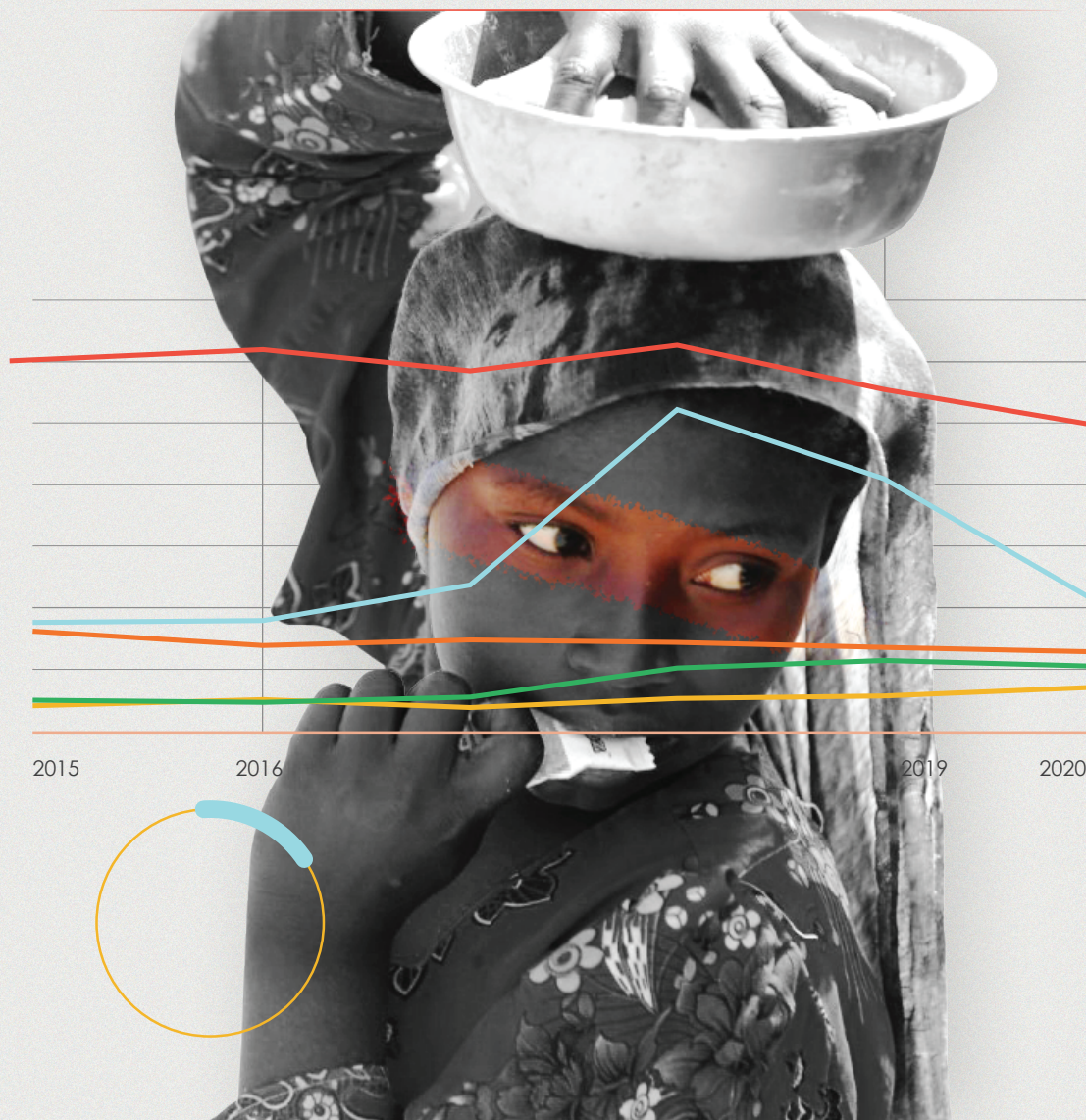# When Aid Goes Awry

How the International Humanitarian Response is Failing Yemen

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This report is part of the Sana'a Center project Monitoring Humanitarian Aid and its Micro and Macroeconomic Effects in Yemen, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. The project explores the processes and modalities used to deliver aid in Yemen, identifies mechanisms to improve their efficiency and impact, and advocates for increased transparency and efficiency in aid delivery.

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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 diplomatic, political, social, economic and security-related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian disaster. The world's biggest response. On the brink of famine for the past four years. It is neglected, grossly underfunded, and exceedingly dangerous. This is the narrative that is spun and reinforced by those who lead the international response in Yemen, both on the humanitarian and political levels, from posts in Yemen to the top humanitarian leadership in New York, Geneva and Rome. The picture painted for the public, amplified through the media and sold to donors is one of overwhelming urgent need. And with more than US$17 billion raised since 2015, it has been highly effective in terms of fundraising. It is also dangerously simplistic.

This portrayal of Yemen as a country where problems relate directly to the war and can be resolved with more money to provide more food baskets for ever more people in need is as seductively straightforward as it is inaccurate. This rarely challenged narrative persists in part because acknowledging its flaws would require admitting failure on a multi-billion-dollar scale. It would also obligate those in charge of the response to fundamentally change its entrenched internal systems, policies and attitudes, and make them accountable for effectively addressing Yemen's true and significant needs, especially those of its most vulnerable people. As foundational errors and poor decisions have accumulated, the institutional investment of the humanitarian system as a whole in upholding simplistic narratives has deepened.

Along with the absence of motivation for change, a lack of transparency and the genuine challenges found in complex and protracted conflict settings enable these narratives to continue unchecked. Informed analysis has been hard to come by in the Yemen humanitarian response, which is marred by a willingness to tolerate partial data that is often biased, usually out of date and lacks nuance, all of which has made it easy to manipulate or ignore to suit priorities. An inflexible security framework, which prevents aid workers from engaging in the fieldwork needed

to gain a true understanding of the operational environment, assess needs and determine what is required to resolve them, has allowed this flawed data to stand. Meanwhile, practices put in place to deal with operational challenges have ceded control of the response to those with vested interests in directing the aid, possibly prolonging the war as well as creating a deeply unprincipled response that has removed aid workers even farther from those they want to, and should, serve. A recent survey indicates that aid is not even reaching the most vulnerable.[1] Despite the dedication of almost unparalleled resources to Yemen, which is and has been the second best-funded response worldwide for the better part of a decade, an appropriate, sustainable or meaningful response is sorely lacking.

