the governorate's residents, then and now, live in and around the capital. Over time, Al-Ghaydah's expanding population has brought into increasing focus the fact that the city does not have an integrated means of disposing of human wastewater. At best, buildings in the city have their own respective septic systems buried in the ground, at worst, wastewater is disposed of in open cesspits. Services to maintain both are limited.^[3]

The increasing volume of wastewater pumped into the ground, coupled with periodic heavy rains and flooding, has regularly caused wastewater to overflow in residential and commercial areas of the city, polluting clean water sources and creating a public health hazard as well as a deeply unpleasant experience for local residents.^[4] During the ongoing conflict, Al-Mahra's relative stability and location far from the frontlines has led to a rapid population influx to the governorate from other parts of Yemen, estimated in the hundreds of thousands.^[5] Many families and businesses are establishing themselves in and around Al-Ghaydah, compounding the city's wastewater woes.

[2] "Introductory profile on Al-Mahra Governorate [AR]," National Information Center, <https://yemen-nic.info/gover/almahraa/brife/>

[3] Mansour Abdo Radman, Director of the Environmental Health Department, Office of Public Works and Roads in Al-Mahra, interview by the author, Al-Ghaydah, August 5, 2020.

[4] Dr. Mubarak Mohammed Mazyoun bin Moaeli, Deputy Director General of the Health and Population Bureau for Health Care Affairs in Al-Mahra, interview by the author, July 16, 2020.

[5] Khaled Hassan Belhaf, director of the general administration for information, statistics and documentation in the governorate of Al-Mahra, interview by the author, Al-Ghaydah, July 15, 2020. Also see Yahya al-Sewari, "Yemen's Al-Mahra: From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, July 5, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7606>

AN ATTEMPT TO BUILD A SEWAGE SYSTEM AND TREATMENT PLANT

In 2006, at a London donor conference, Oman pledged US\$100 million to development projects in Yemen via the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development and the Yemeni Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation.^[6] The grant money was to be released in stages and focused specifically on economically developing the border region between the two countries.^[7] In 2014, through this grant, a number of projects were set to kick off in Al-Mahra, including a sanitation project for Al-Ghaydah.^[8] This was undertaken after much follow-up by the late former governor of the governorate, Ali Mohammed Khawdam.^[9] On February 23, 2014, a contract was signed between the Urban Cities Project of the Ministry of Water and Environment and the Sana'a-based Abdulaziz Altam Trading and Contracting Corporation.^[10] The signing was also attended by the Egyptian firm consulting on the project, Arab Consulting Engineers (ACE) Moharram Bakhom.^[11]

The project was to include a sewage treatment plant and a system of sewer pipes covering 80 kilometers.^[12] The pipes would traverse several neighborhoods of the city – in particular the areas of Bin Hijleh, Bin Ghouna, Kalashat and Al-Nahda – though it was by no means intended to serve the whole population.

The project broke ground May 26, 2014,^[13] and the Abdulaziz Altam Corporation started implementation based on an assessment and project plan that had been prepared by

[6] "Oman commits \$100m in aid to Yemen," Gulf News, April 6, 2010, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/oman/oman-commits-100m-in-aid-to-yemen-1.6o8583>

[7] "Expediting the Omani Grant's Allocations to Yemen [AR]," Al Methaq Net, February 7, 2008, <https://almethaq.net/news/news-5880.htm>

[8] Saleh Mahfouz Barzeeq, Director of Studies and Designs Department at the Public Works and Roads Bureau in Al-Mahra, phone interview by the author, Al-Ghaydah, May 23, 2020.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Mohammed Abdulaziz Altam, owner of Abdulaziz Altam Trading and Contracting Corporation, phone interview by the author, August 9, 2020.

[11] Hani Mohammed Ghadaf, head of the Technical Office for Abdulaziz Altam Corporation, phone interview by the author, May 24, 2020.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Mohammed Abdulaziz Altam, owner of Abdulaziz Altam Trading and Contracting Corporation, phone interview by the author, August 9, 2020.

the Jordanian consulting firm Sajdi Consulting Engineering Center.^[14] The work included digging, laying and connecting the pipes, as well as installing manholes and small inspection rooms at set distances.^[15] But operations ceased in June 2015. Abdulaziz Altam Corporation requested that the contract be voided due to threats against the company by local contractors and protests over the planned location of the sewage treatment plant.^[16] In May 2016, the Arab fund accepted the request to void the contract, and the project was liquidated.^[17]

[14] Mohammed Abdulaziz Altam, owner of Abdulaziz Altam Trading and Contracting Corporation, phone interview by the author, May 28, 2020.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

