



Revisiting the Sana'a Center's Humanitarian Aid Reports: Then and Now

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Cover photo: A man carries aid provided by the World Food Programme in Al-Mudhaffar district in Taiz governorate on January 20, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al-Basha.



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

In October 2021, the Sana'a Center published a series of reports, *When Aid Goes Awry: How the International Humanitarian Response is Failing Yemen*. Based on extensive research and interviews with 73 key informants, the reports looked at the failures and challenges of the humanitarian response. Findings pointed to a deeply flawed response – one in crisis, of questionable quality, hobbled by a restrictive operating environment, and mired in uncertainty and assumptions due to unreliable data and a lack of field presence. Reactions to the reports diverged, though public criticism was carefully withheld. Messages from aid workers arrived en masse in private, overwhelmingly thankful for the reports' candor in highlighting problems that had long been talked about behind closed doors. Donors requested briefings to dig deeper into certain issues. The reports also unsettled many, including senior humanitarian leaders in Yemen and abroad, with those with a vested interest in keeping the response unchanged attempting to discredit the reports by questioning their findings and the research methodology.^[1] Others tried to find a middle line – acknowledging the veracity of the findings in private, but questioning whether speaking out publicly was the right course of action.

Almost 18 months later, the findings have largely been accepted. Key to this acceptance was the subsequent publication of three other reports, which largely reached the same conclusions. In December 2021, a review of the use of humanitarian principles in the Yemen response was published by HERE-Geneva,^[2] followed by a review of the humanitarian access environment in Yemen in March 2022.^[3] Finally, the official inter-agency humanitarian evaluation (IAHE) was completed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)^[4] in July 2022.^[5] Together the reports have provided for more open and transparent conversations, allowing some of the issues to be tackled.

This is not to say that the road to acceptance has been easy. In a validation workshop on the IAHE findings in Amman in early 2022, some reportedly tried to push back against the findings with the oft-heard refrain of "You don't understand the realities of Yemen."^[6] With some of the in-country senior leadership visibly upset, it reportedly took the intervention of the Humanitarian Coordinator to ensure that the findings were accepted by UN agencies.^[7] Despite this initial pushback, they were published with few changes, largely mirroring the Sana'a Center findings published in 2021.

Following the publication of the other reports, and subsequent efforts to address some of the major concerns, this paper looks at where the humanitarian response is today and whether advocacy efforts have managed to effect change.

[1] Based on messages and feedback received by the author after the report was published in 2021 from aid workers and donors, and information from meetings attended by the author with Sana'a Center personnel in November 2021. This was also confirmed by interviews with key informant #1, a food security expert, January 9, 2023; and an interview with key informant #2, a humanitarian donor, January 10, 2023.

[2] Marzia Montemurro and Karin Wendt, "Principled Humanitarian Programming in Yemen, A Prisoner's Dilemma?" HERE-Geneva, Geneva, December 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/principled-humanitarian-programming-yemen-prisoner-s-dilemma-december-2021>

[3] Paul Harvey, Abby Stoddard, Monica Czarwano, and Meriah-Jo Breckenridge, "Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Yemen Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid," Humanitarian Outcomes, London, March 22, 2022, https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/score_yemen_2022.pdf

[4] The IASC is the highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the United Nations system. It brings together the executive heads of 18 organizations and consortia to formulate policy, set strategic priorities, and mobilize resources in response to humanitarian crises. <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc>

[5] Lewis Sida, Martine Van de Velde, Isabel Vogel, Abeer Alabsi, Rajith Lakshman, Philip Proudfoot, Tina Nelis, James Darcy, and Helen Lackner, "Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis," Inter-Agency Standing Committee, July 14, 2022, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluations-steering-group/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-yemen-crisis>

[6] Interview with key informant #7, a senior humanitarian aid expert, February 17, 2023.

[7] Ibid.

Between December 2022 and May 2023, 11 key informants were interviewed – some who originally took part in the Sana'a Center's original research and some new, to ensure that the thoughts and reflections of people working in Yemen today are captured.^[8] New key informants were identified based on introductions by previous key informants. This was followed by a research workshop session, comprised of active aid actors in Yemen, to reflect on the current situation, what has changed, and what still needs to change.^[9] While some positive developments were noted, the general consensus was that there has been little overall change in the response itself.^[10] As one key informant put it: "It is still not an effective or principled response."^[11]

[8] Six key informants had also been interviewed for the initial research; five were new. All remain active in the Yemen humanitarian response.

[9] Representatives included a UN agency, national and international NGO workers, as well as researchers and analysts. The online workshop was held on March 29, 2023.

[10] This view was reflected by all key informants interviewed and confirmed during the workshop session on March 29, 2023.

[11] Interview with key informant #2, a humanitarian donor, January 10, 2023.

What Has Changed?

Some efforts have been made to address key concerns that were raised. Aid workers continue to work in challenging circumstances, and the efforts that have been made and the commitment of aid workers to continue with day-to-day operations should not go unacknowledged or unappreciated. There are some positive steps that have been undertaken that should be highlighted.

