Localizing Aid and Development in Yemen

By: Dr. Nadia al-Sakkaf   October 24, 2024

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Cover photo: A Yemeni family collects humanitarian food aid at a distribution point in Taiz's Al-Mudhaffar district on January 20, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha.

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Executive Summary

This study examines the key barriers and opportunities regarding localizing humanitarian aid in Yemen. The findings reveal a significant gap between the international community's intent to localize aid and the reality on the ground. Challenges include Yemen's fragmented political landscape, weak governance, and a limited understanding of what localization entails. Further, the lack of sustained investment in local organizations, especially those in rural areas or led by women, has hampered efforts to empower Yemeni actors. Internal issues within Yemeni civil society, such as monopolies over donor partnerships, also exacerbate the problem.

These issues leave international entities struggling to find effective Yemeni partners. At the same time, Yemeni local communities, civil society, and the private sector are desperate for genuine leadership. While expressing interest in a more localized approach to aid in Yemen, the international community has insisted that localization efforts must be linked to the presence of effective local leadership. Conversely, local entities argue that investment in Yemeni institutions and skills must come first.

Key Findings:

- Localization is seen as critical for sustainable aid delivery, but its implementation is hindered by political fragmentation and an absence of robust local leadership.

- Yemeni civil society, while eager for leadership opportunities, is limited by insufficient funding and capacity-building support, particularly for smaller community-based organizations (CBOs) and women-led initiatives.

- Donor focus remains largely centralized, leaving rural areas and marginalized groups underrepresented in aid programs.

Key Recommendations:

1. Define localization clearly: Establish a unified definition of localization tailored to Yemen's context and aligned with global principles.

2. Invest in capacity building: Donors must fund capacity-building efforts that strengthen local organizations' institutional frameworks, particularly smaller CBOs and women-led groups.

3. Foster inclusive partnerships: Encourage equitable, genuine partnerships between international and local actors, ensuring shared decision-making.

4. Simplify bureaucratic processes: Use political mediation to streamline administrative procedures and reduce interference from authorities.

5. Increase flexible funding: Allocate a greater share of flexible funds directly to Yemeni organizations, focusing on local needs and priorities.

Introduction

The concept of localization has gained traction as a means of creating more effective and sustainable aid mechanisms. Localization in this study refers to the process of transferring decision-making power and leadership to local actors, allowing them to take ownership of humanitarian and development initiatives. For Yemen, a country marked by prolonged conflict and humanitarian crisis, localizing aid is not just a policy aspiration but a critical necessity.

The application and implications of the global localization agenda in Yemen, especially from a Yemeni perspective, requires more exploration. Substantial steps toward real localization are yet to be taken, partly because the process suffers from an element of politicization. This study explores the dynamics of localizing humanitarian and development work in Yemen and provides policy recommendations for enhancing the role and leadership of local actors. It is aimed at decision-makers among both Yemeni stakeholders and the international community.

Methodology

This study relies on a comprehensive review of existing publications and research related to localization and the humanitarian response in Yemen. Primary data for the report was gathered through 11 key informant interviews, seven with Yemeni stakeholders and four with representatives of the international community. The research also utilizes data from a focus group discussion on humanitarian and development in Yemen, as well as surveys and interviews conducted during previous work undertaken by the author.

Localizing aid in Yemen: A brief history

The concept of localizing development in Yemen has been gaining traction since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul and the Grand Bargain compact. This initiative was reflected to a degree in Yemen's Humanitarian Response Plan 2021, which emphasized protecting Yemen's human and social capital by providing tools and building the capacity of Yemeni partners across sectors to improve implementation and overcome challenges.[1] Even though the term localization per se was not mentioned specifically, the 2021 plan included an objective to "ensure that the humanitarian response is coordinated, accountable, inclusive and effective."[2] However, the need for coordination with Yemeni stakeholders was not clearly stated. The following year, the Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF) developed and released a *localization* strategy, focusing on enhancing the involvement of local and national actors in the humanitarian response. Key elements included building the capacities of Yemeni organizations, promoting local leadership in aid delivery, and improving the sustainability of humanitarian efforts by fostering greater ownership among local communities.[3]

A few months later, the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the Yemen Crisis published its report in July 2022, acknowledging that a "coherent localization strategy supporting durable solutions is not in place in Yemen." It recommended developing one based on collective ownership, transparency, and accountability while building the capacity of local partners and increasing the volume and quality of funding to them.[4] Later, at a retreat in Amman, Jordan, for the Yemen Humanitarian Country Team in December 2022, three national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) presented a localization white paper on the main obstacles national NGOs face and recommendations for more local leadership roles in response design, delivery, and impact measurement.[5]

In early 2023, a Localization Task Team was established to develop a strategic action plan for localizing humanitarian aid to Yemen (2024-2026).[6] However, this was not the first localization team established in the humanitarian sector. The Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster, by the nature of its work, implemented several localized approaches in coordination with local NGOs that emphasized partnerships and collaborations with Yemeni partners, adopted an area-based approach, and created technical working groups at the area, sub-national, and national levels.[7] The CCCM Cluster's National Strategy for 2023-2024[8] included an objective of establishing a Localization Framework

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[1] "Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2021," OCHA, March 16, 2021, https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-2021-march-2021-enar

[2] Ibid., p. 129.

[3] Ghassan Elkhalout and Sansom Milton, "Localisation of Yemen's humanitarian response," Humanitarian Practice Network, June 15, 2023, https://odihpn.org/publication/localisation-of-yemens-humanitarian-response/

[4] IASC, "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the Yemen Crisis," OCHA, July 14, 2022, p. 108, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-humaniatrian-evaluations-steering-group/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-yemen-crisis

[5] These were the National Foundation for Development and Humanitarian Response, the Yemen Family Care Association, and the Nahda Makers Organization. The papers were based on consultations with 41 participants from 35 Yemeni NGOs.