Well into the humanitarian response's seventh year, the reports from Yemen are bleak: Diversion, corruption, restricted access and a lack of or diminishing operational space are all well documented. Challenges and obstacles to evaluating need and response delivery in Yemen are often blamed on the restrictive operating environment and the impediments created by authorities, mainly the armed Houthi movement, Ansar Allah, which controls the more populous north. Yet, the bulk of the most fundamental problems with the Yemen response are internal. Many humanitarians have gone into Yemen and come out frustrated and angry, citing an inflexible, inefficient and inappropriate system of aid delivery. The 73 humanitarian aid workers, analysts and experts, donors, civil society representatives and others interviewed as part of this research all questioned whether humanitarian aid alone, without peace and/or directly addressing root causes of Yemen's situation, is an appropriate response for Yemen.

Yemen has struggled for decades with chronic malnutrition, poor food security and significant challenges to service delivery. Prior to the current conflict, nearly 15 million people — about half of the population — were thought to be in need of humanitarian support. The reasons were rooted in longstanding state mismanagement of resources, poor service delivery, corruption, frequent periods of conflict and deep social and political divides. The country's poor baseline meant it had been receiving development support from the international community for decades, and the 2014 outbreak of the current conflict only added economic

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[1] "For Us but Not Ours. Exclusion from Humanitarian Aid in Yemen," Danish Refugee Council and the Protection Cluster, November 2020, (non-public report).

collapse, displacement, destruction of farmland and infrastructure, and a further decline of service delivery to the woes and struggles of Yemen and its people. Yet, even though the root causes of need in Yemen far predate the current conflict, humanitarian aid — by its nature the short-term response to sudden-onset disasters — continues more than six years on to be considered the answer to Yemen's problems.

While senior humanitarian leaders describe Yemen as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, several experienced key informants cited the Yemen response as among the worst responses, if not the worst, in which they have ever worked. The majority of this criticism was levelled at the system itself, including the humanitarian leadership in-country and at headquarters. The aspects of the Yemen humanitarian response addressed in this series of reports are ones key informants have flagged as particularly problematic — those with wide-ranging consequences and that could be improved if there was a willingness to make a change.

Understanding the Numbers, Their Flaws and How They are Used

Existing data, even with all of its flaws and limitations, serves as a starting point for looking at a humanitarian response that failed to launch on solid footing in 2015 and never recovered. When viewed across global responses, a more nuanced picture of the Yemen humanitarian framework emerges than the world generally receives. Compared to other major humanitarian emergencies in countries with complex conflicts, specifically Afghanistan, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan, Yemen does not appear to merit being characterized as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Comparisons indicate:

- While in absolute numbers Yemen remains the country with the highest number of individuals in need, other countries are relatively worse off. Syria and South Sudan, for example, have about three-quarters of their populations in need, indicating these societies as a whole are in deeper crisis.

- The Yemen response has the lowest number of civilian deaths due to conflict across the comparison countries. Even taking into account civilian deaths due to the collapse of the state (e.g. health systems, water networks, etc.) Yemen does not compare to the high death tolls affecting Syria and South Sudan.

- The number of displaced people in Yemen is lower than three of the other major humanitarian disasters world-wide: Syria, the DRC and Afghanistan.

Furthermore, Yemen is often touted as "on the brink of" or "one step away from" famine. Yet when looking at the numbers, and using the definitions and internationally accepted standards relied on to make such judgements in global responses, this is simply not true in either absolute or relative terms. The DRC had the highest number of food-insecure people at the end of 2020, Syria was considered to have the highest rate of food insecurity per capita, and South Sudan the highest number of people facing catastrophic food insecurity, with at least one part of the country experiencing a famine. Yemen, on the other hand, reportedly saw a 15 percent improvement in food security from 2019 to 2020, the biggest improvement noted globally.[2] While food insecurity on any level should be dealt with, including in Yemen where the numbers merit significant concern, arguing that Yemen is the worst off or on the brink of famine is likely not true. While it is a tried and tested narrative that works for fundraising, it fails to hold up under scrutiny.

The claim that Yemen is the world's largest response does, however, hold some merit. Despite claims of neglect and inadequate funding, it is the world's second-best-funded response. Though global funding is split among approximately 35 responses, information reported on theFinancial Tracking Service of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs indicated Yemen had received about 14 percent of the global budget for humanitarian aid in recent years. Yet, despite the access to resources, Yemen has a much smaller presence of humanitarian aid workers on the ground compared to other responses and arguably less technical expertise within its cadres of staff. In addition, despite being one of the largest and most expensive responses worldwide, the Yemen

[2] "2021 Global Report on Food Crises. Joint Analysis for Better Decisions," Food Security Information Network (FSIN), May 5, 2021, p. 17, https://www.wfp.org/publications/global-report-food-crises-2021

response has consistently failed to deliver. A recent report found that the vast majority of aid recipients considered the aid they had received was inappropriate for their needs, and that many of the most vulnerable people have been excluded from access to aid, especially women, people with disabilities and those belonging to lower social classes.[3] The question then is: Why?

Flawed Data Drives the Yemen Response

Any humanitarian response should be based on a clear and accurate picture of needs, derived from needs assessments that guide the allocation of resources (type of aid as well as human and financial resources). This is crucial to an appropriate and correct rollout of the response. Yet in Yemen, this all-important first step is missing, with no needs assessment conducted at the start of the response in 2015, and, five years later, more than 60 percent of data collection unable to be completed. Even the 2021 humanitarian response plan acknowledged the lack of comprehensive countrywide data in Yemen.

What data is available has been of poor quality, often collected by authorities who are party to the conflict and have vested interests in how much aid is provided and where aid ends up. Though potentially deeply biased, this data is relied upon even when too limited or otherwise too flawed to be representative or when lacking in contextual analysis. Opacity surrounding how it was collected, by whom and its limitations hinders scrutiny of claims made based on faulty data, thereby allowing for exaggerations — whether regarding cholera or famine, the amount and types of need, security risks, etc. — that combine to create the institutionally vested narratives relied upon to fundraise. The overwhelming majority of those interviewed and surveyed for this report said they had little faith in the accuracy of the needs portrayed to exist in Yemen, often citing the lack of reliable data. Basing assessments on flawed data inevitably leads to an errant response. In this light, it is not surprising that humanitarian aid workers, whether international staff or Yemeni, expressed skepticism about the appropriateness of the response.

