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BRIEF

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The Role of Civil Society in Peacebuilding in Yemen

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Introduction

This Brief focuses on the contributions of Yemeni civil society to six core areas central to supporting sustainable peace: the economy, politics, culture and society, security and justice, education, and the environment. It is part of a wider project that encourages Yemeni-international research cooperation on peace requirements in Yemen, which CARPO is implementing on behalf of the Deutsche

Executive Summary

Yemeni civil society organizations (CSOs) are seeking to fill an important gap created by the collapse of Yemeni state institutions and the financial shift of international organizations to concentrate on humanitarian emergency relief. The current political and economic conditions make it difficult for CSOs to continue functioning on an effective level, while a lack of human and organizational capacity are hampering project results. CSOs generally have only limited impact, causing little to no structural change despite their, at times, decades-long engagement. Nevertheless, Yemeni CSOs do contribute to peace requirements in various sectors and remain an important actor in the Yemeni civic sphere. In a context in which conflict parties are not willing to compromise and media contributes to escalating violence, actors that uphold the principles of human rights, political participation and peacebuilding are most likely to be found in the realm of civil society. In order for civil society to be able to contribute to future reconstruction efforts, now is the time for international organizations to support CSOs and invest seriously into their human and organizational capacity building. This can be done through material, financial, and capacity development support.

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Civil society is a broad and ambiguous concept that can be defined in manifold ways.² In the *Partnership Framework Between the Yemeni Government and Yemeni Civil Society Organizations*, adopted by the Yemeni cabinet in September 2013, civil society organizations (CSOs) are understood as “established or being established by citizens in accordance to existing laws, and aim at contributing to public good and conveying concerns and values of their communities based on ethical, cultural, political, and religious or charity considerations; and do not seek profit nor acquire political power.”³ We follow this definition in this Brief. To understand the contributions of Yemeni civil society to the above-mentioned sectors with the goal of achieving sustainable peace, we conducted focus groups discussions and interviews with officially registered civil society organizations and their activists, as well as more informal groups.⁴

A Short History of Civil Society in Yemen

Yemen’s civil society took different shapes and roles in the twentieth century, according to local, national and international circumstances and political, legal, economic and institutional conditions.⁵ The first CSOs in Yemen emerged in opposition to British colonial rule in the South and to the rule of Imamate in the North. In total, there were about 47 CSOs established before the late 1960s.⁶ The republican state-building phase in South and North Yemen of the 1970s formed two independent states with completely different political and economic systems, and two contrasting visions of modernity and development. By 1989, a total of 424 CSOs had been established.⁷ Most of them aimed at contributing to social and economic development.

On 22 May 1990, South and North Yemen united as the Republic of Yemen. The Constitution of 1991, with amendments in 2001, guarantees the state’s commitment to parliamentary democracy, political pluralism and a

¹ For a more complete discussion of the six areas and their centrality for sustainable peacebuilding in Yemen, see the CARPO Report 06 *Understanding Peace Requirements in Yemen: Needs and Roles for Civil Society, Women, Youth, the Media and the Private Sector*, in which Mareike Transfeld and Marie-Christine Heinze outline the conceptual framework for this paper. The Report, which was published in March 2019, is available at https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/carpo_policy_report_06_2019.pdf (22.10.2019).

² See, for example, the definition of civil society in: *ibid.*, p. 16.

³ MOPIC (2013): *Partnership Framework between the Government of Yemen and Civil Society Organizations*, Yemen’s Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, Sana’a, p. 3. Available at https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Event/MNA/yemen_cso/english/Yemen_CSO_Partnership_Framework_GoY_CSO_ENG.pdf (10.10.2019).

⁴ Fieldwork was implemented between 20 August and 20 September 2019, in Sana’a, Aden, Ta’iz and Shabwa. The field work team conducted four focus group discussions with a total of 28 (12 females and 16 males) CSO representatives and eight key informant interviews.