Transparency and Understanding

Overwhelmingly, key informants noted a positive change in dialogue and understanding around Yemen and the humanitarian response. As the first of the series, the Sana'a Center report was noted to have paved the way for the following reports. A key value attributed was the codification of a series of concerns held by humanitarian practitioners, allowing them to refer to the reports and not just their own opinions. The combined weight of recent research has been credited with publicly identifying problems, establishing a baseline of understanding of the challenges, and forcing more honest discussions.^[12] Donors stated that they found the evaluations useful in supporting efforts to confront and pressure the system, draw stricter lines, and have more transparent conversations.^[13]

The Narrative

A key problem highlighted in the Sana'a Center reports was the narrative which surrounds the humanitarian response. Yemen has always been overwhelmingly framed as a famine response, though research has showcased this as an inaccurate narrative.^[14] Whilst it has been successful for fundraising efforts – resulting in one of the best-funded humanitarian responses of recent times, it also influenced certain response modalities as a result of and to maintain that narrative – ones which have not been effective in resolving food insecurity in the longer term. One focus has been on the distribution of food baskets for example, rather than looking at the lack of access to markets or economic support, which are the main causes limiting the availability of food. Rather than a food security crisis, many feel that the Yemen crisis is a protection crisis, where restricted and conditional access to aid and resources remains the largest obstacle for the majority of the population, blended with a development and economic crisis which are beyond the capacity of the humanitarian system to resolve.^[15]

[12] Highlighted in all interviews with key informants.

[13] Interview with key informant #2, a humanitarian donor, January 10, 2023.

[14] Sarah Vuylsteke, "The Myth of Data in Yemen," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 27, 2021, pp. 31-34, <https://sanaacenter.org/reports/humanitarian-aid/15353>; Sarah Vuylsteke "A Data Case Study: Famine in Yemen," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 27, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/reports/humanitarian-aid/15546>; Lewis Sida et al., "Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis," pp. 70-71;

Nicholas Haan, Peter Hailey, Daniel Maxwell, Oleg Bilhuka, and Jose Lopez, "Famine Review Committee Conclusions and Recommendations on the IPC Yemen Analysis. Summary Report," IPC, Rome, November 28, 2018, http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/FRC_Yemen_Summary_report.pdf; Nicholas Haan, Peter Hailey, Daniel Maxwell, Oleg Bilhuka, Andrew Seal, and Jose Lopez, "Famine Review of the IPC Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition Analyses. Conclusions and Recommendations For Five Areas in Yemen (Abs, Haradh, and Midi in Hajjah Governorate, and Al Hali and Al Hawak in Al Hudaydah Governorate)," IPC, Rome, March 22, 2022, <https://fcluster.org/yemen/document/famine-review-ipc-acute-food-insecurity-o>; Daniel Maxwell, Peter Hailey, Lindsay Spainhour Baker, and Jeeyon Janet Kim, "Constraints and Complexities of Information and Analysis in Humanitarian Emergencies. Evidence from Yemen," Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2019, <https://fic.tufts.edu/assets/2019-Evidence-from-Yemen-final.pdf>

[15] Interview with key informant #4, a protection expert, February 3, 2022; interview with key informant #5, an international aid worker, February 9, 2022; interview with an access expert, May 12, 2023; "For Us but Not Ours. Exclusion from Humanitarian Aid in Yemen," Danish Refugee Council and the Protection Cluster, November 2020, (non-public report); Marzia Montemurro and Karin Wendt, "Principled Humanitarian Programming in Yemen, A 'Prisoner's Dilemma?'" p.10.; and Lewis Sida et al, "Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis," pp. XIV, 37-38, 42, 80, 94, 106, 121.

Aid workers on the ground indicate that the reports have furthered this understanding, which is more accepted today. The hope is that a change in narrative will allow for a different focus of the response and its modalities, which could allow for more effective strategies in ensuring that aid is more appropriate and has longer-term benefits. ^[16]

A New Accountability Framework

A key challenge in the Yemen response has been a serious accountability and transparency deficit, both in terms of aid delivery and toward the populations who receive it.^[17] There has been a lack of collective will to improve ineffective accountability mechanisms.^[18] This has not only produced poor-quality aid but has also led to widespread mistrust of humanitarian assistance by local communities, authorities, and aid workers themselves.^[19] One of the key recommendations adopted by the humanitarian country team (HCT) in the Management Response Plan, as a response to the IAHE, was to improve accountability systems and practices, in particular to recipients of aid.^[20] As a result, a previous accountability framework from 2017 was re-invigorated, and the Yemen Community Engagement and Accountability to Affected People Working Group developed a work plan. A new collective feedback mechanism to collect and analyze complaints and community feedback has also been discussed and is due to be rolled out in 2023.^[21] In addition, at least one of the largest humanitarian agencies active in Yemen today has invested in further research to understand and address aspects of diversion and challenges in aid delivery.^[22] Though these steps to reinvigorate the accountability system are positive, key informants questioned their effect and impact, noting that building accountability within the current environment is challenging and will take time.^[23] In particular, the continued lack of access for humanitarian actors in areas under the control of the Houthi movement was highlighted as a key constraint on accountability.

Some Red Lines are Finally Being Enforced

One of the most fundamental challenges in Yemen is the operating environment, which is known to be one of the most restrictive and eroded globally – especially in areas controlled by the Houthi movement. Though restrictions are widely blamed on Houthi authorities, the Sana'a Center found that part of the blame lies with the humanitarian community for failing to uphold

[16] Interview with key informant #4, a protection expert, February 3, 2023; key informant #5, an international aid worker, February 9, 2023; and key informant #8, a Yemen humanitarian researcher, March 15, 2023, and confirmed in the research workshop held March 29, 2023. This is also supported by the language of the new HRP, which focuses on the centrality of protection rather than food security: "Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2023," UNOCHA, Sana'a, January 25, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-2023-january-2023-enar>

[17] Lewis Sida et al., "Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis," p. 96; Marzia Montemurro and Karin Wendt, "Principled Humanitarian Programming in Yemen, A 'Prisoner's Dilemma?'" pp. 33 – 34; Sarah Vuylsteke, "The Myth of Data in Yemen," pp.9-10; and Sarah Vuylsteke, "Monitoring: Accountability Falter When Oversight is Outsourced," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 20, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/reports/humanitarian-aid/15564>

[18] Lewis Sida et al., "Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis," p. 96; Sarah Vuylsteke, "When Aid Goes Awry: How the International Response is Failing Yemen. Monitoring: Accountability Falter when Oversight is Outsourced."