[6] The strategic plan was created after discussions with some 260 members of the international NGOs forum, the Gender Network (GN), the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), local government, donors, and 179 Yemeni NGOs that are actively involved in at least one humanitarian cluster. "Localization Strategy and Action Plan 2024-2026," Yemen Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) November 21, 2023, https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Annex%203%20Yemen%20HCT%20Localization%20Strategy%20and%20action%20plan.pdf

[7] CCCM Cluster, "CCCM Cluster Yemen Strategy," UNHCR, June 2021, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/87228

[8] CCCM Cluster, "CCCM Yemen – National Cluster Strategy 2023-20243," UNHCR, December 12, 2022, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/

and Work Plan in 2023, to be designed in participation with key stakeholders in line with the five 'Principles of Partnership'.[9] Momentum for localization continued among the humanitarian community, and in November 2023 the Yemen Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) designed and endorsed a two-year localization strategy action plan (for 2024-2026) under the theme "as local as possible, as international as necessary."[10] This phrase was originally coined by the UN Secretary-General at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and provided a foundation for the strategic direction of localizing humanitarian support worldwide. In the Yemen HCT strategic action plan, localization was specifically defined as seeking to "give more decision-making power, leadership, and resources to local actors including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), authorities, the private sector, and affected communities."[11]

The two-year action plan focused on two goals simultaneously: strengthening local capacities and improving partnerships between local and international humanitarian actors through a gender-responsive and inclusive approach. It included the following objectives:

- Improve humanitarian response quality through transforming leadership and ownership to local people.

- Expand the capacities and space of national actors, including women-led organizations, in coordination, leadership, decision-making, access to funding, response planning, and management.

- Promote gender equity and social inclusion to ensure that the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups are well-considered in response design and implementation.

- Build mutual collaboration, good partnership, and accountability among donors to national/local and international agencies to encourage localization.

Consequently, a seven-member localization task team was appointed in December 2023, including three representatives from Yemeni national NGOs, including at the level of chair and co-chair, two from UN agencies, and two from the international NGO community, as well as five facilitators from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In 2024, the HCT, through the localization Monitoring Working Group, started monitoring progress under four main pillars: capacity development; coordination; leadership/influence; and funding. The Yemen Humanitarian Fund (YHF) has committed to implementing key actions in accordance with the localization strategy. The results of this monitoring are yet to be published.

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[9] The five principles of partnership are: equality, transparency, result-oriented approach, responsibility, and complementarity; "Cluster Membership and Partnership," CCCM Cluster, https://www.cccmcluster.org/resources/coordination-toolkit/cluster-membership-participation

[10] "Localization Strategy and Action Plan 2024-2026," Yemen Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), November 21, 2023, https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Annex%203%20Yemen%20HCT%20Localization%20Strategy%20and%20action%20plan.pdf

[11] Ibid.

Localization in practice: Trends and gaps

Efforts by the international community to achieve greater localization in both humanitarian and development projects have become increasingly visible in recent years, as evidenced by the growing number of Yemeni partners and the percentage of projects led by Yemeni NGOs. However, according to the OCHA Financial Tracking Service, of the total humanitarian funding for Yemen from 2018-23, the share received by Yemeni partners did not exceed 4 percent. The number of Yemeni partners also decreased by around 18 percent during the same period. Although the numbers show a slight increase in the percentage allocated to Yemeni partners, whether local or national, from 1 percent in 2018 to 4 percent in 2023, the overall share remained very low.[12] National NGOs are those operating at a national level covering many regions beyond a certain governorate or local area, while local NGOs are those operating at a governorate level or below.
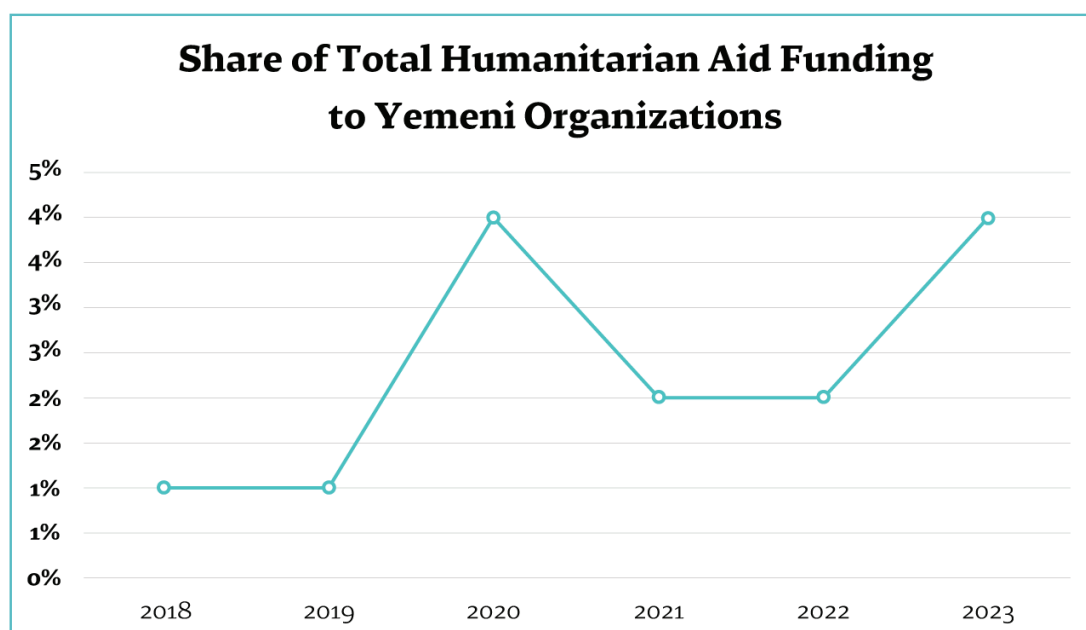