⁵ Sheila Carapico (1998): *Civil Society in Yemen. The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia*, Cambridge. Sheila Carapico (2006): ‘Civil society and civil activism in Yemen’, in Sarah Ben Nefissa, Maggy Grabundzija and Jean Lambert (eds.): *Civil Society, Associations and Local Governance in Yemen*, CEFAS, Sana’a, p. 202.

⁶ MOPIC (2013), p. 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*

multi-party system.⁸ Articles 42 and 58 of the Constitution protect the freedoms of expression, association, opinion and participation in public life. This legal framework, in combination with the proliferation of a capitalist-patterned economy, a competitive political setting and the growth of a vibrant and well-educated middle class, provided space for more formal and specialized CSOs in the 1990s. A transformation of traditional civil society (*mujtama al-ahli*) to more modern forms of civil society (*al-mujtama al-madani*) accelerated. The 2001 Law of Associations and Foundations and its 2004 bylaw⁹ reiterated the government's commitment to political pluralism, but also allowed room for considerable government monitoring and control of CSO activities. On the one hand, the 2001 Law has been considered the most enabling law governing civil society organizations in the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁰ On the other hand, it relegated civil society to an insignificant level of development as it mainly relied on government patronage.¹¹ Also, the increasing number of Yemeni NGOs has not necessarily resulted in the empowerment of independent civil society, free from governmental, tribal, religious and political influence and patronage.

Yemen's 2011 uprising opened new spaces for the promotion of civic activism in Yemen's political sphere. Revolutionary activists not only demanded democracy, justice and dignity for women and men, but they were also determined to benefit as civil society organizations from the opportunities offered by the transitional process initiated by the GCC-Initiative. Not only did the number of active organizations increase, but CSOs diversified regarding their fields of activity and were now increasingly viewed by society and politicians alike as credible social actors. Between 2011 and 2016, between 12,000 and 15,000 organizations operated either with or without formal registration in various sectors.¹² A focus group participant confirmed that the 2011 protests accelerated the establishment of CSOs as legal entities, given that informal youth initiatives from the protest squares were transitioned into a legal framework: "Young people desire to contribute to society and achieve positive change in local communities. This encourages young people to create CSOs." With this development came a diversification of CSO work. Before 2011, the overwhelming majority of CSOs worked in charity. From 2011 onwards, the number of organizations working in other fields increased: including the promotion

8 *Yemen's Constitution of 1991 with Amendments through 2001*. Available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Yemen_2001.pdf (20.11.2019).

9 *Executive Bylaw for Law No. 1 for the Year 2001 Concerning Associations and Foundations*. Available at https://www.icnl.org/research/library/yemen_reg-1-2001-en/ (20.11.2019).

10 ICNL (2017): *Civic Freedom Monitor: Yemen*, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. Available at <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/yemen.html> (10.10.2019).

11 Carapico (1998); Sarah Phillips (2007): *Evaluating Political Reform in Yemen*, Carnegie Papers – Middle East Series 80, p. 8. Available at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp_80_phillips_yemen_final.pdf (10.10.2019).

12 MOPIC (2013), p. 30; ICNL (2017).

of women's and human rights;¹³ youth initiatives;¹⁴ freedom of press and expression;¹⁵ and other development, democracy and social-related issues.¹⁶

CSOs sought to enhance their legitimacy through taking a prominent role in the protests of 2011 and the subsequent transitional process. And indeed, the wider society recognized their importance, even as CSOs became increasingly inclusive engaging youth, women and other marginalized groups. Likewise, against the backdrop of a legitimacy deficit and gaps in service delivery, the transitional government under President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi enhanced official recognition of the role of CSOs in development and state-building. During the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which was mandated by the GCC-Initiative and implemented 2013/14, civil society representatives were included as delegates, while other CSOs shaped the consultative process in other roles. Regardless of the improved conditions, however, the government did little to actively increase the participation of civil society; at the same time, CSOs suffered from a lack of funding and skills, and were often dependent on foreign donors who thus shaped their agendas.