[19] Ibid.

[20] "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Response Management Response Plan," UNOCHA, Sana'a, August 31, 2022, pp. 2, 3 and 6, https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/FINAL_MRP_IAHEYemen.pdf

[21] Ibid., p. 6.

[22] Interview with key informant #8, a Yemen humanitarian researcher, March 15, 2023.

[23] Interview with key informant #2, a humanitarian donor, January 10, 2023; key informant #5, an international aid worker, February 9, 2023; key informant #8, a Yemen humanitarian researcher, March 15, 2023; and key informant #9, a senior aid expert, February 23, 2023. This was also confirmed during the research workshop held on March 29, 2023.

basic principles of humanitarian action or enforce 'red lines.'^[24] One of the most hopeful signs for the Yemen response is that this year may mark one of the first instances of a red line being drawn within the response. According to key informants, this year's integrated food security phase classification exercise (IPC) saw partners reportedly take a collective stand to not conduct food security assessments unless key issues^[25] (such as enumerator selection, monitoring, etc.) were addressed. This resulted in lengthy negotiations with senior Houthi authorities, who predictably are not in favor of a more accurate assessment. As of the time of writing, the IPC exercise has not been carried out in areas under Houthi control, though a partial IPC analysis was completed for areas under the control of the internationally recognized government. As a result, assistance in Houthi-controlled areas is likely to be affected, which would mark one of the first instances of consequences for a failure to respect humanitarian standards and principles since the response began some eight years ago.^[26] Considering the dependence the Houthi movement has on food and cash assistance, it is expected that this could further create friction in the relationship between Houthi authorities and the aid sector. Outcomes could go either of two ways, either leading to further restrictions on access in retaliation – or leverage in negotiations by touching on a key resource. To achieve the latter outcome, it is likely that the former hurdle will have to be overcome, necessitating courage and steadfastness on the humanitarian front.^[27] Regardless, this is the first indication that the boundaries of humanitarian space might finally be drawn.

[24] Red lines are defined as actions or conditions deemed unacceptable by aid providers beyond which they will not operate. Examples include the killing of aid workers, looting, an inability to determine needs and beneficiaries independently, etc. Sarah Vuylsteke, "To Stay and Deliver: Sustainable Access and Redlines," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 28, 2021, pp. 28-35, <https://sanaacenter.org/reports/humanitarian-aid/15485>

[25] Sarah Vuylsteke, "Flawed data continues to plague humanitarian response in Yemen. The Yemen Review, January-February 2022," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, March 15, 2022, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/jan-feb-2022/17010>

[26] Interview with key informant #1, a food security expert, January 9, 2023; key informant #2, a humanitarian donor, January 10, 2023; and key informant #8, a Yemen humanitarian researcher, March 15, 2023.

[27] A previous attempt to leverage access to food aid was made in 2019 and opened up avenues for negotiation, though ultimately failed due to concessions made by the humanitarian side prior to any real changes made by Houthi authorities; Sarah Vuylsteke, "To Stay and Deliver: Sustainable Access and Redlines," pp. 30-31.

What Has Not Changed?

Despite these positive signs, the overwhelming conclusion echoed by all key informants and the main takeaway from the research workshop is that in reality very little has changed in Yemen today, both in the humanitarian situation and the response.^[28] As two key informants reflected, “There is some change but it is not easy,”^[29] and “How do you dig yourself out of a hole that deep?”^[30] The main issues addressed by the various reports remain problems today, with crucially, the operational environment is considered to be more restrictive than it was several years ago.^[31] New restrictions on female aid workers are just one example of worrying signs that the operating environment could continue to shrink.^[32]

A Failure to Review the Security Framework

Accountability within a humanitarian response can only be fully achieved through the unrestricted presence of aid workers on the ground, where aid is being delivered. Yet despite being one of the best-funded humanitarian aid responses, the presence of aid workers (in particular international staff) remains low in Yemen – particularly outside of Sana’a and Aden.^[33] This lack of field presence can be directly attributed to the overly restrictive security posture of the UN,^{[34],[35]} which has created a non-operational culture amongst international organizations.^[36] As a result, aid workers, particularly those working for the UN, rarely, if ever, travel to the field. If they do, this is often for limited windows of time, ensconced in armored vehicles, with armed escorts, and with authorities dictating which members of the local community they can speak with.^[37] This bunkerization continues to create a schism between international aid workers and Yemenis,

[28] This was the conclusion of all key informant interviews as well as the overwhelming conclusion of the participants in the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

[29] Senior aid worker, participant in the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

[30] Interview with key informant #8, a Yemen humanitarian researcher, March 15, 2023.

[31] Interview with key informant #1, a food security expert, January 9, 2023; key informant #2, a humanitarian donor, January 10, 2023; key informant #4, a protection expert, February 3, 2023; key informant #11, an international aid worker, February 5, 2023; key informant #5, an international aid worker, February 9, 2023; and key informant #9, a senior aid expert, February 23, 2023. This was also confirmed in the research workshop held on March 29, 2023.