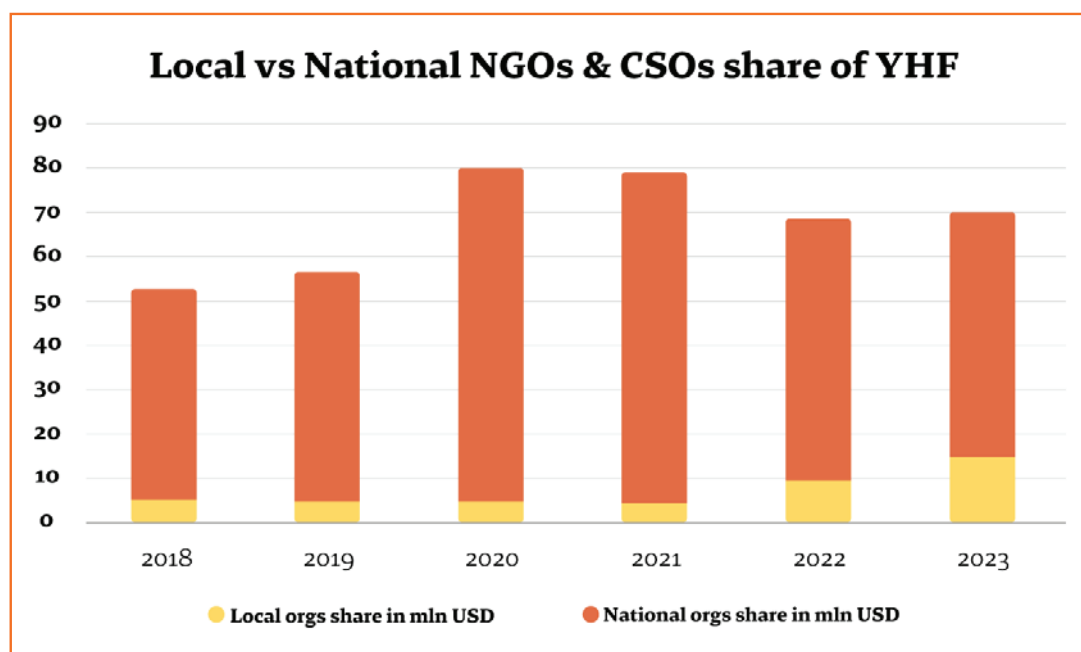*Table 1: Number of local to national organizations receiving humanitarian funding since 2018*

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
No. of Local NGOs/CSOs	50	36	18	20	26	49
No. of National NGOs/CSOs	103	136	39	79	46	77

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[12] "Yemen 2018," OCHA Financial Tracking Service, https://fts.unocha.org/countries/248/summary/2018

A joint statement by several Yemeni and international NGOs, as well as UN agencies, published in September 2023, reiterated concerns related to the funding gap between local and national NGOs, on the one hand, and international NGOs, on the other. It argued that such a disparity "negatively impact[s] the thriving and active civil society space and their ability to operate," and called for increased funding for Yemeni CSOs, especially women-led organizations, as a step toward effective localization.[13] The 2022 Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation also commented on the funding gap, highlighting significant issues with the way national and local organizations have been supported.[14]

These criticisms may seem contrary to the figures published by the Yemen HCT strategic plan. In 2022, 46 percent of the YHF funding was allocated to national partners, both directly and indirectly.[15] These percentages met the Grand Bargain target of at least 25 percent of the Country-Based Pooled Fund going directly to national NGOs. The HCT 2023 report also pointed out that the YHF supported 17 national women-led/women's rights organizations in 39 projects, with a combined budget of US$29.9 million.

This discrepancy exists because the YHF report only uses data from the Yemen Humanitarian Fund and not the total humanitarian funds that reached Yemen, including direct funding from donors or through other entities such as the European Union and the World Bank, which are way higher than YHF's share. And while the YHF shows promising progress with 46 percent allocation to national partners in 2022, this represents only a fraction of the total humanitarian aid to Yemen.[16]

[13] "Joint Statement on Yemen Humanitarian Situation and Funding Gap," Relief Web, September 14, 2023, https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/joint-statement-yemen-humanitarian-situation-and-funding-gap-enar

[14] IASC, "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the Yemen Crisis," OCHA, July 14, 2022, p. 111, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-humaniatrian-evaluations-steering-group/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-yemen-crisis

[15] Yemen HCT, "Localization Strategy and Action Plan 2024-2026," November 21, 2023, https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Annex%203%20Yemen%20HCT%20Localization%20Strategy%20and%20action%20plan.pdf

[16] "About the Yemen Humanitarian Fund," OCHA, May 2023, Yemen Humanitarian Fund | OCHA (unocha.org)

"The YHF is only one funding channel for Yemen, and it is one of the most localized and effective tools for humanitarian aid to Yemen. There are, however, many other and more substantial channels of funding that do not go through the fund, and here lies the problem," said Shuaib Zaghir, chief of the technical office at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation.[17] He added that this distinction is crucial for understanding the true state of localization efforts in Yemen. "While we see positive trends in some areas, such as the YHF, the overall picture still shows significant room for improvement in channeling more funds directly to local and national organizations."

That being said, there is more to localization than the percentage of funding Yemeni entities receive. "We have huge challenges in getting our voice heard by the donors and even international implementing organizations. They consider us as implementers, not real partners. If we challenge this, we risk losing the funding for our projects, and without this funding we risk shutting down," a senior manager at a national civil society organization said.[18]

Funding was identified as one of the seven pillars for measuring localization, according to a baseline report published at the end of 2022 on humanitarian localization in Yemen.[19] The remaining six pillars or indicators of effective localization are partnerships; participation; capacity strengthening; coordination and complementarity; policy influence; and leadership. The report concluded that there was evidence of moderate progress in only one pillar, participation. Other baseline report findings indicated opportunities for local NGOs to be involved, but not at the decision-making level. Additionally, it cited evidence of insufficient expertise and funding for capacity-building among local NGOs. Direct funding was difficult to secure for each of the pillars. Overall, the findings pointed to uneven progress in localization within the current humanitarian effort in Yemen.

Interviewees for this study generally agreed with the findings of the baseline report, indicating that even though the concept of equitable partnerships is widely accepted on paper, in practice, it is more about participation than true partnership. According to Afrah al-Zouba, the Managing Director of the Executive Bureau for the Acceleration of Aid Absorption and Support for Policy Reforms, there are many challenges facing genuine localization in Yemen.[20] "True localization involves leadership, representation, capacity-building, and partnership. Challenges to achieving true localization include access to data, competition among international NGOs, and the need for genuine collaboration and capacity-building at the local level," she said.