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[3] "For Us but Not Ours. Exclusion from Humanitarian Aid in Yemen," Danish Refugee Council and the Protection Cluster, November 2020, (non-public report).

Inflexible Security Framework Reinforces a Narrative, Inhibits Response

The data collection challenges are heavily influenced by the lack of field presence of international and independent aid workers on the ground. This lack of presence also contributes to poor quality programming and delivery, and less understanding of the operational context and environment, further resulting in poor decision-making within the response. While officially the Yemen response abides by the humanitarian concept of "to stay and deliver" even in the most challenging environments, it falls far short in practice. Key informants noted that the UN security framework as it is applied in Yemen and managed by the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) has played a significant role in limiting aid workers' ability to tend to needs where they exist.

Among other myths, Yemen is often portrayed as one of the most dangerous places for aid workers to operate. Yet, when compared to all other humanitarian contexts, Yemen does not even rank in the top five of countries where most incidents against aid workers have been recorded. Humanitarians with experience in other contexts also referred to Yemen as one of the safer countries they have worked in over the years. Yet, these other countries have more flexible and lenient security frameworks in place. While not without risk, the overarching questions are whether the security measures taken in Yemen are proportionate to the actual risks faced and whether they are geared toward enabling the response rather than avoiding risk. In Yemen, the security framework leans heavily toward bunkerization — keeping aid workers behind desks in fortified urban compounds rather than on field missions — and is described by those working within the response as archaic, bureaucratic, inflexible, disproportionate to actual risk levels and immensely inhibitive to the rollout of activities. Aid workers interviewed directly attributed the security framework applied in Yemen to the inability to roll out a quality, principled response.

The lack of analytical capacity in the country, in general and specifically in terms of security, was identified as a key challenge. What little capacity is present has been concentrated in Sana'a, resulting in analysis based largely on desk research

or on reports from entities outside the response that lack the humanitarian focus needed to make their reports useful for operational decision-making. The limited awareness of context and environment skews risk analysis, which some key informants said also has been manipulated to serve the interests of those who prefer to prioritize security over aid delivery. Disproportionate and inappropriate mitigating measures have been imposed based on these faulty perceptions, inhibiting access and the presence of aid workers to areas in need.

Ways in which the security framework and standard operating procedures inhibit response include:

- Imposing and maintaining staff ceilings, in large part because of cumbersome and inflexible security regulations on accommodations. This has prevented enough skilled staff from being present in locations across the country to ensure good programming, contextual awareness and networking as well to directly provide the monitoring that is critical to ensuring accountability to the response and the population. UN field accommodation standards include blast-proof windows, armored vehicles, continuous presence of electricity, security perimeter walls, etc., which are not only expensive but also time consuming to put in place, considerably hindering any staff rollout.

- Standard operating procedures for movements significantly impede the ability to respond quickly to unfolding crises. Any movement is dependent not only on authorization from authorities on the ground, but also on clearance by UN security, in-country heads of agencies and, in certain situations deemed very high risk, their headquarters in Rome and Geneva as well as clearance from New York. The standard operating procedures for movements, staff presence in the field and the paperwork required were noted among the biggest bureaucratic impediments to the response.

- Despite clear guidance that armed escorts should only be used as a means of last resort, UNDSS has ensured that their use is standard protocol for movements across the country, particularly in the south. This has imposed additional bureaucratic hurdles and has compromised the neutrality of aid workers through association with the warring parties – who provide the escorts – potentially putting response staff more at risk.

- Requirements for deconfliction with the Saudi-led military coalition have been turned into a de facto block on humanitarian movements, one that is facilitated by the coalition and UNDSS. Significant lead time is needed to organize movements and response because of the bureaucracy involved in deconfliction, which coordinates humanitarian movements with military actors to ensure safe passage for aid workers and supplies. The amount of information required to be passed to the coalition can be considered excessive for deconfliction purposes, and it essentially imposes an unwarranted obligation on the response to prove its humanitarian nature.

- An institutional unwillingness from operational staff, the in-country leadership and leaders at headquarters levels for change has led to inefficiency and inflexibility in a system that is resilient to any effort to push a more streamlined and effective response.

Fundamentally, the lack of a proper operational culture in Yemen and the lack of an enabling security framework has led to a slow and patchwork response of poor quality with almost no accountability. Instead of focusing on tried-and-tested strategies, such as gaining acceptance through presence, providing a quality response and building trust, the response has limited itself to protective measures that have only increased the distance between the population and the response, with fundamental, long-term negative consequences for risk and security.

Defining 'Hard to Reach' as Impossible to Access

The lack of an enabling security framework has also influenced access — or the absence of it — throughout the country. Sustainable access to populations in need is essential to delivering aid, but is lacking in Yemen. Though inaccessibility is overwhelmingly attributed to restrictions imposed by authorities and their operational interference, this focus of blame neglects the responsibility of the humanitarian response to ensure a conducive operating environment and clear redlines.

Throughout the response, the humanitarian community has diminished its own operational environment by putting in place and maintaining bad practices that directly affect access. The response has allowed, and continues to allow, unacceptable behavior from, primarily, Houthi authorities, such as detention of staff, restrictions on movements, refusals to permit independent assessments and response, diversion and operational interference. Moreover, it continues to use authorities who are a party to the conflict to directly implement humanitarian aid. Using entities that created the problem to fix it does not provide incentive for change, and in the long run has only decreased direct access to populations. The unwillingness and inability to draw and enforce redlines surrounding such issues has only emboldened authorities who continue to insert obstacles to aid delivery. Without boundaries and a willingness to apply consequences for unacceptable constraints and behavior, the operating environment and access can only be expected to continue to deteriorate.

When the focus is on noting access impediments rather than fixing them, access begins to become a bystander activity rather than a core responsibility. Despite the complexity of the operating environment in Yemen, there is no, and never has been any, systemwide operational access strategy. This means that beyond tracking access impediments, there is little impetus or push for solutions and change. The problem starts with the most basic definitions. According to the UN, nearly 80 percent of the population in need of humanitarian assistance is hard to reach.[4] But what this means in practice is unclear. It is often also interpreted

[4] "Global Humanitarian Overview 2021. Yemen," UNOCHA, December 1, 2020, p. 112, https://gho.unocha.org/yemen

as impossible to reach, which inherently discourages and disincentivizes any attempts for access. Yet, as many aid workers said, the majority of Yemen is reachable if a little effort is put in.