[32] Lisa Barrington, “Male guardianship rules in north Yemen restrict women’s aid work,” Reuters, March 23, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/male-guardianship-rules-north-yemen-restrict-womens-aid-work-2023-03-23/> and; “Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2023,” pp. 7, 9, and 36.

[33] Sarah Vuylsteke, “When Aid Goes Awry: How the International Response is Failing Yemen. To Stay and Deliver: Security,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, pp. 35-36, https://sanaacenter.org/files/When_Aid_Goes_Awry_03_To_Stay_and_Deliver_Security_en.pdf; and Lewis Sida et al., “Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis,” pp. 88-91.

The continued absence of more than a handful of people in field offices outside of Sana’a and Aden was confirmed through the new round of key informant interviews in 2023.

[34] Lewis Sida et al., “Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis,” p. 89; Paul Harvey et al., “Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Yemen Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid,” pp. 12-14; Sarah Vuylsteke, “When Aid Goes Awry: How the International Response is Failing Yemen. To Stay and Deliver: Security,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, https://sanaacenter.org/files/When_Aid_Goes_Awry_03_To_Stay_and_Deliver_Security_en.pdf

[35] Though this is overwhelmingly the case for UN aid workers, restrictive security measures also have an effect on the ability of UN national staff to be present, and directly and indirectly influences INGO security perceptions and measures.

[36] Lewis Sida et al., “Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis,” p. 89; Paul Harvey et al., “Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Yemen Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid,” pp. 12-14; Sarah Vuylsteke, “When Aid Goes Awry: How the International Response is Failing Yemen. To Stay and Deliver: Security,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, https://sanaacenter.org/files/When_Aid_Goes_Awry_03_To_Stay_and_Deliver_Security_en.pdf

[37] Representatives of local and national organizations indicated during the research workshop on March 29, 2023, that the restrictions over which community members can be spoken to during assessments and monitoring extend to them as well as internationals.

fundamentally undermining the acceptance of aid and aid workers in Yemen,^[38] and making it impossible to effectively oversee and monitor aid delivery. As a result, implementation and monitoring of aid activities have been largely outsourced to local and national organizations, as well as parties to the conflict, undermining the response's independence, neutrality, and impartiality. Though the value of, and need for, the inclusion of local organizations in aid delivery is indisputable, the likelihood of inherent bias and vested interests must also be recognized, necessitating some form of independent, neutral, and impartial oversight. This requires the presence of international staff in the field.

To address this, the IAHE report called for an urgent review of security arrangements to better enable the response.^[39] As a result, reform of the security sector was included in the management response plan.^[40] In particular, goals were formulated to increase staff field presence and conduct a review of security measures, protocols, risk assessments, and security analysis, with the aim of reducing inappropriate security measures, the reliance on armed convoys, and notification protocols where deemed unnecessary.^[41] On paper, some progress has been made. The management response plan indicates that there has been a 30 percent increase in staff presence in field locations in the second half of 2022 compared to the first half of 2021.^[42] All Security Risk Management processes (SRM) and security plans have been reviewed.^[43] Measures have been taken to reduce the bureaucratic burden of deconfliction acknowledgment notifications, which previously delayed missions.^[44] Despite this, little has changed on the ground. The review of the SRMs and security plans simply updated and reinforced measures already in place, rather than making them more flexible. Armed escorts remain the norm. Mission notifications and security planning remain an immense bureaucratic burden, slowing down the movement of staff. Staff ceilings remain in place.^[45] As one participant in the workshop stated, "We always have trouble with them [United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS)]; they are the ones who try and restrict our movements tremendously, and they are extremely risk averse."^[46]

In addition to the security framework itself, a key criticism has been a lack of internal analytical capability – in particular with regard to security and threat analysis.^[47] This has impacted the willingness and ability to reform the security framework, despite this being key to any broader reform of the humanitarian response. According to key informants, security officers, UNDSS, and aid workers still do not have a good understanding of risk and are therefore unable to effectively put in place appropriate mitigation measures to enable presence and response.^[48] Information from UNDSS continues to be vague, overblown, and with unclear sourcing, presumably to limit exposure, and fails to meet the minimum standards of their mandate to enable the work of the UN system.^[49]

[38] Lewis Sida et al, "Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis," pp. 90-91, 105, 122.

[39] Ibid., p. XXI

[40] "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Response Management Response Plan," pp. 4-5.

[41] Ibid., p. 4.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] An agreement was reached that acknowledgment was no longer necessary, and that the notification of submission was enough to allow missions to move forward; "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Response Management Response Plan," p. 5.

[45] This was confirmed by all key informants and acknowledged by aid workers during the research workshop session on March 29, 2023.

[46] A senior, aid-worker, participant in the research workshop, March 29, 2023.

[47] Sarah Vuylsteke, "When Aid Goes Awry: How the International Response is Failing Yemen. To Stay and Deliver: Security," pp. 23-32.

[48] Interview with key informant #4, a protection expert, February 3, 2023; key informant #5, an international aid worker, February 9, 2023; key informant #8, a Yemen humanitarian researcher, March 15, 2023; and confirmed during the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

[49] Views expressed during the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

Access Remains Problematic

Directly linked to security, access was noted in all reports as problematic and highly restricted – particularly in areas under the control of Houthi authorities.^[50] According to key informant updates and documentation, this has not changed.^[51] Bureaucratic constraints on movement and access remain in place – both from Houthi authorities and self-imposed by internal humanitarian systems. Houthi authorities, despite being a major party to the conflict, continue to be the biggest implementer of humanitarian aid in areas under their control, and continue to control beneficiary lists.^[52] In addition, in the face of increased criminality and insecurity in some areas of southern Yemen, movement restrictions have been ramped up in places that previously saw relative ease of access.^[53]

The lack of a cohesive, systemwide access strategy was flagged as a key impediment,^[54] and as a result, the development of such a strategy was recommended, including by the IAHE.^[55] This recommendation was taken up in the management response plan,^[56] and an access strategy document was developed in January 2023.^[57] Unfortunately, the strategy fails to address key issues and resorts to a series of broad statements aligned to a rough composition of issues without any effective means of resolving problems with access.