Another issue is the lack of an agreed-upon definition for localization. The 2022 baseline study attempted to understand localization through the seven aforementioned pillars.[21] Under the Grand Bargain, the signatories have committed to "making principled

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[17] Interview with Shuaib Zaghir, chief of the technical office at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, February 29, 2024.

[18] Interview with a senior manager at a national CSO, February 20, 2024.

[19] Wameedh Shakir, Bashar Mugahid, Mohammed Faisal, Abdulrahman al-Asali, "Measuring Humanitarian Localisation in Yemen: Baseline Report," Tamdeen Youth Foundation, ITAR for Social Development, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies and Humanitarian Advisory Group, November 2022, https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/measuring-humanitarian-localisation-in-yemen-baseline-report/

[20] Interview with Afrah al-Zouba, Managing Director of the Executive Bureau for the Acceleration of Aid Absorption and Support for Policy Reforms, February 19, 2024.

[21] These are based on the seven dimensions framework for localisation developed in 2017 for the Start Fund and Network The Start Fund. See, Smruti Patel and Koenraad Van Brabant, "Start Network and Localisation: Current situation and future directions," Global Mentoring Initiative and Start Network, April 3, 2017, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/start-fund-start-network-and-localisation-current-situation-and-future-

humanitarian action as local as possible and as international as necessary," while continuing to recognize the vital role of international actors, in particular in situations of armed conflict."[22] OCHA adopts the Grand Bargain slogan "as local as possible, as international as necessary," but even within its page dedicated to the concept of localization there is no clear definition.[23] According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Development Cooperation Report 2023, while localization is broadly understood as a process that promotes effective development by empowering local actors, there is no shared definition or guiding principles for what localization precisely entails. This ambiguity arises because different actors in the development community interpret and implement localization in various ways, making it challenging to form a cohesive understanding and approach.[24] The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), meanwhile, describes localization as "a process of recognizing, respecting and strengthening the leadership by local authorities and the capacity of local civil society organizations in humanitarian action, in order to better address the needs of affected populations and to prepare national actors for future humanitarian responses."[25]

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[22] "The Grand Bargain Workstream 2: Localisation," International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), https://gblocalisation.ifrc.org/

[23] "Localization," OCHA, https://www.unocha.org/localization

[24] "Development Co-operation Report 2023: Debating the aid system," OECD, February 13, 2023, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/development-co-operation-report-2023_f6edc3c2-en

[25] "The Grand Bargain Workstream 2: Localisation," IFRC, https://gblocalisation.ifrc.org/grand-bargain-localisation-workstream-2/guidance/

Institutionalizing localization

Yemeni organizations are represented structurally in the UN humanitarian cluster-based system. OCHA's most recent report on the presence of Yemeni partners in the clusters said 87 national organizations were actively operating in one or more of the 10 UN-based clusters spread across 333 districts in the country.[26] On the ground, the percentage of Yemeni organizations active in a given cluster is significantly higher than that of UN agencies and international organizations. However, they often cover remote and hard-to-access areas of the country, and are not as widespread. For example, while UN agencies claim a presence in 332 of the 333 districts, national NGOs are present in 299 districts, including some of the most remote and hard-to-reach areas. But this presence does not translate into proportionate budget allocations or decision-making positions within the clusters or the broader aid and development circles.

An ideal situation would involve Yemeni partners being present in all districts where international NGOs and UN agencies operate, with a phased approach to replace international NGOs with Yemeni stakeholders. A 2021 analysis of humanitarian access in hard-to-reach areas in Yemen found that more than 10 million people in need (47 percent of the total in-need population) lived in areas difficult to access due to security considerations, bureaucratic limitations, geographic challenges, lack of infrastructure, or a combination of these factors.[27] Still, the role and potential of local partners, especially community-based organizations (CBOs), are crucial in facilitating access to the millions of people in need in these areas. So it is only logical that they would be included in all levels of humanitarian and development decision-making. Thus, building their capacity should be a top priority. This is also in line with the recommendations of the HCT in response to access constraints in hard-to-reach areas, which included increasing aid and services – since CBOs frequently rely on national NGOs to sustain their operations – and more effective inclusion of national NGOs at the decision-making level.[28]

A former government official with the Ministry of Local Administration who specializes in issues of decentralization admitted that challenges at the local level are complicated by the polarization of the conflict and rival authorities. "While the central state institutions are dysfunctional, there is an opportunity to work with the local authorities and offices which are still functioning, even though they are working at their own accord," he said. Another solution could be for national institutions such as the Social Fund for Development (SFD) to play the role of a local donor and coordinate among the central government, local authorities, donors, and local implementing organizations. "This is not ideal, however, as it risks replacing the state institutions, but it is the next best thing in terms of localizing assistance to Yemen," the former official argued.[29] An SFD official noted the fund could be well-positioned to take on such a role since it is already considered a trusted partner by large donors such as the World Bank. "There has been investment in the capacities of the SFD team and its various organizations. Other national entities such as the National Public Works Project and the National Microfinance Foundation also present opportunities for Yemeni partners to ensure sustainable development in the country through local leadership," they said, adding that such institutions have sufficient independence to operate without the limitations of government bureaucracy.[30]

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[26] "Yemen: Organizations' Presence, January - March 2024," OCHA, May 30, 2024, https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/yemen/yemen-organizations-presence-january-march-2024-enar

[27] "Yemen: Analysis on humanitarian access to 'Hard-to-Reach' areas in 2021," OCHA, March 16, 2022, https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-analysis-humanitarian-access-hard-reach-areas-2021-june-december-2021

[28] Ibid.

[29] Interview with a former official at the Ministry of Local Administration, February 27, 2024.

[30] Interview with an official at the Social Fund for Development, February 18, 2024.

Despite the shortcomings in localizing humanitarian aid, it remains in a much better state than localization in development support to Yemen. In fact, beyond the humanitarian clusters, impactful and formal coordination structures between international and Yemeni entities working in the aid and development sectors are almost non-existent.