The Role of Civil Society During the Conflict

In March 2015 a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen, six months after armed Houthis derailed the transition process and violently took control of the capital Sana'a in September 2014. The increase of violence and the onset of the war in 2014/15 have had devastating effects on civil society. Not only did legal frameworks change, but areas of activities shifted. It became increasingly difficult for CSOs to have an impact on politics. International funds shifted to the humanitarian sector. This, in combination with CSOs' perception of humanitarian work as less risky in the new political context, caused many CSOs to shift to humanitarian aid. At the same time, the capacity of CSOs to operate in affected areas was limited due to both the violence and the absence of necessary skills and capacity-building opportunities.

As a result of the war, the country split into two main camps politically: the internationally-recognized government under Hadi, and the Houthis (Ansar Allah). The former is further split into various areas of influence, such as the areas under influence of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) or under the

13 Wameedh Shakir (2015): *Women and Peacemaking in Yemen. Mapping the Realities*, CMI. Available at http://cmi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Women_and_Peacemaking_in_Yemen_EN.pdf (30.12.2018). Ewa K. Strzelecka (2018): 'A political culture of feminist resistance. Exploring women's agency and gender dynamics in Yemen's uprising (2011-15)', in: Marie-Christine Heinze (ed.): *Yemen and the Search for Stability. Power, Politics and Society after the Arab Spring*, London, pp. 47-70.

14 Moosa Elayah (2018): *Civil Society Organizations and Peacebuilding after Yemen's Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh*, GPBC/CIDIN/ Radboud University, Sana'a, p. 2. Available at <https://bit.ly/33gl60R> (10.10.2019).

15 Nadia al-Sakkaf (2016): *The Tragedy of Yemen's Civil Society*, The Washington Institute. Available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-tragedy-of-yemens-civil-society> (15.04.2020).

16 ICNL (2017): *Civic Freedom Monitor: Yemen*, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. Available at <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/yemen.html> (10.10.2019).

Yemeni Congregation for Reform (al-Islah Party). Although there had already been regional differences in CSO activity in terms of a concentration in the centers (Sana'a, Aden, Ta'iz), the division of the country in the context of the war has created different legal, security and social conditions for CSOs.

In the northwestern areas, held by the Houthis, the space for civil society has become the most restricted in the whole country. The Houthi camp had quickly moved to repress civil society activity and shut down organizations affiliated with the al-Islah Party and those receiving Western funding. Many CSO activists were arrested or forcibly disappeared. In November 2017, the Houthis, in contradiction to the Law of Associations, restricted the space for civil society by changing regulations through existing state institutions, specifically the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC). In November 2017, the Houthi de-facto authorities established the so-called National Authority for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (NAMCHA). The new institution was charged with registering, reviewing and evaluating the work of CSOs. Making it even more difficult for CSOs to register or renew their registration, NAMCHA froze the bank accounts of CSOs and forced organizations to include Houthi-loyalists within their ranks. Additionally, CSOs were now required permission to carry out specific activities. This particularly affected organizations with a focus on gender equality and women's rights. The Yemeni Women's Union, for instance, was forced to change names and contents of projects that had a focus on women empowerment and family planning. In November 2019, NAMCHA was replaced by the Supreme Council

for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (SCMCHA). Some CSOs have had no other option but to cooperate with the de facto authorities, either through local mediators or directly, in order to obtain licenses or reach affected communities. Organizations banned by NAMCHA / SCMCHA continued their operations outside of Houthi-held areas.