LOCAL GRIEVANCES LEAD TO RESISTANCE

In both the design and attempted implementation of the sanitation project there was a distinct lack of consultation and engagement with the communities in which the project was to take place. For instance, the plans drawn up by the Jordanian consulting firm called for the treatment plant to be situated roughly 700 meters from Shahouh, a residential district on the eastern edge of Al-Ghaydah home to about 50 families. On most days, the winds in Al-Mahra come from the direction of the sea, which would have pushed smells from the plant's uncovered sewage treatment basins into Shahouh. The residents of the area protested and demanded that the plant be moved to a more suitable area, and threatened to continue to fight against local authorities over the project's implementation.^[18]

The implementing partner, Abdulaziz Altam Corporation, was based in Sana'a, a roughly 1,200 kilometer drive away. While a Yemeni company, it lacked a local knowledge base and network. Many local companies complained that the Abdulaziz Altam Corporation had ignored them in subcontracting various aspects of the project, such as supplying materials, labor and equipment.^[19] Residents of neighborhoods through which the project was being constructed demanded that they be hired as day laborers.^[20] While Abdulaziz Altam Corporation did work with some local companies, the local impression was that the Sana'a-based company had handled the situation without regard for community dynamics.^[21]

Regional relations in Yemen played into this situation. Al-Mahra was part of the former South Yemen, and southerners generally distrust northern business interests, a feeling that stems from their economic marginalization following the unification of Yemen's north and south in 1990, and the subsequent north-south civil war in 1994.

[18] Abdullah Ghamdad Saeed Qumsit, resident of Shahouh, interview by the author, Al-Ghyadah, August 9, 2020.

[19] Tariq Abdo Mohammed al-Kindi, Deputy Director General of the General Organization for Water and Sewerage in Al-Mahra, interview by the author, Al-Ghaydah, August 10, 2020.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

By not being seen to have properly engaged with local businesses and communities, Abdulaziz Altam Corporation was regarded as a foreign threat and not seen as working in the interests of the local population. The Abdulaziz Altam Corporation claimed some of its employees were physically threatened as a result of these local grievances.^[22] The company alleges that on several occasions it requested local authorities provide a security detail for the project, but they were unwilling or unable to deliver.^[23]

[22] Mohammed Abdulaziz Altam, owner of Abdulaziz Altam for Trading and Contracting Corporation, interview by the author, July 27, 2020.

[23] Ibid.

CAUSES AND IMPLICATIONS OF DEVELOPMENT PROJECT FAILURE

The implementation of the sanitation project was hindered by a disregard for local concerns and an overcentralization of decision-making, a mode of governance that former President Ali Abdullah Saleh employed extensively during his years in office, and which continued under his successor, current president Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Local officials in Al-Mahra were not granted the authority to directly supervise the project.^[24] Decision-making, including planning and tendering for the project, was carried out at the ministry level of the central government, which meant it was not responsive to local concerns and made it difficult for companies in Al-Mahra to win contracts.^[25] Decisions in the implementation phase, by Abdulaziz Altam Corporation, were likewise handled from Sana'a. The financing partner for the project, Oman, which acted through the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, was disconnected from project developments on the ground and had no mechanisms in place to ensure transparency and accountability to the local population.

The lack of local engagement and accountability fostered a negative image of the project in Al-Ghaydah and created impasses that local companies and decision-makers, with more on-the-ground experience in Al-Mahra and networks in the local communities, could have foreseen and surmounted.

The failure of the project has had long-term consequences for Al-Ghaydah. The implementing company, Abdulaziz Altam Corporation, did not fully repair damage done to roads during the excavation process, and much of the disrepair remains. Terminating the contract meant forfeiting funds allocated for its remaining stages – roads and sidewalks that were dug up to make way for sewage pipes were never repaired.^[26]

[24] Tariq Abdo Mohammed al-Kindi, Deputy Director General of the General Organization for Water and Sewerage in Al-Mahra, interview by the author, Al-Ghaydah, August 10, 2020.

[25] Saleh Mahfouz Barzeeq, Director of Studies and Designs Department at the Public Works and Roads Bureau in Al-Mahra, phone interview by the author, Al-Ghaydah, May 23, 2020.

[26] Hani Mohamed Ghadaf, Head of the Technical Office for Abdulaziz Altam Corporation, phone interview by the author, May 24, 2020.

LOOKING AHEAD

Al-Mahra in 2021 is not Al-Mahra in 2008, when the studies and plans for the sanitation project were prepared. Its population has grown significantly — it may have more than tripled according to some estimates.^[27] The real estate market has boomed as a result, along with the city's economy. While ostensibly positive for the region's prospects, the rapid influx of new residents to a city that still lacks proper sewers and a waste treatment facility has only magnified the problems associated with wastewater disposal.