A senior officer with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Yemen noted that prior to the conflict, there was a basis for "an agenda of localization within the framework of decentralization, including supporting elections of local administrations." "The challenge was that the regime did not want to implement the law under the excuse of low capacity at the local level and controlled resources," they said. Although there were economic reforms in the early 2000s that aimed to reduce government bureaucracy and ensure transparency through the 'one-window system', now the international community, as well as the private sector and civil society, face extreme government bureaucracy. Even though there is talk of reviving the one-window system, they noted that public servants seem to lack the capacity to carry it out.[31]

Shuaib Zaghir from the technical office at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation recalled a number of successful structures within development aid to Yemen with strong localized systems such as the SFD and the National Public Works Project. "Other successful localized models in development are the Rural Roads Program and the Road Maintenance Fund. These institutions demonstrated that with proper structure, autonomy, and capacity-building, Yemeni entities could effectively implement large-scale development projects," he said. Unfortunately, however, "many other infrastructure and service state institutions such as ministries of electricity, agriculture, public works, and education were less successful," Zaghir explained, adding that donor engagement was often superficial.[32]

There is now an opportunity to include more Yemenis in the Yemen Partners Group (YPG), established in 2023 as a coordination body for donors. According to a 2024 humanitarian crisis analysis by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency Sida, more needs to be done in terms of institutionalized coordination linking humanitarian, development, and peace actors together, and the YPG represents operational elements of such coordination structure.[33] Currently, there is hardly any Yemeni representation in the YPG and its technical team and sector groups, a fact that puts their commitment to localization in question. "There could be an argument for involving Yemenis in the Yemen Partner Group at a certain stage, but I think the issue is that there is a need for donors to get their house in order before having more discussion on structure and expansion," said Marieke Wierda, Deputy Ambassador of the Netherlands to Yemen.[34] She added that there is more coordination and localization at the technical level than at the political and policy one: "Progress towards localization is slow, but it exists. There is more space for localization in the humanitarian space simply because of scale and the nature of humanitarian work. And after all, the commitment to localization came out of the Grand Bargain which is in the humanitarian domain."

There have been some efforts to institutionalize localization among the donor community's

[31] Interview with a senior officer with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Yemen, February 19, 2024.

[32] Interview with Shuaib Zaghir, chief of the technical office at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, February 29, 2024.

[33] "Humanitarian Crisis Analysis 2024, Yemen," Sida, March 21, 2024, https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2024/04/22142804/Yemen-HCA-2024.pdf)

[34] Interview with Marieke Wierda, Deputy Ambassador of the Netherlands to Yemen, February 28, 2024.

structures, said Kimberlee Bell, the USAID Country Director for Yemen and Senior Development Advisor. "While the YPG is still working out how to formally include Yemeni representation within it, the YPG leadership is focused on hosting the internationally recognized government in a future gathering to share ideas and discuss coordination opportunities," Bell said.[35] "On the Yemen Partnership Technical Team of which I am the current donor co-chair, each working group has been delegated the authority to work out their engagement strategy with Yemenis and their overall Yemeni representation approach," she added.

The decreased funding for the humanitarian response in Yemen poses a significant challenge to promoting localization efforts. This is especially the case regarding coordination processes and events, which are often carried out with minimal participation from Yemeni stakeholders who require logistical and financial support to be able to effectively participate or even attend such events. According to Afrah al-Zouba, there is often a lack of coordination among the international community representatives themselves. "There is competition between humanitarian and development efforts, often against the principle of localization. While localization is now a trend, it requires more than just talk; it needs genuine, on-the-ground action and partnership with local entities," she said.

Coordination efforts are often bilateral and driven by the international entity, which typically has the funds to support such processes. Work by researchers such as Marta Colborn shows that one of the main challenges local organizations in Yemen continue to face is establishing meaningful collaborations with global organizations and directly tapping into donor resources.[36] In Colburn's study, Yemeni organizations said that despite the pledged emphasis on localization as outlined in the Grand Bargain and the Charter for Change, there has been a shortfall in international support for Yemeni civil society in gearing up for a post-conflict role. Additionally, the politicized context has frequently seen parties to the conflict manipulate organizations, highlighting a failure on the part of the international community to uphold its commitments.[37]

This situation is not unique to Yemen. In their research on localization across what they call the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, Sultan Barakat and Sansom Milton show that the lack of direct funding to local partners, inadequate attention to capacity-building, and complicated donor requirements are among the challenges to effective localization across this triple nexus and these affect true partnerships between the internationals and locals.[38] In Yemen there is also the obvious challenge of the security situation and the ability to work effectively, especially in the northern areas. The Dutch deputy ambassador Marieke Wierda said it is becoming increasingly difficult for the local staff to work there, let alone internationals.

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[35] Interview with Kimberlee Bell, USAID Country Director for Yemen and Senior Development Advisor, July 8, 2024.

[36] Marta Colborn, "A New Path Forward: Empowering a Leadership Role for Yemeni Civil Society," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 27, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/13021

[37] Ibid.

[38] Sultan Barakat and Sansom Milton, "Localisation Across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, Volume 15, Issue 2, May 19, 2020, pp. 147-163, https://doi.org/10.1177/1542316620922805

This chicken or the egg dilemma has left the localization process in Yemen handicapped. "We have to start somewhere," said a Yemeni businessman and economic leader.[39] "Lacking effective Yemeni counterparts is a real obstacle but not an excuse. If the international community is genuine in its desire to support Yemen and empower its institutional reform to ensure sustainable development, it needs to work with what exists, build Yemeni capacities, and invest in building the executive institutions from the ground up." Al-Zouba agreed: "UN agencies working with ministries often make plans without engaging the ministry in consultation and participatory planning. Building the capacity of government entities and institutions, especially in conflict, is part of the UN mandate and essential for genuine localization."[40]

[39] Interview with a Yemeni businessman, February 17, 2024.

[40] Interview with Afrah al-Zouba, Managing Director of the Executive Bureau for the Acceleration of Aid Absorption and Support for Policy Reforms, February 19, 2024.

Localizing aid in Yemen: Who and how?

Given that there is no consensus on a unified, measurable definition of localization in aid and development support, the understanding of this concept depends on who is looking at it and from which angle. Despite the agreement in principle on the need for localization and the overarching condition that it requires more empowerment of local partners, the priorities and methods to achieving it remain contested among Yemenis on the one side and the international community on the other.