As a starting point, there is a lack of analysis of the key access impediments which would be expected to form the basis of any strategy. The document states that “The purpose of this strategy is to guide the HCT to sustain humanitarian response efforts in line with humanitarian principles and to reinforce continued advocacy efforts with all parties to the conflict to: i. protect civilians and civilian infrastructure; ii. facilitate safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access; and iii. abide by their International Humanitarian Law obligations (IHL).”^[58] Yet civilian protection and IHL remain almost entirely unaddressed by the strategy. In addition, only one of the humanitarian principles is addressed (impartiality) – with a distinct lack of focus on independence and neutrality, whose absence remain key inhibitors to the humanitarian response. The majority of the activities proposed aim to ‘strengthen’ and ‘improve engagement,’ but without any practical guidance on how to go about this.

Other items are unclear or inappropriate. Objective 2.1 of the strategy finds that a key challenge is a “lack of collective context analysis and adjusting risks and mitigation measures according to the context.”^[59] Yet, no mention is made of how to improve mitigation measures. Similarly, objective 3.1 aims to address the challenges of “limited decentralization of stocks across

[50] Sarah Vuylsteke, “To Stay and Deliver: Sustainable Access and Redlines,” Paul Harvey et al., “Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Yemen Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid,” pp. 9-10; Lewis Sida et al., “Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis,” pp. 90-93.

[51] This was reflected by all key informants interviewed as well as during the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

[52] Views expressed by several aid workers (national and international) during the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

[53] “Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2023,” pp. 36-37; “Yemen: Access Snapshot - October to December 2022,” UNOCHA, Sana’a, January 30, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-access-snapshot-october-december-2022-31-december-2022-enar>

[54] Sarah Vuylsteke, “To Stay and Deliver: Sustainable Access and Redlines,” pp. 43-45.

[55] Ibid. p. 46.; Lewis Sida et al., “Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis,” p.125.

[56] “Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Response Management Response Plan,” p. 3.

[57] “Yemen Humanitarian Country Team – Humanitarian Access Strategy,” UNOCHA, January 10, 2023, non-public document, seen by the author on February 10, 2023.

[58] Ibid., p. 1.

[59] Ibid., p. 5.

clusters and sub-utilization of common resources; limited inclusion of local organizations and insufficient analysis of community feedback through complaints and feedback mechanisms.”^[60] One of the key activities identified to address this issue is to undertake capacity building training for local actors on IHL (humanitarian action and principles training). But, IHL does not address issues related to humanitarian action beyond its obligations within the context of conflict and belligerents and certainly does not address issues relating to decentralization, inclusion, or community feedback. It is therefore unclear how this is an appropriate activity to address the problem.^[61] One access expert who reviewed the plan stated they rated it very poorly as an actual strategy.^[62]

Due to the continued lack of improvement on security management and access, the humanitarian presence on the ground has not improved, and dialogue with communities continues to be a struggle, hampering the ability to roll out a principled response and understand local needs and ensure accountability.

Aid Still Does Not Reach Those Most in Need

Following eight years of conflict and decades of underdevelopment, needs in Yemen likely remain high. Most problems are structural and require large-scale investment, such as fixing water systems and roads. Services, including healthcare, are poor and degrading, and the economy is increasingly fragile. In this context, needs are likely widespread, and many people require some form of assistance. This was confirmed by the 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview, which found that 21.6 million people need humanitarian and protection assistance, and more than 80 percent of the country’s population struggles to access food, safe drinking water, and adequate health services.^[63] With widespread needs and limited resources, identifying those who need assistance most is a priority. In the humanitarian aid sector, targeting takes place based on certain criteria – those prioritized for assistance are usually women, children, the elderly, the disabled, members of marginalized groups, and populations most affected by conflict. Yet in Yemen, membership in any of these groups makes one more likely to be excluded from humanitarian aid.^[64] This finding has been confirmed in multiple reports, which document the exclusion of women and minority groups^[65] and question whether the response adequately includes the most vulnerable.^[66]

These findings remain current. Aid workers indicate that in many cases, assistance does not reach those most in need.^[67] Authorities continue to be involved in the identification and targeting of beneficiaries, with the Houthi-run Ministry of Education particularly identified as a problem. More recently, fraught discussions on the parameters of inclusion and vulnerability criteria have been had with authorities, especially in Houthi-controlled areas, with authorities

^[60] Ibid., p. 7.

^[61] Ibid., p. 3.

^[62] Review of the Yemen Access strategy, an access expert, May 12, 2023.

^[63] “Humanitarian Needs Overview Yemen 2023,” UNOCHA, Sana’a, December 20, 2022, pp. 4-6, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-december-2022-enar>

^[64] “For Us but Not Ours. Exclusion from Humanitarian Aid in Yemen,” Danish Refugee Council and the Protection Cluster, November 2020, (non-public report), and Marzia Montemurro and Karin Wendt, “Principled Humanitarian Programming in Yemen, A ‘Prisoner’s Dilemma?’,” p. 10.