Beyond a more nuanced picture of access in Yemen and a strategy to tackle the impediments, the Yemen response to date has failed to properly map out and understand local actors, their networks and how to negotiate with those who hold power. As a result, most negotiations take place at the central level with a handful of interlocutors, leading to frequent deadlocks and no alternative contacts to leverage. This lack of analysis, engagement and mapping, heavily influenced by the security framework in place, has affected and slowed the establishment of a decentralized response. Aid workers' lack of engagement with interlocutors on the ground — people who are important to know when access is needed to roll out a response — has only reinforced the tendency to operate from a distance. Aid workers remain centralized in Sana'a and Aden, impacting response time to events on the ground as well as monitoring and accountability. This problem is compounded by a dysfunctional coordination system that is unlikely to be the best approach for Yemen. Like everything else, coordination is centrally based within the cluster system, heavily dependent on those sitting in Sana'a for decision making, allocation of resources and response. As a significant portion of the country remains out of reach from Sana'a, key informants suggested alternatives were needed — in particular, an area-based approach that could be more effective because it would coordinate at a local level and horizontally rather than vertically.

Despite recommendations and calls for more decentralization since the start of the response to improve presence, access and implementation, it has only been since 2021 as the response was entering its seventh year, that some potentially substantive steps have been taken to implement and staff more sub-offices. There is a risk that these efforts, like other elements of the response, will be undercut by the challenges of the existing security framework and the well-entrenched mentality that centralizes decision-making for all of Yemen in Sana'a. A significant shift in mindset as well as policies will be required if these hubs are to be empowered with the requisite resources (notably staffing), responsibilities and authority to improve the response.

From Fundamentally Flawed to Uniquely Unprincipled

The result of what has been discussed above, as is laid out throughout this series of reports, is a deeply unprincipled response that is increasingly seeing its operating space and ability diminish in the face of continued compromises. By ceding control of the aid process to warring parties, from the establishment of needs to the implementation of the response, and directly funding them with humanitarian aid money, the response has undermined its own independence and neutrality. Without a presence to ensure adequate monitoring, the response also has effectively lost its ability to uphold accountability, to both aid recipients and donors. This leads to the uncomfortable question of which consequences are related to these choices. The deeply institutionalized control of warring parties over aid resources and allocation opens opportunities for aid to be manipulated to further war efforts, which directly contravenes the objective of aid, to relieve suffering, and the concept of "first do no harm." To what extent the response may have perpetuated suffering requires further research.

In Yemen, aid is used for political gain by a broad range of actors. Not only is it vital for authorities inside Yemen, it has also been used in the regional and international political spheres for various reasons. Humanitarian aid, for example, has been used for years to try to show achievement in the ailing political process run by the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen (OSESGY). This close intertwinement of politics and aid has come at a cost to the humanitarian response; both international and Yemeni aid workers perceived the response as having compromised its neutrality and independence. At times, the consequences have been severe, such as in the pressure applied to provide large amounts of food aid to Durayhimi city in 2019, where the aid primarily benefited Houthi fighters. On the political front, the melding of political and humanitarian hasn't always paid off; the OSESGY's most recent peace proposal has been held up in part over the humanitarian aspects that were woven into it as incentives. Key donors to the response also use humanitarian aid for political gain. The bulk of the response thus far has been paid for by regional powers that have been major players in the fighting as well as their international backers, which have

vested interests of their own. The top four major funders through most of the Yemen response — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the US and the UK — are also those that aided the continuation of the war in Yemen through direct support to a party to the conflict and through arms sales. All have non-humanitarian interests in Yemen. While a few key informants defended accepting money from parties to the conflict, more than five times as many raised the issue in a negative light, as damaging to humanitarian principles.

A principled response is the fundamental basis for establishing an operating environment that is conducive to an effective response. Compromises are possible, but only as a last resort, over a short period of time and with a clear exit strategy. In the seventh year of the response, compromises are the norm rather than the exception in Yemen. And rather than improving access to populations in need and ensuring the delivery of aid, compromise has only led to diminished access, (unintended) support to continue the war, and possibly even a prolongation rather than alleviation of suffering.

All of the above have led to an appalling perception of humanitarian aid in Yemen. None of 33 Yemenis, including aid workers and community activists, interviewed for this report expressed a positive view of the response. In addition to perceiving the response as unprincipled, they described it as corrupt, out for personal or institutional gain, of poor quality, inappropriate and generally failing to understand Yemen and its needs. Non-Yemeni aid workers, to a large extent, shared similar opinions, rating the Yemen response as among the worst and least effective responses in which they had worked.

Nature of the Aid Can Change, but Systemic Flaws Still Need Fixing

Since its start in 2015, the humanitarian response in Yemen has not conformed to typical models. Heavy institutional support rather than direct implementation and a focus on service continuation rather than emergency modalities imply a more hybrid model than a traditional aid response. This is backed up by looking at how funding has been allotted, with more than 25 percent of the response's funding from 2015-2019 dedicated to development activities.[5] So is the response in Yemen even humanitarian, and should it be? The humanitarian situation in Yemen is not due to conflict alone. The war has exacerbated pre-existing conditions that long kept Yemen near the bottom of global development indicators, and it has created some new hardships. But humanitarian aid is not meant to resolve long-standing chronic and institutional problems. It is simply a lifesaving, short-term modality that will never resolve underlying causes. Yet, the narrative on Yemen remains focused on the humanitarian, and this is what brings in the money.

Recently, attempts have been made to bring in a new approach, the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (or triple nexus). This approach recognizes that modern crises have increasingly become protracted conflicts requiring more than one approach. It attempts to coordinate a comprehensive and cohesive approach among three different pillars to design better solutions. While not a new concept, the triple nexus is logical in its premise. Yet, like similar efforts since the 1990s to change how aid is delivered, it struggles to be operationalized. Challenges around definition, operational translation, leadership, funding, institutional mindset and its effect on humanitarian principles have meant that few to no examples exist of a successful translation of the approach. This is true for Yemen as well, where discussions around the nexus started in 2018, and were formalized into the response in 2021. While it looks good on paper, translation into action has been missing and the concept remains vague. Questions surround funding, coordination and technical expertise for the different pillars and how to approach the peace side of the triangle.