From the outside looking in

Interviews with representatives of donors and international organizations show that while they are keen on advancing the localization agenda in Yemen, access constraints and government red tape deployed by the parties to the conflict and de facto authorities present serious obstacles. The Houthi arrests this year of Yemenis working with international organizations in Sana'a are the most recent example of the difficulties organizations face.[41] Questions of access, corruption, and accountability were raised repeatedly by interviewees for this study.[42] And while some UN agencies have shown greater willingness to relax some of their security restrictions so as to enable their staff to visit sites on the ground and monitor aid, staff with international organizations remain at high risk in Houthi areas – made worse by the conflict between the Houthis and US-led forces over the Red Sea shipping attacks.[43] There is also the constant danger of funding fatigue as other emergencies draw attention away from Yemen.[44]

The other obstacle to localization, from the perspective of the international community, is the lack of capable Yemeni partners on the government side. However, even though local authorities have been seen as an obstacle more than an enabler, the 2022 baseline report measuring localization in Yemen found local authorities in the south (government-held areas) more receptive to working with donors and international NGOs.[45] Furthermore, there are opportunities for working with cultural leaders, such as tribal figures, and religious and community leaders, who have credibility among their constituents and want to be seen positively by their communities. This could be leveraged to create friendlier and more capable local partnerships.

The country director of an international NGO operating in Yemen admitted that donors and international NGOs can do more toward enabling the Yemeni counterparts, especially in terms of development efforts. That there is enough stability at the local level to encourage development donors to carry out more partnerships. The director recognized that "it is hard

[41] "Yemen: Houthis Disappear Dozens of UN, Civil Society Staff," Human Rights Watch, June 26, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/26/yemen-houthis-disappear-dozens-un-civil-society-staff

[42] See, for example, the event held in May 2022 by the Center for Strategic & International Studies. "Sustaining Yemen: ensuring humanitarian aid amid shifting conflict dynamics," CSIS YouTube, May 24, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYFFnKJ5xNE

[43] Secretary of State Antony Blinken, "Terrorist Designation of the Houthis," US Department of State, January 27, 2024, https://www.state.gov/terrorist-designation-of-the-houthis/

[44] "Yemen: Funding cuts and escalation threaten peace prospects and recovery after nine years of crisis," Norwegian Refugee Council, March 25, 2024, https://www.nrc.no/news/2024/march/yemen-funding-cuts-and-escalation-threaten-peace-prospects-and-recovery-after-nine-years-of-crisis/

[45] Wameedh Shakir, Bashar Mugahid, Mohammed Faisal, Abdulrahman al-Asali, "Measuring Humanitarian Localisation in Yemen: Baseline Report," Tamdeen Youth Foundation, ITAR for Social Development, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies and Humanitarian Advisory Group, November 2022, https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/measuring-humanitarian-localisation-in-yemen-baseline-report/

for the donors to see this (possibility to do more) when they not on the ground and amid the constant narrative from other international NGOs about humanitarian need still being the biggest issue," and advocated for supporting infrastructure and building local capacity rather than being overwhelmed with 'the Yemen in need' narrative."[46]

Zaghir agreed with this. "As the humanitarian needs grew, we saw a shift towards the Humanitarian Response Plan model. Whilst this has helped coordinate the humanitarian response, it has also presented challenges for long-term development and localization efforts," he said. Through his position in the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, Zaghir has seen the trends shift up and down. Many donors suspended development projects when the war began in 2015, and even the World Bank, a development donor, reallocated some funding. Some regional donors later resumed funding for development projects. "Importantly, institutions like the Social Fund for Development, the Public Works Project, and the Rural Roads Program have continued to implement projects even during the crisis, demonstrating their resilience and capacity," Zaghir said.[47]

Similarly, Al-Zouba said a reframing of the relationship between the UN and international NGOs, on the one hand, and Yemeni counterparts, on the other, is required in order to overcome the partnership challenge. "We must revise the role of UN agencies during the crisis, focusing on sustainability and quality. Their hierarchical structure has proven expensive and inefficient for Yemen, raising concerns about transparency, efficiency, and competition with national entities," she said. "The role of the state institutions before and after recovery needs clarity. Whether the state will be involved in regulation, policymaking, and service provision, or just regulation, with other entities as implementers, needs careful consideration."[48]

Working with multiple partners of varying capacities is a challenge, let alone in a volatile and complex environment like Yemen. Britain's Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) last year launched a programme in Yemen that tries to manage this. Via its 'Brightly' initiative (Building Resilience through Integrated Community-based and Humanitarian Systems Transformation and Leadership in Yemen) the FCDO coordinates with national Yemeni and international NGOs to provide support to local Yemeni organizations.[49] "Localization is a policy and program priority for the UK in Yemen, and we have central-level guidelines on this. However, in Yemen, there are barriers to effective partnerships. Due to security reasons, we are not on the ground, which limits our understanding of the realities faced by our Yemeni partners," an official said.[50] Genuine localization requires balancing donor requirements, which include sophisticated project proposals, transparency checks and balances, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks with the varying capacities Yemeni organizations have.

[46] Interview with Alex Harper for the 'Development is Coming' report, May 18, 2023, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/21886

[47] Interview with Shuaib Zaghir, chief of the technical office at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, February 29, 2024.

[48] Interview with Afrah al-Zouba, Managing Director of the Executive Bureau for the Acceleration of Aid Absorption and Support for Policy Reforms, February 19, 2024.

[49] "As hunger hits households in Yemen, major new initiative announced to address food insecurity," CARE International UK, February 27, 2023, https://www.careinternational.org.uk/news-stories/as-hunger-hits-households-in-yemen-major-new-initiative-announced-to-address-food-insecurity/

[50] Interview with British FCDO official, July 9, 2024.