^[65] Paul Harvey, et al., “Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Yemen Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid,” p. 11.

^[66] Lewis Sida et al., “Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis,” pp. XIV, 37-38, 42, 80, 94, 106, 121.

^[67] Interview with key informant #4, a protection expert, February 3, 2023; key informant #5, an international aid worker, February 9, 2023, and confirmed by participants in the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

attempting to influence the definition of these parameters.^[68] Aid workers indicate that normal practice continues to be to receive ready-made lists from authorities, with verification remaining problematic. Community representatives and sheikhs continue to act as gatekeepers and restrict access to whom teams can speak within their communities.^[69] As a result, the diversion of aid remains a problem.^[70] A positive sign is that at least one major UN agency is engaging in a detailed study on how aid is received and used.^[71] But many continue to focus questions around corruption and diversion. Other questions remain unasked and unanswered. Has aid become part of the problem? Is it being weaponized as part of the war economy?

Data Continues to Be a Challenge

One of the key problems within the humanitarian response has been its failure to establish a baseline and gather independent, accurate, and holistic data to help understand needs.^[72] The IAHE found that “only one collective multi-cluster assessment over the five and a half years under examination [has been carried out]... No accurate nutrition surveys for over two years. No publicly available health data. Only two reports on the collective operation since 2015.”^[73] As a result, the credibility of figures is questionable, and needs are assessed with broad estimates.^[74]

To date, this has not changed, and the humanitarian response largely continues to work on questionable and outdated data. Food security continues to be one of the largest components of the humanitarian response. Though the most recent IPC analysis has been carried out for areas under the control of the internationally recognized government, due to an impasse on the independence of the collection of food security data, this has not been done in areas under Houthi control.^[75] The quality and reliability of previous food security analyses are questionable, as has been well documented,^[76] and that used for the 2023 HNO remains so. Notably, the report notes that the “population dataset used in the 2023 Humanitarian Program Cycle (HPC) and Area Assessment dataset are based on different methodologies,” resulting in a divergence in the results of the two datasets.^[77] The last comprehensive multi-sector assessment, on which the 2023 humanitarian response plan is based, is from 2021.^[78]

A telling example was narrated by a representative of a national non-governmental organization. The representative expressed his continued confoundment on how prioritization exercises were

^[68] Views expressed by participants in the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

^[69] Ibid.

^[70] Interview with key informant #8, a Yemen humanitarian researcher, March 15, 2023.

^[71] Interview with key informant #8, a Yemen humanitarian researcher, March 15, 2023, and confirmed by participants in the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

^[72] Sarah Vuylsteke, “The Myth of Data in Yemen,” Lewis Sida et al., “Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis,” pp. 30-32, 34.

^[73] Ibid., p.34.

^[74] Sarah Vuylsteke, “The Myth of Data in Yemen,” Lewis Sida et al., “Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis,” p. 34.

^[75] Interview with key informant #1, a food security expert, January 9, 2023; key informant #8, March 15, 2023; and confirmed in the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

^[76] Sarah Vuylsteke “A Data Case Study: Famine in Yemen,”; Sarah Vuylsteke, “Flawed Data Continues to Plague Humanitarian Response in Yemen,”; Lewis Sida et al., “Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis,” pp. 70-71.; Nicholas Haan, et al., “Famine Review Committee Conclusions and Recommendations on the IPC Yemen Analysis. Summary Report,”; Nicholas Haan, et al., “Famine Review of the IPC Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition Analyses. Conclusions and Recommendations For Five Areas in Yemen (Abs, Haradh, and Midi in Hajjah Governorate, and AlHali and Al Hawak in Al Hudaydah Governorate),” and Daniel Maxwell, Peter Hailey, Lindsay Spainhour Baker, and Jeeyon Janet Kim, “Constraints and Complexities of Information and Analysis in Humanitarian Emergencies. Evidence from Yemen.”

^[77] “Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2023,” p. 11.

^[78] “Humanitarian Needs Overview Yemen 2023.”

carried out at the cluster and central levels. Due to limited resources, prioritization of districts is done to focus aid in areas considered most in need. This prioritization is done at the national level based on the analysis of data made available by the clusters. The representative indicated that in the field, it is often found that other districts surrounding the prioritized district had higher needs, indicating the questionable accuracy of analysis.^[79]

Though the issue of data is key to the humanitarian response, the aid community declined to address this deficiency in the management response plan following the IAHE. Though the aim to strengthen and improve data collection is mentioned, this is only for the sectors of food security and protection.^[80] A comprehensive plan to improve data collection to better understand and define humanitarian need in Yemen is still missing.

Humanitarian Assistance Remains the Main Source of Support

The Yemen crisis is rooted in a failure of development, which has been further exacerbated by the conflict. Any resolution to the current humanitarian situation lies in longer-term recovery and development assistance rather than consecutive short-term humanitarian interventions.^[81] Though the triple nexus^[82] has been part of humanitarian strategy in recent years, there has been little tangible evidence of concrete initiatives with positive effects.^[83] As a result, the overwhelming majority of interventions continue to be humanitarian focused, with a short-term mindset.