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[5] "Working Together for Yemen´s Future. A Strategy for Strengthening Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) Efforts in Yemen 2020-2021. Draft," UNDP, Sana'a, November 27, 2019, internal report shared with the author in 2020, p. 1.

Another risk of the nexus approach specific to Yemen is that by its nature it conflicts with the narrative perpetuated for years, one of war plunging Yemen headlong into famine and disease, but still stoppable with more aid for quick interventions. As development funding trends indicate, it is far more difficult to sell a situation of endemic need that requires broader programs and significant direct investment in unproven (or known to be corrupt) authorities over the long term. As a result, a muddled view of the needs and solutions for Yemen is maintained to keep up funding targets while giving a nod to the precursors and drivers of need.

Even those interviewees who questioned whether the nexus approach is the correct approach agreed that humanitarian aid is not the sole, or the appropriate, modality to address needs in Yemen. Some key informants suggested a better solution would be a development-led response and, functioning independently alongside it, a smaller, faster and more flexible humanitarian response. In that model, there would be communication and coordination among the humanitarian and development efforts, but the humanitarian response could be kept isolated from political endeavors and interests.

Regardless of whether the nexus, or any other model, is adopted, the overarching question is whether a new approach would be enough to fix the Yemen response. The current modality clearly has not worked; it is based on a flimsy narrative that falls apart when examined more closely. It is deeply unprincipled, has limited access at best to the population and is contained by an inflexible, disproportionate and misguided security framework. Key informants overwhelmingly agreed that the response in Yemen needs to be fundamentally redesigned to ensure change. This would require a proper analysis of what has gone wrong and, based on a true picture of what Yemen is and what it needs, how it can be corrected. Donors' support would be crucial to the success of a new approach, both as a presence on the ground to ensure accountability and in providing more flexible financing, which is required to enable development-oriented and humanitarian aid modalities to function side by side.

Undertaking this process also would come at a cost. The internal changes to systems, staffing and operations recommended as a result of this research would be deep and be painful to implement. Abandoning a flawed response would require institutional acceptance of failure, and acknowledgement that wrong decisions have been taken consistently for more than six years. Open recognition of this would likely jeopardize funding and take a sort of courage that has not been exhibited thus far within the system. But until the highlighted issues are recognized and addressed, any new approach would be saddled with the existing shortcomings and flaws, making it just as likely to fail.

Though the efforts and investment required for this process would be intensive, the payoff would be a properly functioning response appropriate for the needs and context, one that has adapted to challenges without fundamentally undermining the very premises of aid delivery. If implemented correctly, meaning Yemenis' short-term crisis needs were being met while long-term work on root causes proceeded toward securing future stability, the Yemen response could set an example for how to deliver in the changed nature of global crises as they are experienced today.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To Senior Leaders of the Yemen Humanitarian Response:

- Acknowledge that the current humanitarian response is suboptimal for Yemen, and begin an extensive analysis with the aim of instituting a more appropriate and targeted response. A reformulation should consider root causes of the crisis and help foster a more effective humanitarian response when and where lifesaving assistance is required.

- Separate data collection and needs analysis from fundraising and agency interests to allow a more accurate representation of needs to inform the response, aid in strategic planning and programming and to restore donor faith in the response. This necessitates abandoning exaggerated or false narratives.

- Ensure humanitarian interventions when and where necessary are effective by providing the best quality data possible. To that end:

  - ☐ Openly and transparently share the potential bias, limited representivity, and methodology by which data is collected to ensure it can be interpreted correctly. If the only available data is flawed and dated, ensure its limitations are made clear and its usefulness is not overstated;

  - ☐ increase the use of alternative and innovative ways of data collection to increase understanding and help provide a clearer picture; and

  - ☐ undertake as soon as feasible a representative countrywide assessment to establish an accurate picture of the needs of the Yemeni population.

- Ensure the response understands its security environment correctly through improved context and risk analysis that will enable appropriate mitigation measures that still allow it to fulfill its duty to stay and deliver. Toward this end:

□ Overhaul the security management system in Yemen to make security protocols more transparent, flexible and efficient, removing unnecessary infringements that complicate humanitarians' ability to move throughout the operating arena;

□ put in place a team of access and security staff tasked with enabling efficient staff movements and aid delivery (such as the Mosul model); and

□ overhaul the deconfliction mechanism in Yemen to create a simple, efficient and effective system that enables the free movement of aid workers and aid. In so doing:

– Return to the premise that notification of a movement is sufficient without subsequent acknowledgement or permission from the Saudi-led coalition, thereby ensuring the Evacuation and Humanitarian Operations Committee (EHOC) cannot use the deconfliction system to block aid for its own interests;

– reduce the information passed to EHOC to ease the data load, ensure shared data cannot be used for other purposes and to end any notion that aid delivery intentions must be justified to warring parties;

– fully review all permanently deconflicted sites to ensure their humanitarian nature and reduce the list to essential sites only; and

– stop requiring proof of deconfliction to authorize UN staff movements.

● Stop using parties to the conflict or their civilian entities as implementing partners for humanitarian assistance.

● Stop funding and providing material support, either directly or through humanitarian assistance, to parties of the conflict.

● Develop and support a baseline for the humanitarian response itself that clearly sets out operating principles, thresholds, redlines and consequences for violations. Only authorize compromises under the principle of last resort, and ensure adherence by the whole humanitarian community through reporting requirements and a compliance mechanism.

● Make clearly defined redlines for the response as a whole known to the authorities on the ground, along with the consequences for crossing them. Consequences for acting outside of reasonable, globally accepted standards (on interference, manipulation, diversion, etc.) may include, for example,

withholding institutional support from the authorities, suspending aid temporarily in areas where breaches have occurred and communicating the breaches to the public and donors.

- Act as one body, showing solidarity and cohesion to external parties, ensuring no organization acts on its own to undermine joint positioning and negotiations.

- Prioritize the establishment of a system-wide access strategy that is developed by people with expertise in access strategies and those with sound operational experience.

- Undertake a full stakeholder and network analysis of authorities and groups in Yemen to identify a broader network of actors with whom to advocate for and negotiate with on key humanitarian issues.