In areas that are nominally under control of the internationally-recognized government, civil society has had a greater degree of freedom. However, they face bureaucratic confusion and lengthy registration and licensing procedures at the MoSAL and MoPIC, in addition to repressive interference by various de facto authorities in the several areas. For example, in the southern areas, the CSOs' applications submitted to the MoSAL and MoPIC have been additionally reviewed by the *Security Belt*, a paramilitary army loyal to the STC. CSOs interviewed in Aden reported that their project requests were rejected by Southern Transitional Council, as they allegedly did not represent the STC's political interests or for being funded by countries hostile to the STC. The president of al-Amal Association, which has run a school supplies distribution program in Aden, Lahij and Abyan since 1995, was arrested by the Security Belt for suspicion of collaboration with the enemy via received funding from Qatar Charity. Civil society organizations in Hadhramawt and Marib governorates are less affected by the security situation; in fact, they enjoy a great deal of freedom of movement and cooperation from the local authorities. In Hadhramawt, civil society organizations rely on local private sector funding more than in any other governorate. CSOs here also enjoy relatively greater access to policy-making processes

and cooperation with government agencies. Although CSOs in Ta'iz enjoy relative freedom, are well-organized and have access to political figures, their work is subjected to interference by various armed groups. For example, an informal resistance group seized and occupied the al-Saeed Foundation for Science and Culture building.

Contributions from Civil Society to Peace Requirements in Yemen

Despite the decreasing civic spaces, Yemeni CSOs continue to be active and contribute to peace requirements. Most importantly, CSOs are one of the very few actors that model the principles of community welfare, human rights, or equality in the various sectors that are essential to achieve sustainable peace. Yet, contributions of CSOs remain limited in scope, given their limitations in mobility, political restrictions and capacity gaps.

Economy

Yemeni CSOs, in contrast to government agencies or the media, as has also been highlighted by the 'Media Team' in this project,¹⁷ have played a significant role in advancing the debate on the state of Yemen's economy. These organizations fill significant gaps in service delivery, job creation and economic empowerment. While the 2011 protests and the 2012 transitional period created an opportunity for CSOs to envision broader

economic reforms,¹⁸ the conflict forced a shift of focus for CSOs working on economic issues, from the national to the local level, to reach those in most immediate need. Against the backdrop of a poor educational system and a lack of Yemeni economic experts, published knowledge on the Yemeni economy is rare; and military and strategic developments overshadow economic developments.

Nevertheless, Yemeni CSOs, in cooperation with international partners, have published in-depth analyses, raised awareness of complex economic issues, as well as put the Yemeni economy on the agenda of international development and policy practitioners. Initiatives include, for example, the 'Development Champions', a group of experts supported by two Yemeni CSOs, DeepRoot Consulting and Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, and their international partner, CARPO. Publications coming out of this project have focused on the food crisis, the banking sector, the collapse of basic services, the role of the Yemeni private sector, and the development of human capital and the fisheries industry, amongst others.¹⁹ Since 2016, the Studies and Economic Center has also issued reports on the social and economic situation in Yemen, aiming to strengthening the role of the private sector in the post-conflict phase.

At the local level, CSOs contribute to reducing unemployment and poverty by providing direct assistance to those in need, supplying services at low cost, and enabling economic

¹⁷ Fatima Saleh, Scott Preston and Mareike Transfeld (17.04.2020): *The Role of Media in Peacebuilding in Yemen*, CARPO/YPC Brief 16. Available at https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/carpo_brief_16_AR.pdf (30.04.2020).

¹⁸ Economic Reform Team (2017): *رؤية إستمرار النشاط الإقتصادي و إعادة الإعمار* [Vision for the Continuation of Economic Activity and Reconstruction], Yemeni Business Club and Studies and Economic Media Center. Available at http://www.yemenief.org/Download_Center/document/doc_2023.pdf (19.10.2019).