The FCDO in Yemen also encourages partnerships with women-led organizations that understand the complexities of Yemeni society, particularly on gender-related issues, and that fund projects benefiting women and girls. "This approach not only empowers women-led organizations and builds their capacities as civil society, but also empowers the women and girls in the communities they serve," the official said.[51]

From the inside looking out

Yemeni interviewees for this study complained that they face the same constraints as the international community in terms of government bureaucracy and red tape, but more severely. Rigid donor requirements and lack of support for logistical and operations costs undermine the Yemeni partner's ability to navigate these challenges. The IAHE's 2022 report confirms this, stating that the support for local partners in addressing this challenge is lacking.[52] This was summarized in the cost recovery for national institutions problem, since donors do not pay for any administrative expenses or other indirect expenditures. This puts great pressure on the national organizations, especially the local ones. It makes them unable to improve their institutional capacities and hence discriminates directly against smaller CBOs who rely on projects to survive. UN agencies also require local partners to pay operational costs in advance before being reimbursed after project completion.

The call for flexible funding was mentioned in the HCT Access Strategy developed in 2021, which included an objective of simplifying cumbersome administrative procedures and reducing interference in aid delivery and programming.[53] However, considering that those responsible for these procedures are in effect the parties to the conflict and not civil society organizations or the international community, it seems the objective of flexible funding can only be realized through political mediation. Until then, local organizations must be supported in their navigation of such challenges.[54]

One such effort came in 2012 when the Yemeni Economic Reform team, led by several prominent Yemeni private sector leaders and economic experts, recommended the creation of an International Fund for Supporting Yemen's Development. As explained by the Yemeni businessman, the idea was to create an executive body, independent of the government but including representatives of the government, donors, private sector, civil society and any relevant stakeholders on its board. The board would decide on the development priorities of the country, create proposals for development projects, and present them to donors. Once donors commit to funding such projects, the executive body of this fund takes on the responsibility of implementation and delivery of results in a professional, cost-effective, and accountable manner, bypassing government bureaucracy and red tape. The government, being part of the board and the one providing the green light for the priority projects at the highest levels, commits to facilitating the fund's work and providing necessary concessions and licenses, while the donors provide financial support and expertise should it be needed. "Our proposal met with rejection once and again, but today represents a new opportunity. We can tweak it further to create stages of implementation and update it to address current day challenges, but in principle it should still work," said the businessman.[55]

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[51] Ibid.

[52] IASC, "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the Yemen Crisis," OCHA, July 14, 2022, p. 111, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-humaniatrian-evaluations-steering-group/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-yemen-crisis

[53] "Yemen: Analysis on humanitarian access to 'hard-to-reach' areas in 2021," OCHA, March 16, 2022, https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-analysis-humanitarian-access-hard-reach-areas-2021-june-december-2021

[54] Nonso Jideofor, "Localizing Humanitarian Action," UNHCR Innovation Service, 2021, https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Localizing-Humanitarian-Action_web.pdf

[55] Interview with a Yemeni businessman, February 17, 2024.

Similarly, Taiz governor Nabil Shamsan explained that there needs to be a strong local champion to enforce localization of aid and development. "Our obligation is to our people first and foremost, so we had to be resourceful and call on the Yemeni professionals and qualified people in the local executive offices to come up with a solid plan. Once we knew what we wanted and how to achieve it, we went to the donors and they were more than willing to help," he said. Shamsan's position in government as an advocate for localized development in Taiz means he is continually obliged to coordinate with the central government while dealing with the various local forces. "It is an ongoing struggle, but believe it or not, funding is not the main challenge – it is leadership, coordination, and accountability," he said.[56]

Localizing localization

Another aspect of localization often overlooked in discussions is the secondary layer of localization, or in other words, "localizing localization" within Yemeni civil society organizations. Findings from interviews conducted for this study and previous work[57] reveal a significant disparity in access to international NGOs and networks within the donor community between well-established Yemeni national organizations and local organizations at the community levels, especially in remote or hard-to-access areas and for small women-led organizations. This means that only a few national organizations are able to compete for large grants since they have sufficient internal funds to ensure their sustainability between projects.

The senior manager at a national civil society organization explained that short-term projects and grants do very little to sustain local organizations or create real impact on the ground. "Sustainability is always in question with the way aid and development support is managed in Yemen. The instability and lack of reliable local authorities make donors reluctant to commit large amounts of money for multiple years and this hurts the learning process and impact of our work on the ground," he said.[58] Established development national organizations such as the Social Fund for Development could play the role of the national development partner on behalf of the dysfunctional government, but the volatile security situation creates too many risks. "There is a need to invest locally in a way that protects against disruptions at the national level, but this requires time and resources, and above all commitment," he said.

This finding aligns with a study conducted by the Humanitarian Advisory Group in 2023 on the definition and requirements for localization in the Camp Coordination and Camp Management cluster. The study revealed a disconnect in understanding of the concept of localization among international organizations, Yemeni national organizations, and local organizations.[59] As depicted in Table 1, the number of Yemeni local organizations has decreased in comparison to national organizations since 2018, despite a doubling of the overall share of funding. While this increase in funding is a positive indicator for larger projects led by established national Yemeni organizations, it raises questions about inclusivity, the need to build the capacity of local community-based organizations (CBOs), and their share of funding.

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[56] Interview with Nabil Shamsan, Taiz governor, February 16, 2024.

[57] Nadia al-Sakkaf, Alex Harper, and Joel Thorpe, "Development is Coming: Be Careful What You Wish For," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, March 8, 2024, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/21886

[58] Interview with a senior manager at a national CSO, February 20, 2024.

[59] Humanitarian Advisory Group, "Localisation in the CCCM cluster coordination: Opportunities and way forward," UNHCR, forthcoming.

While most Yemeni and international NGOs acknowledge the need for more localization and funding for Yemeni NGOs, there is a lack of prioritization in advocating for these demands in local and remote areas of the country. This is partly because it is usually the more established national Yemeni organizations that have access to international networks and more clout. For instance, in a statement signed by 60 Yemeni NGOs and 38 international NGOs and UN agencies on localization in September 2023, they focused on four main demands, none of which address the disparity among Yemeni stakeholders themselves.[60] These demands included upscaling quality and flexible humanitarian funding, ensuring equity of funding across sectors, ensuring early availability and continued funding, and working collectively to increase coherence between humanitarian and development aid.