- Prioritize support for operational access over reporting of access impediments; and institute clear guidance on appropriate behavior for humanitarian actors. Adherence by all organizations should be monitored by UNOCHA.

- Take steps toward changing the operational culture and stepping outside of the current lethargic manner of operating by shifting staff into the field and ensuring objectives and goals focus on improving aid delivery rather than reporting. This can be aided by hiring operational staff with a proven track record of technical proficiency in complex environments.

- Differentiate between areas under the control of Houthi authorities and those under the internationally recognized Yemeni government, and take advantage of the better operational space and access in southern areas to mount a quality and effective response that will make a sustainable difference for many people.

- Initiate a transparent analysis of how the aid sector has contributed to the war economy in Yemen, and use it to inform any future design of the response in Yemen.

● Reframe the debate and foundation of support to Yemen with a clear and consistent message that Yemen's problems cannot be resolved purely by humanitarian aid.

● On the basis of sound analysis, undertake a realistic assessment of which needs in Yemen are humanitarian and which are development-oriented. Evaluate whether the triple-nexus approach is an appropriate model for Yemen, and be open to the possibilities that it may not be fully applicable or that separate responses may be required to appropriately address humanitarian and development needs.

● Switch the vast majority of support to official development modalities; implement proper recovery and development programs where possible; and bring in staff with appropriate expertise and skill sets to ensure the proper design and implementation of these development-oriented programs and activities. Aid workers should not, for example, be carrying out development activities.

● Protect the humanitarian response from being instrumentalized and used for political processes such as the Stockholm Agreement and the Joint Declaration pursued by the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen.

To All Humanitarian Sector Actors within the Yemen Response:

- Increase aid workers' field presence outside of Sana'a to inform a better understanding of needs and the operational environment as well as of the drivers and contributing factors to the needs of affected populations.

- Do not allow an inability to roll out improved data collection in all parts of the country to hamper doing so where possible, and avoid reliance on information provided by actors with vested interests in geographical allocation, type of response and inclusion of certain segments of society.

- Take a more nuanced approach when considering and establishing the needs of the Yemeni population. In particular:
  - Analyze data collected within context and environment to correctly understand root causes and indicate an appropriate response;
  - ensure any reference to the term "in need" accurately reflects the form of need to ensure appropriate response; and
  - involve local communities in needs assessments and program design.

- Data reflective of the situation on the ground should be used to enable analysis that will better inform access decision-making. In particular, the hard-to-reach classification should be revised to be based on solid data rather than subjective perceptions emanating from focus group discussions.

- Ensure aid provided is appropriate for the needs (for example, food aid is not always the correct form of aid to address food insecurity), and is not chosen purely based on ease of distribution or donor preferences.

- Ensure resources are spent wisely by focusing on activities that create a substantive, positive and lasting impact on communities in need, rather than continuing those offering wide but superficial coverage.

- Be more open and transparent about indicators and figures used to validate the response, so donors and others are informed of actual and realistic achievements. The amount of aid moved across the country, for example, is not equivalent to the beneficiaries reached.

- Ensure neutral and independent verification of the beneficiary selection process by providing organizational monitors and prohibiting subcontracting of the process to a party to the conflict with a vested interest in where aid ends up.

- Make use of aid workers on the ground, including international staff, to undertake post-distribution monitoring instead of relying on local third party monitors.

- Establish proper compliance mechanisms where reports of aid misuse are followed up on and addressed in a comprehensive and timely manner.

- Put in place measures to transparently, honestly and constantly communicate with authorities, communities and beneficiaries on the modalities of aid, inclusion criteria and challenges faced to ensure understanding and mitigate frustration and negative perceptions.

- Prioritize solidarity within the humanitarian sector to ensure redlines are upheld and one organization cannot undermine another.

- Improve the decision-making process when faced with operational difficulties that challenge principled action. This will require developing frameworks and guidance around ethical decision-making, providing consistent staff training, and ensuring continuous external communication to all stakeholders on the principles of humanitarian aid, redlines and unacceptable conditions.

To the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS):

- Undertake an immediate review of bureaucratic impediments resulting from the UN security management system and review the burden of the bureaucratic procedures on the response.

- Ensure UNDSS becomes a field-focused entity and decentralizes by taking staff members out of Sana'a and positioning them nationwide to inform security and risk analysis. More staff should be based in the field than in Sana'a.

- Reform the application of security risk management (SRM) procedures to ensure context and threat analysis are fact-based and adhere to standard operating procedures and international standards. Analysis should focus on the impact of the work and mandate of UN personnel rather than generalized broad analysis. To this end:

  - Ensure at least one security analyst is based in each hub as well as in Sana'a and Aden to enable quality local security and risk analysis;

  - be proactive in moving outside compounds and throughout the country to better understand context, risk and vulnerability;

  - consider hiring experts in fields such as economics, anthropology, conflict, who could develop a proper baseline of understanding of the operational (security) environment and ensure current analysis is readily available to inform decision-makers; and

  - ensure analysis is based on credible facts that have been triangulated or verified to avoid data manipulation in favor of maintaining the status quo.

- Be transparent with the humanitarian community about how risk is analyzed and why decisions related to risk and mitigation are taken.

- Prioritize skills developed through previous experience enabling humanitarian programming when hiring security officers rather than defaulting to candidates from law enforcement, military or private security backgrounds, where more rigid deterrent approaches are the norm.

- Streamline security procedures to promote efficiency. To this end: Assign specific staff to process mission requests; prioritize humanitarian movements; and review security requirements for field locations to ensure they are made more flexible to facilitate and speed up the emerging process of operationalizing field hubs.

- Remove current requirements on the use of armed escorts and follow Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidance so that armed escorts are only used in exceptional circumstances under a principle of last resort.

- Invest in the pillar of acceptance rather than a protective and bunkerized approach. This can be done by ensuring the acceptance concept is clearly emphasized in all steps of the SRM process and by facilitating staff work in the field, including accompanying field missions and allowing for staff engagement with community members.

To Donors:

- Fund independent field reviews of aid efficiency. Without a physical presence of donors in Yemen, there is no independent mechanism to verify information from the humanitarian sector. This is necessary to retain the integrity of the response.

  - ☐ Advocate at the highest levels for an independent and immediate review of how enabling the UN security management system is in Yemen.