¹⁹ All publications resulting out of this project can be accessed at <https://carpo-bonn.org/rethinking-yemens-economy/> (15.04.2020).

empowerment. The economic crisis caused by the five-year war has devastated large parts of the Yemeni population, with women and children as the most vulnerable. Several large Yemeni CSOs implement economic empowerment projects on the grassroots level with a special focus on women. The Yemeni Women's Union, for example, has implemented the 'Livelihoods and Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls' project since 2017, providing funds for small projects, material support for women affected by violence, and cash assistance to alleviate food insecurity throughout Yemen. In 2017, the Economic Information Center launched the 'I Will Work' initiative to train a group of young women in the manufacturing and marketing of accessories. The Social Development Fund, with its Yemen Loan Guarantees (YLG) and The Small and Micro Enterprise Promotion Service (SMEPS), has demonstrated extraordinary capacity to reach even remote rural areas with the goal of economic empowerment and job creation. Since 2014, SMEPS has created 173,000 jobs, mostly in the agricultural and fisheries fields.²⁰

Politics

The prominent role of civil society organizations in the 2011 uprising strengthened the negotiating role of CSOs in policymaking and government accountability during the transitional period. However, most CSOs could not maintain this position during the conflict,

given the new repressive environment, security threats, and funding shortages. Yet, CSOs remain active in the political field on various scales: on the local level, CSOs continue to advocate for policy changes and increased participation; on the national level, CSOs attempt to support and shape the UN-led peace process. An example at national level is the research and the implementation of track II talks, most often in cooperation with international partners, among them the above-mentioned 'Rethinking Yemen's Economy' initiative that brings together experts on the economy and development from across the political spectrum. As well, the Political Development Forum in Yemen has entertained a highly successful partnership with the Berghof Foundation in political track II talks.

Since 2015, five rounds of the UN-brokered peace talks have been held between the two main actors: the internationally-recognized Hadi government and the Houthis. Only four female politicians in total have been at a negotiation table: three in peace talks in Kuwait in 2016, and one in Sweden in 2018.²¹ The Houthi delegation has had no female participants. A gender quota of 30 percent, agreed as part of the 2013/14 National Dialogue Conference outcomes, has been systematically ignored, despite advocacy efforts by female activists and other civil society groups to promote the inclusion of women and gender perspective in the UN-sponsored peace process.

²⁰ Website of Small And Micro Enterprise Promotion Service: <https://smeps.org.ye/smepsweb/> (15.04.2020).

²¹ Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, Rasha Jarhum, Rana Allam, and Devin Cowick (2017): *A Policy Brief in the 2016-17 U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security Policy Brief Series*, p. 5. Available at <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/9th%20US%20CSWG%20Policy%20Brief%20August%2028%202017%20v3%20%28002%29.pdf> (20.03.2020). Afrah Nasser (2018): 'Yemen's Women Confront War's Marginalization', in: *MERIP* 189. Available at <https://merip.org/2019/03/yemens-women-confront-wars-marginalization/> (20.03.2020).

Successful civil society initiatives, supported by the UN Special Envoy for Yemen and UN Women, include: the participation of seven independent female activists from the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security (WPPS) in the unofficial discussions in peace talks in Kuwait (May 2016); eight members of Women's Technical Advisory Group (TAG) in the peace consultations in Geneva (September 2018); and a delegation of female activists from TAG, WPPS and the Political Advisory Group in consultations in Stockholm (December 2018). In March 2019, the international conference 'Yemeni Women: Mediators for Peace', organized by UN Women in Amman, brought together 100 female activists for two days to discuss their role in peacemaking and peacebuilding in Yemen. However, the CSO Southern Women for an Independent South State felt underrepresented and wrote a letter of complaint to the organizers, protesting against their marginalization in the UN-sponsored peace process.²²

In the highly politicized context of Yemen, many CSOs have kept the ability to claim and defend their own values. For example, Yemeni CSO Mwatana for Human Rights not only documents violations committed by parties to the conflict, but also lobbies in the defense and promotion of human rights in peace talks (e.g. through the letter 'Human Rights Priorities at the Negotiation Table in Kuwait' in 2016). Research-centered CSOs, such as the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, the Yemen Polling Center, and the Studies and Economic Media Center, continue to conduct research with the aim of informing national and international policy-making.