On the other hand, there has been reference to this disparity in partnerships in the 2022 IAHE report, which stated the need for equal access and opportunities in the selection of Yemeni partners. The report states that the "selection of national NGOs as implementing partners does not appear to be based on a mapping of protection vulnerabilities of local populations and an assessment of local NGO capacity and community networks. The lack of such assessments contributes to perceptions of favoritism and puts those having better access to United Nations agencies and international NGOs in privileged positions."[61] Similarly, the HCT Localization Strategic Action Plan 2024-2026 included a specific objective of increasing the quantity and quality of direct partnerships with smaller national NGOs, including women-led organizations.[62]

The gap between local and national organizations can create resentment and infighting in an atmosphere of declining humanitarian funding to Yemen.[63] According to the civil society senior manager, OCHA attempted to encourage national NGOs to empower local organizations by requiring collaboration with three smaller organizations in funded projects. But the requirement has been discarded in recent years due to a need for additional funding to help the local organizations manage monitoring and evaluation. "These added costs had to be sourced from existing budgets, and as Yemeni partners, we were already under stress in terms of operational costs," the manager said.[64] The findings of this research also indicate that some local organizations need to bolster their resilience in the face of intimidation.

[60] "Joint Statement on Yemen Humanitarian Situation and Funding Gap," Relief Web, September 14, 2023, https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/joint-statement-yemen-humanitarian-situation-and-funding-gap-enar

[61] IASC, "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the Yemen Crisis," OCHA, July 14, 2022, p. 111, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-humaniatrian-evaluations-steering-group/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-yemen-crisis

[62] "Localization Strategy and Action Plan 2024-2026," Yemen Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), November 21, 2023, https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Annex%203%20Yemen%20HCT%20Localization%20Strategy%20and%20action%20plan.pdf

[63] "Humanitarian aid in Yemen slashed by over 60% in five years," Save the Children, September 25, 2023, https://www.savethechildren.net/news/humanitarian-aid-yemen-slashed-over-60-five-years

[64] Interview with a senior manager at a national CSO, February 20, 2024.

Conclusion

This study has explored the complexities and challenges of localizing aid and development in Yemen, shedding light on the significant barriers and opportunities that exist in this critical endeavor. While there has been growing acknowledgment of the need for localization and some progress in integrating Yemeni partners, especially into the humanitarian frameworks, substantial obstacles remain. These include a dysfunctional central government, polarized political authorities, limited understanding of localization, and insufficient funding and capacity-building for local organizations, especially community-based ones, those in remote areas, and smaller women-led organizations. The international community's efforts, although commendable in some respects, have not yet realized the full potential of a truly localized approach.

The Yemeni context, with its nearly two decades of instability, poses unique challenges that require a tailored and nuanced approach to localization. The findings underscore the need for a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond merely increasing the percentage of funds directed to local entities. True localization involves empowering local actors, fostering genuine partnerships, and addressing the disparities within Yemeni civil society itself.

The HCT localization strategy 2024-2026 provides an excellent starting point for achieving significant localization and empowerment of civil society organizations. However, the action plan does not adequately address the barriers to localization caused by government and de facto authorities, including non-state forces on the ground. In interviews, government bodies and local authorities came up time and again as key obstacles to effective localization in terms of bureaucracy, corruption, and lack of capacity. One HCT goal, which calls for supporting national coordination mechanisms, is a potential entry point to resolving this problem. Yet it is important to acknowledge that for this issue in particular, political mediation and pressure from donor countries will be needed. Leveraging existing local knowledge has to be at the core of such mediation to ensure a careful balance between external capacity-building and adoption of local solutions. This is particularly important given the varied success of our project implementation units across different sectors.

Recommendations

- **Develop a clear, measurable, and unified definition of localization.** This must be done through an inclusive process with all Yemeni stakeholders in a way that creates local ownership of the terms and places the responsibility on all stakeholders proportionally. The definition should be aligned with the principles outlined in the Grand Bargain and tailored to the specific needs and context of Yemen. This also includes establishing formal structures to institutionalize localization within the humanitarian and development sectors in Yemen. An independent body could be formed to oversee localization efforts.

- **Commitment to funding capacity-building and administrative costs for coordination and other operational expenses on top of the project budgets.** Donors must commit to investing in comprehensive capacity-building programs for Yemeni local and national organizations, focusing on institutional development, project management, monitoring and evaluation, and financial management. Capacity-building and coordination initiatives must be adequately funded, and specific budget lines must be assigned for empowering local community-based organizations.

- **Promote genuine and more equitable partnerships and shared decision-making.** This also includes duty of care, where the partners' safety and well-being is considered a priority as they engage in the project design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation processes. Equitable partnerships between international actors and Yemeni organizations must be fostered, ensuring that local partners are involved in decision-making processes at all levels. This means allowing more time for the discussion of proposals, and mid-term evaluation of defined deliverables and taking feedback from local partners seriously.

- **Encourage national organizations to empower smaller organizations, especially women-led organizations, by the former taking on the responsibility of localization further within Yemeni civil society.** Partnerships should be established between national NGOs and small local organizations that build the capacities of the latter in this regard.

- **Increase direct and flexible funding available to Yemeni organizations.** The approach to humanitarian and development support should take into account the fluid political and security situation. A greater share of flexible humanitarian and development funds should therefore be allocated directly to Yemeni local and national organizations, meeting or exceeding the Grand Bargain target of 25 percent for Country-Based Pooled Funds.

- **Design creative accountability and transparency frameworks that address the bureaucratic challenges faced by local authorities.** This includes working through the private sector and national quasi-government bodies such as the Social Fund for Development while empowering the executive bodies at the local level to support responsible decentralization, sustainability, and restoration of local institutions. The accountability measures should extend to the donor and international NGO reports, for example making them accessible on the website in Arabic. There should be a quota of funding that has fewer rigid requirements to allow less established organizations to receive grants. The funding priorities should be derived from the local communities.

- **Press donor countries to make sure international NGOs simplify administrative procedures and reduce bureaucratic interference in aid delivery, recognizing the complex political context in Yemen.** Understanding and engaging with local political dynamics is crucial. The political authorities in donor countries should work in collaboration with their humanitarian groups to facilitate implementation and increase impact.

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