- Be exacting in questioning the humanitarian leadership regarding how it frames the humanitarian narrative, and demand specific examples and high-quality data substantiation before accepting the veracity of statements about the response and its needs.

- Fund analysis positions for UNDSS and the wider humanitarian system with the requirement they are dispersed throughout the country.

- Stop funding organizations that use parties to the conflict as implementing partners.

- Introduce funding consequences for organizations that do not uphold redlines.

- Demand transparency and proper accounting from the UN and humanitarian organizations. For example:

  - ☐ Stop allowing the use of humanitarian funding for activities that directly support institutions and parties to the conflict, including paying the salaries of officials at the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (SCMCHA) and others in authoritative political positions.

- Respect the neutrality of the humanitarian response, and don't use it to further political or foreign policy goals. To enable a clear divide between humanitarian and political initiatives:

  - ☐ End the practice of earmarking or providing conditional funding based on the donor government's interests and foreign policy goals;

  - ☐ allow independent and impartial aid organizations to decide on needs and the resources required to address them; and

□ support the humanitarian community when it pushes back against instrumentalization from the political sphere.

● Build flexible modalities into funding agreements to support the temporary suspension and retargeting of aid, if necessary, to enable the humanitarian community to institute and uphold consequences for redline breaches.

● Support higher quality programming that may have a narrower geographical scope but can ensure positive lasting change over temporary, superficial coverage that does not address needs in a sustainable manner.

● Ensure funding modalities are appropriate to the response needed in Yemen. Toward this end:

□ Establish multi-year funding cycles for longer-term responses;

□ move away from humanitarian funding in situations where needs are better addressed by longer-term and development interventions; and

□ fund activities geared toward recovery and resilience with more flexibility, a broader scope and longer time frames to ensure the ability to put in place durable solutions that take time to implement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Vuylsteke worked as the Access Coordinator for the United Nations World Food Programme in Yemen from February to December in 2019. In this position, she traveled throughout the country, interacting with representatives from all sides of the conflict trying to facilitate aid delivery. Since 2015, she has worked for the United Nations and other international organizations in South Sudan, Yemen, the Central African Republic and Cameroon, and she is presently a field coordinator with Médecins Sans Frontières. Prior to 2015, Vuylsteke worked on human rights and conservation issues in Uganda, Sierra Leone and Liberia. She has an LLM in Public International Law from the University of Amsterdam, and has authored and co-authored articles and reports for various agencies on political, economic and humanitarian issues.

Author's Note:

Despite decades of international presence inside Yemen and a humanitarian response that is in its seventh year, the world's organized effort to aid Yemenis through a protracted war is seemingly operating blindly. In addition to little understanding of the country, the environment, and the security and political context, the Yemen humanitarian response is also operating without any clear understanding of needs. It is, therefore, operating without any clear understanding of how to address the problems. Considering that over US$17 billion has been spent on the humanitarian response since 2015, it is scary how little humanitarians know and understand about where we work when it comes to Yemen and why we operate how we do. The result is a response that is at best questionable.

Yemen is overwhelmingly described as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. It is also often described as the most complex, least permissive context for a humanitarian response. It is portrayed as unique, and to a certain extent this is true. Yemen is, of course, unique, and so is its humanitarian response operation. No one context or operation is identical to another. The word "unique" when applied to Yemen, though, is often used as an excuse to brush off failures or avoid dealing with challenges. Yemen is "unique", therefore we don't have to sit down and analyze why things are not working and consider a different approach. Yemen is "unique", therefore we should accept lower standards, consistent breaches of principles and a deeply compromised operational environment.

And this is where the crux of the problem lies. Because Yemen is not unique in this way; it is not the only complex, protracted conflict in which aid organizations operate. The overwhelming majority of humanitarian operations take place in sustained conflict settings with nuanced conflict and political dynamics. Many other humanitarian contexts are far more dangerous for humanitarians to operate in. Other contexts often have poorer infrastructure than Yemen, and all but one other response, that in Syria, have far fewer resources at their disposal. Yet in other contexts, the compromises, the bad practices and the failure to deliver to those in need are not accepted as they are in Yemen.

Many people will ask – and some have already asked – why I chose to write this report. People unhappy with it may question my motives and cry bias because of my own frustration during my time in Yemen. They are partially correct. I did find my experience in Yemen deeply frustrating. And I did then and do now question many aspects of the response. But this multipart report is not based on my views alone. Any findings and conclusions herein have been supported and confirmed through research and the many conversations I had during my time in Yemen and while conducting interviews in the course of my research.

I decided to write this report because deep-seated institutional challenges are preventing the Yemen response from being a good response. The institutional unwillingness to transparently and openly address these challenges is blocking solutions and improvements. As one person succinctly put it to me during an interview, "there is no success without failure. In Yemen, we are not able to admit failure, therefore we can never succeed." My hope is that bringing into the

open the challenges and failures the humanitarian community has experienced in Yemen will force a long-overdue conversation about how we can make this response better.

It is also important to note that the Yemen response illustrates many worrying global trends within the wider humanitarian architecture that challenge how we work and our ability to deliver. It is, therefore, not only in Yemen that we need to evaluate our efforts; this is a conversation that should be had on a larger scale.

While this report necessarily focuses on the negatives within the response, I also want to acknowledge that there are people who work incredibly hard every day to try and ensure the delivery of aid to those who need it. Though there were not enough of them, I had the chance to work alongside some of the best people the humanitarian sector has to offer during my time in Yemen. I had the great privilege to meet and work with some amazing Yemenis, and I managed to see large parts of a beautiful country. Unfortunately, these experiences were often drowned out and these people demotivated and exhausted by the wider and louder dysfunctional machine.

The Yemen response is not unfixable. But the many dysfunctions within it are hampering the establishment of an appropriate, principled and quality response. Getting the response where it needs to be will require work and energy, as well as support from all levels. The question that remains is whether the courage exists to do this work, expend this energy and offer this support.

METHODOLOGY

The research for this report was designed to cover the time period of the current civil war in Yemen, and the corresponding humanitarian response from 2015 through 2020. The research takes into account the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, recognizing its potential to skew the data, and updated data has been incorporated as much as possible and where relevant, up to the time of publication.