One result of this is that the quality and appropriateness of the assistance provided do not match beneficiary expectations, a key point of convergence among all the reports.^[84] Humanitarian aid is short term by nature, and it is questionable whether certain types of assistance – such as the distribution of temporary shelter kits and in-kind food baskets – are relevant over eight years into the response, and whether they match what people really need. The HERE-Geneva study confirmed that most of those that receive aid feel that they are not consulted, and that the assistance provided does not even begin to cover basic needs.^[85] The IAHE evaluation raised concerns that the quality of aid provided was low, after documenting instances of unacceptable standards in multiple sectors.^[86] When consulted, the overwhelming ask from Yemeni people, aid workers, donors, researchers, and others is to pivot to longer-term sustainable solutions, focusing on systemic problems and economic empowerment.^[87]

[79] Representative of a national non-governmental organization who participated in the research workshop held on March 29, 2023. This view was supported by others present in the session.

[80] "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Response Management Response Plan," pp. 4-5.

[81] Sarah Vuylsteke, "Rethinking the System. Is Humanitarian Aid What Yemen Needs the Most?" The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 29, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/reports/humanitarian-aid/15487>; Lewis Sida et al., "Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis," pp. XVI, 108-110. This was also highlighted during the research workshop held on March 29, 2023.

[82] The triple nexus is the term used to capture the interlinkages between the humanitarian, development, and peace sectors. It specifically refers to attempts in these fields to work together to more effectively meet peoples' needs, mitigate risks and vulnerabilities, and move toward sustainable peace.

[83] Sarah Vuylsteke, "Rethinking the System. Is Humanitarian Aid What Yemen Needs the Most?"; Lewis Sida et al., "Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis," pp. XVI, 108-110.

[84] "For Us but Not Ours. Exclusion from Humanitarian Aid in Yemen," Danish Refugee Council and the Protection Cluster; Sarah Vuylsteke, "When Aid Goes Awry: How the International Response is Failing Yemen. Executive Summary," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, p.8, https://sanaacenter.org/files/When_Aid_Goes_Awry_oo_Executive_Summary_en.pdf

[85] Marzia Montemurro and Karin Wendt, "Principled Humanitarian Programming in Yemen, A 'Prisoner's Dilemma?'" p. 14.

[86] Lewis Sida et al., "Interagency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Crisis," pp. xv, 45, 57, 60, 62, 72, 74, 78, 87-88, 105.

[87] This was expressed by all key informants during the interviews, as well as stated clearly by all participants in the research workshop on March 29, 2023.

In response to findings from the IAHE, the HCT committed to recommendations relating to systemic solutions, longer-term funding, and public sector strengthening, advocating with development partners such as the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).^[88] As a result, more coordinated discussions have taken place between humanitarian and development donors^[89] and some frameworks have been put in place. A new humanitarian-development coordination structure was adopted by the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) and donors in June 2022, and a development-humanitarian collaboration forum has been operational since September 2022.^[90]

Despite these newly established frameworks and forums for dialogue and cooperation, little has changed on the funding front. Humanitarian aid continues to be the largest response to the crisis, despite its inability to address the structural issues that lie at the root of many of the challenges facing the Yemeni population. Despite more coordinated conversations, and more conversations around durable solutions, development donors remain largely absent.^[91] In April 2022, a truce was announced between the warring parties which still largely holds. The truce improved the overall security environment, which could have opened opportunities for an increased humanitarian presence and created an entry point for more sustainable programming to resolve root causes. But there were no changes in the operational environment. And with no improvement in operational space or delivery, donors have failed to use the opportunity to engage in longer-term planning. Paradoxically, the truce coincided with a reduction in funding leading to a perception of a negative correlation between the truce and aid.^[92]

[88] "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Response Management Response Plan," UNOCHA, Sana'a, August 31, 2022, pp. 1-3, https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/FINAL_MRP_IAHEYemen.pdf

[89] Interview with key informant #2, a humanitarian donor, January 10, 2023; and key informant #5, an international aid worker, February 9, 2023.

[90] "Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation of the Yemen Response Management Response Plan," pp. 2-3.

[91] Interview with key informant #2, a humanitarian donor, January 10, 2023; and key informant #5, an international aid worker, February 9, 2023.

[92] Interview with key informant #5, an international aid worker, February 9, 2023.

Why Has There Been So Little Change?

Yemen continues to be one of the most challenging operating environments due to the actions of belligerents and the self-imposed restrictions from international organizations. Parties to the conflict play a large role in this challenge. But the strangled operating environment is also the responsibility of the international community. More than two years on from the Sana'a Center report, and despite some positive steps taken, recent interviews suggest that little has changed on the ground. Worryingly, instead of a reversal of many of the policies and practices that have been critiqued, there has been a duplication of bad practices in other contexts, with similar operating environments being created by the acquiescence of aid workers in for example Syria, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, without an incentive and a willingness to change systems, advocacy, and research rarely drive change. The aid community is used to being lauded for a perceived (if self-proclaimed) selflessness and is often unable to tolerate any form of honest assessment of its impact. Publicization of failures and wrong-doings rarely leads to accountability in the aid community, instead often eliciting a defensive response. One key informant aptly described it as a tortoise retreating into its shell as it is being attacked.^[93] Public recognition of problems is often only acknowledged after widespread media attention.

Ultimately, there is little incentive for change in the system. A key priority for organizations and staff is to ensure continued, and preferably increased, funding. Promotions are contingent on showcasing good performance and delivery. This hinges on the ability to convince headquarters, donors, and communities that aid delivery is effective, efficient, and of high quality. Admitting that one does not have control of aid, that there is no access, and that delivery is questionable is not an option.