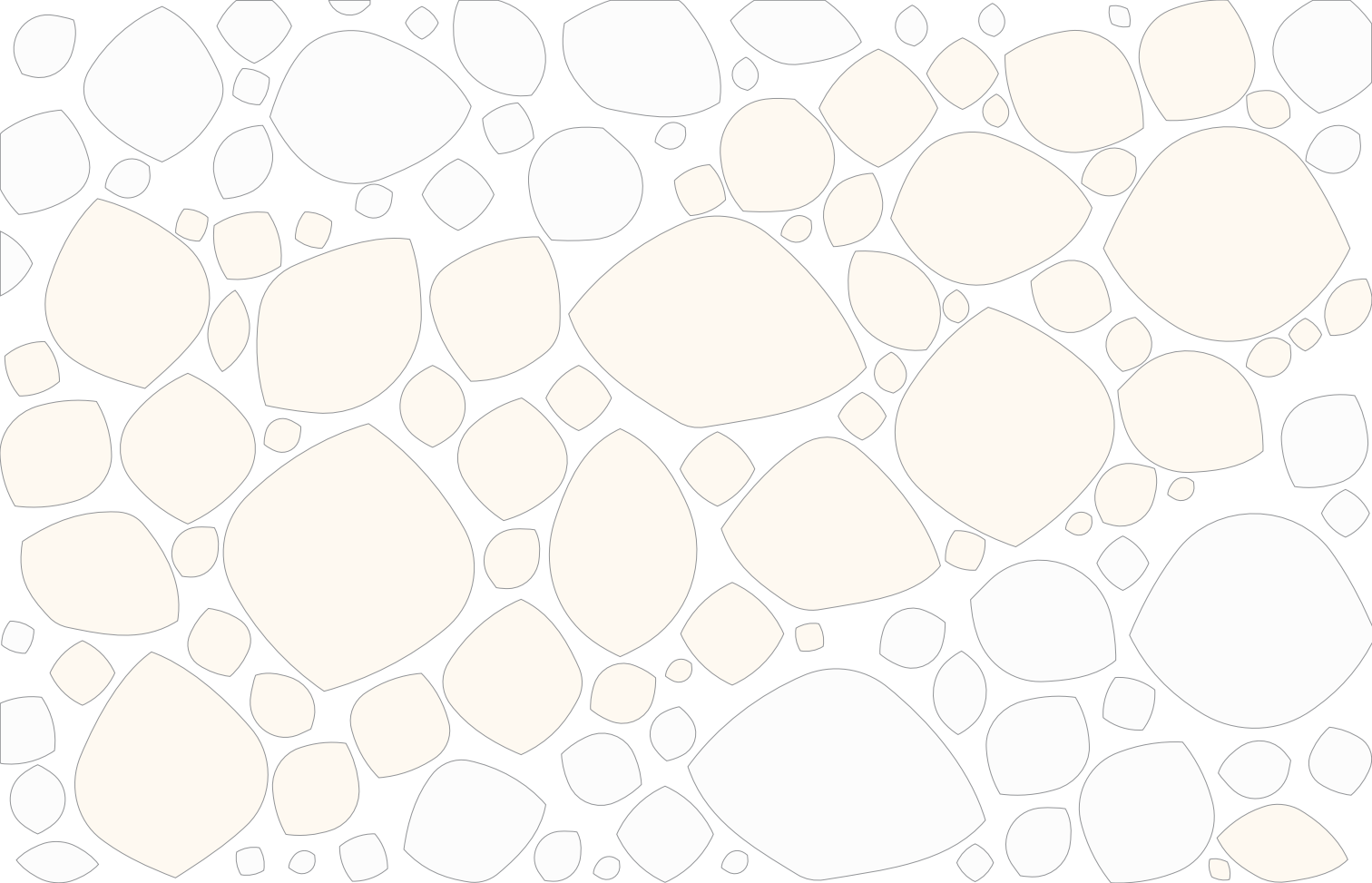
Restarting the project would not just require starting over, but also learning from the mistakes of the past. This should include input and oversight from local authorities regarding a new study, new plans that take into account population growth, and a new site for the wastewater treatment facility, while also carefully considering local companies' involvement to facilitate the project's acceptance. The donors for such a project must also ensure mechanisms for transparent use of funds and accountability of the project's outcomes to those it is meant to serve.

[27] "A hot button for Oman's relationship with Saudi Arabia [AR]," Al Khaleej Online, Sept 4, 2019, <https://alkhaleejonline.net/سياسة/زر-تفجير-لعلاقات-عُمان-مع-السعودية-والإمارات-ماذا-تعرف-عن-المهرة؟>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This article was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.



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