This report draws on desk research, a literature review, semi-structured interviews and time spent in the field by the author working on the response in 2019. Seventy-three interviews, as well as some follow-up interviews, were conducted from November 2020 through January 2021. The 43 key informant interviews carried out by the author included 27 humanitarian aid workers (international and Yemeni), whose experience covered all stages of the Yemen response and among whom were 15 current or former UN staff representing seven agencies and entities. Ten analysts, three donors, two independent experts and one journalist also were interviewed. Field researchers with the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies carried out an additional 30 semi-structured interviews in Yemen with a further 26 Yemeni humanitarian aid workers, including national staff for international organizations and staff of national non-governmental organizations, one representative of civil society, two representatives of community organizations and one from a community committee to also gain their perspectives on the humanitarian response in Yemen. The key informant interviews were conducted by the author in English through Zoom, Skype or WhatsApp phone calls. Interviews in Yemen were carried out in Arabic by phone in December 2020 and included closed and open-ended questions.

Interviewees were selected on the basis of their expertise and their work and presence in and/or on Yemen during the timeframe covered by the research. Initial key informants were selected by the author based on knowledge of their expertise and areas of intervention in the humanitarian response or analysis, and these were built on through identifying further key informants based on

review of the literature as well as recommendations and introductions by those initially contacted for interviews. A balanced representation of UN personnel, international non-governmental organization personnel and Yemen analysts were interviewed during the research process to ensure a wide depiction of views and insights. Additional interviews with Yemenis involved in the response by the Sana'a Center were specifically added to ensure Yemeni perspectives were taken into account in the research findings. Special effort was made to ensure representation for those working in both Houthi-controlled territory and in areas controlled by the internationally recognized Yemeni government. For specific topics (such as the famine case study) additional experts were consulted to ensure technical grounding. Participants in the Sana'a Center semi-structured interviews were selected on the basis of affiliation with preference to aid workers with Yemeni organizations, half of whom were from Houthi-controlled areas and half from government-controlled areas

Key informant interviews were semi-structured with foundation questions that were asked of all interviewees (for example, their analysis of the efficacy of the response, the evolution of the humanitarian response in Yemen, which aspects work well and which do not, what key aspects they would change to improve the response and their views on security management). These questions were complemented by others specific to the interviewee's technical and sectoral expertise. During the interviews, informants were asked to speak directly to their experiences in and/or on Yemen. Any findings from the interview process were triangulated through testing their assumptions with other interviewees, through follow-up interviews where necessary, and through literature review to ensure multi-source confirmation. As a general rule, no finding was taken into account or investigated fully unless a minimum of three key informants confirmed or brought up the issue. Where views on topics diverged, all sides have been reflected in the placing of the issue. Overall, key informants were open and willing to share information, which was facilitated through an anonymity clause.

Informants consented to participate upon confirmation that all interviews would be anonymized, and no statements would be attributed to them or be presented as a position of their organizations. For this reason, unless the identity of the organization in question was clear and already publicly known, direct references have not been made in this report to individual organizations when illustrating findings through examples.

Various means of data analysis were employed; qualitative analysis was done on the substance of the interviews by distilling key points and findings from each interview. Findings were grouped under topics (data, access, security, etc.) and coded for reference to interviews. Illustrative examples were ensured for each topic. In addition, some answers were quantified (for example, the percentage of those who feel that the security set up in Yemen is not adapted to the context) to illustrate the level of consensus on some key findings.

In addition to the interviews, an extensive literature review was conducted with desk research to further explore topics covered in this report and support the qualitative interview process. Lastly, the report builds on knowledge gained about the humanitarian response in Yemen through the author's time working within the response in 2019. Findings of the final report rested on the research conducted from November 2020 to January 2021.

Some limitations were experienced during the course of the research for this report. Not all of those invited to participate in the interview process accepted the invitation. Data in Yemen is scarce and unreliable, an issue that is addressed in one of the sections of this report, which made confirmation of findings through secondary data sources difficult. In addition, Yemen has endured conflict for much longer than the scope of this report. More could be written on humanitarian response and root causes from a historical perspective, but the choice was specifically made to focus on the current humanitarian response from 2015 onward. Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the response in Yemen, but the choice was made to exclude this factor in the research to avoid skewing the broader systemic issues that are the focus of the report. That aside, COVID-19 is a reality that continues to affect the humanitarian response in Yemen, and globally, for the foreseeable future. Acronyms

ACRONYMS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project	**AMRF**	Access Monitoring & Reporting Framework
AQAP	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	**CIMP**	Civilian Impact Monitoring Project
DFID	Department for International Development	**DO**	Designated official for security
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo	**ECHO**	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
EFSNA	Emergency Food Security and Nutrition Assessment	**EHOC**	Evacuation and Humanitarian Operations Committee
FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization	**FRC**	Famine Review Committee
FSAC	Food Security and Agriculture Cluster	**FSIN**	Food Security Information Network
FSLA	Food Security and Livelihoods Assessments	**GPC**	General People's Congress party
HAWG	Humanitarian Access Working Group	**HCT**	Humanitarian Country Team
HDPN	Humanitarian–development–peace nexus	**HFA**	Humanitarian food assistance
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview	**HRP**	Humanitarian Response Plan
HTR	Hard to reach	**IASC**	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross	**IDP**	Internally displaced person
IHL	International humanitarian law	**INGO**	International non-governmental organization
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification	**IPC TWG**	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Technical Working Group
IS	Islamic State group	**L3**	Level 3

MCLA	Multi-cluster location assessment	MoE	Ministry of Education
MoH	Ministry of Health	MSCR	Mission security clearance request
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières		National Authority for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Aid
NGO	Non-governmental Organization	NNGO	National non-governmental organization
OSESGY	Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen	RRM	Rapid response mechanism
SAM	Severe acute malnutrition	SCMCHA	Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SCSS	Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies	SFHRP	School Feeding and Humanitarian Relief Project
SMART	Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions	SMS	Security management system
SMT	Security management team	SOM	Senior Officials Meeting
SOP	Standard operating procedure	SRM	Security risk management
STC	Southern Transitional Council	TPM	Third-party monitoring
UAE	United Arab Emirates	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDSS	United Nations Department of Safety and Security	UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service

UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund	**UNMHA**	United Nations Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs	**UNSMS**	United Nations Security Management System
USAID	United States Agency for International Development	**WASH**	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme	**WHO**	World Health Organization
YHF	Yemen Humanitarian Fund		

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