Every report on the Yemen response indicates that many of the problems in the humanitarian response could be resolved through an overhaul of the security management system, which could enable a better humanitarian presence. This could lead to better acceptance and understanding, and a more independent and transparent response of better quality. Yet the security posture remains immutable, with discussions around a review of security management perhaps the most contentious issue in the response. One key informant described how an Emergency Response Coordinator in New York reportedly requested that the Yemen response stand down requests for a review so as to not rock the boat.^[94] The reluctance to change the security setup, and continued risk averseness, could be partly attributed to the kidnapping of five UN staff in southern Yemen in 2022 – including one international staff member – who currently remain in detention.^[95] Yet, in contexts considered infinitely more dangerous for aid workers, such as South Sudan, CAR, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo,^[96] security restrictions remain much lower and more flexible. Fundamentally, if the security system won't change, it is unlikely anything in the humanitarian response will change.

[93] Interview with key informant #6, international aid worker, February 21, 2023.

[94] Interview with key Informant #7, a senior humanitarian aid expert, February 17, 2023.

[95] "Five U.N. staff abducted in southern Yemen," Reuters, February 12, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/five-un-staff-abducted-southern-yemen-2022-02-12/>

[96] "Aid Worker Security Report: Figures at a glance 2022," Humanitarian Outcomes, 25 July 2022, www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/awsd_figures_2022.pdf

The practice of bunkerization, as it is entrenched in Yemen, produces an operational culture and affects how aid workers think and plan. A key phenomenon in humanitarian aid today is the outsourcing of delivery to others, often national and local organizations. These are officially referred to as implementing partners, paid and entrusted to carry out humanitarian activities on behalf of the larger and international (mainly UN - but increasingly INGO) organizations. But this outsourcing is not always to an organization that can be considered humanitarian. Increasingly, aid delivery is outsourced to private contractors^[97] or ruling authorities – as in Yemen. These parties have their own vested interests and priorities, which undermine the premise of a principled response. In addition, questions of quality and duty of care remain when outsourcing aid delivery. Often organizations contracted to deliver aid do not have the resources, training, or infrastructure to safely take on the responsibility for providing quality assistance in complex environments. In 2022, 98 percent of aid workers who died worldwide were national staff, and more than half (53 percent) were national NGO staff.^[98] Outsourcing risk to this extent, without the ability to mitigate negative consequences, is a moral failing.

The notion of interests must also be kept in mind. The United Nations is inherently a political organization with its own military and uniformed personnel.^[99] While it has a humanitarian side, it also represents development and political actors, and distinctions are often hard to draw. For example, the World Health Organization primarily works through ministries of health - and will often put this relationship ahead of humanitarian interests. The national Humanitarian Coordinator regularly doubles as the Resident Coordinator, placing two separate roles, with different objectives, under the auspices of one person. The first role reports to the Emergency Response Coordinator,^[100] while the other reports to the Deputy Secretary-General. One can assume which line holds more clout. Most heads of agencies will ensure that their relationships with line ministries are maintained, rather than taking a stand on contentious issues and potentially losing the ear of a main interlocutor. As a result, humanitarian principles and agendas are rarely prioritized, and often take a back seat.

A New Way Forward

The real question, not just in Yemen, but globally, is whether the existing humanitarian system is still fit for purpose. For years now, many have argued it is not.^[101] As conflicts and disasters have changed over the past decades the humanitarian system has not adapted. Many current crises span years if not decades, with root causes largely borne out of poor development, struggling economies, and structural degradation due to a lack of investment. Solutions to these issues are political and developmental. But in current crises, be it Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, or Somalia, – these aspects are mostly absent. And in this absence, humanitarians are increasingly asked to do more, stepping in to manage entire systems and assuming the role of political and development actors. Aid workers are not suited to this type of work, nor should they be. As one key informant put it, “It’s like having firemen running a stock exchange.”^[102]

[97] For example, Committed to Good, who act as a contractor for humanitarian positions and are often used in places such as Afghanistan and South Sudan to work on behalf of UN agencies: <https://ctg.org/>

[98] “Aid Worker Security Report, Figures at a Glance 2022,” Humanitarian Outcomes.

[99] Currently the U.N. has over 97,000 uniformed personnel, of which approximately 70,000 are military, see: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/military> Currently the U.N. has over 97,000 uniformed personnel of which approximately 70,000 are military: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/military>

[100] Currently Martin Griffiths, former UN special envoy to Yemen.

[101] Anthony Banbury, “I love the U.N., but It Is Failing,” The New York Times, March 18, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/20/opinion/sunday/i-love-the-un-but-it-is-failing.html> and; “Missions Impossible. The UN has too much on its plate,” The Economist, June 18, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/06/18/the-un-has-too-much-on-its-plate>

[102] Interview with key informant #6, an international aid worker, February 21, 2023.

Humanitarian aid needs to change, not just in Yemen but on a global scale. It needs to become smaller and more specialized. Humanitarian aid is designed to keep people alive and to reduce suffering in crises, not to resolve structural economic issues or the root causes of conflict. Ultimately, humanitarian aid should go back to the fundamental question, "Are we saving lives?" It must prioritize its focus on stopping immediate loss of life and meeting urgent needs.

Refocusing humanitarian aid will have many advantages. It will break down the massive bureaucratic systems that have grown out of the proliferation of the sector, which have slowed down response delivery and instilled a lack of adaptability. A smaller system should also allow aid workers to be better deployed, with the potential to invest more in training for work in hostile and complex environments. With increased capability should also come increased accountability.

Change in Yemen remains a long shot. At the end of the day, it will again come down to whether there is a willingness to adapt and the leadership to see that through. The diagnosis of the problems has been made. There is consensus around it. But the pathway to change remains unclear, amid fear that if one block of the current system collapses, the rest will go down with it.

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