On the local level, work in favor of the peace process has become dangerous, particularly in Houthi-held areas. Parties to the conflict perceive a positioning for peace as a positioning against them and their interests. Regardless, CSOs, albeit on a smaller scale, continue to advocate for inclusive politics and build mechanisms for participation on the local level. Among the most important is the formation of village cooperation councils across Yemen by the Social Development Fund. CSOs have also facilitated the establishment of community committees to improve services, social accountability, and monitoring. In fact, since the beginning of the war, CSOs have become crucial in managing local affairs, given the weakness of local councils and the lack of state service provision. CSOs also support the decentralization of the Yemeni state as a peace-building strategy.

Culture and Society

The war has deepened regional and sectarian fault lines in an unprecedented way. In this context, Yemeni civil society organizations attempt to mend broken links in the social fabric. CSOs supported the community's own capabilities, strengthened social security and stability networks, solved local conflicts, and thus preserving the cohesion of the social fabric. At the same time, CSOs continue to create spaces on and offline, where culture is celebrated, young talents are supported and cultural production is kept alive.

CSOs contribute to promoting social inclusion and eliminating tension through creating opportunities for young and old alike to engage

²² Southern Transitional Council (2019): *Statement of Protest to the UN Women-Organized Conference "Yemeni Women Peace Mediators"*. Available at <https://stc-eu.org/en/statement-of-protest/> (15.04.2020).

within their communities. Such engagement promotes solidarity, cooperation and trust between various groups. CSOs likewise contribute to social cohesion by combating family violence, supporting women's access to security, and fighting discrimination against the marginalized. Beyond this, CSOs also address extremism and sectarianism through cultural and artistic activities in the cause of peace advocacy. Various documentary and artistic film productions demonstrate the resilience of Yemeni society and promote social peace. These include #SupportYemen's *Melody of Our Alienation* and *The Color of Injustice*. The campaigns #LetsCoexist and #Badihi, conducted by Yemeni youth and supported by Saferworld and the Yemen Polling Center, have contributed to community building and de-radicalization. Both campaigns used film content to focus on commonalities of Yemenis, including landscapes, food, music, children or heritage.²³ Graffiti has also become a popular means for campaigning for peace, the most prominent initiatives coming from the artist Murad Subay, such as his March 15 global Yemeni art events, in which Yemenis across the globe bring people together to celebrate art and Yemen.

When the war began, many cultural institutions were forced to shut down as funding shifted to humanitarian work. New initiatives have emerged, however, such as the cultural magazine *al-Madaniya* and the Rumuz Foundation, both which focus on (creative) writing, photography and videography. These means aim to support young talents, create

cultural and intellectual platforms, and develop Yemeni cultural production, thus filling a significant gap created by the increase of violence in 2014/15. The Basement, a youth cultural foundation in Sana'a established in 2010, continues to operate, despite the increasingly difficult circumstances in the city, by organizing film viewings, art galleries and discussion events. The Meemz art initiative in al-Mukalla aims to enhance peace as it reaches and encourages youth to seek art as a creative outlet.

Security and Justice

In the wake of weak state security institutions and security vacuums throughout the country, a few CSOs endorsed projects focusing on community security and, often within the framework of humanitarian work, engaging in local conflict resolution and mediation. Against the backdrop of a majority of Yemenis preferring the police to take an active role in security provision,²⁴ some CSOs attempt to improve state security services on the local level.

Activities aiming to improve state security in areas held by the Houthis have become extremely risky. In Ibb, active youth groups formed to improve the security in their neighborhoods, but Houthis repressed their activities, and forced them to stop. CSOs we interviewed shared insights into their work on preventing and fighting sexual violence, reduction of arms in public, raising awareness on mines and preventing celebratory fire at

²³ Mareike Transfeld (2018): *Youth Activism in Yemen*. Yemen Polling Center, Policy Report. Available at <http://www.yemenpolling.org/2664-2/> (14.03.2020).

²⁴ Mareike Transfeld & Shaima Bin Othman (2020): *The State of the Police in Western Yemen*. Yemen Polling Center, Research Debrief. Available at <http://www.yemenpolling.org/4325/> (14.04.2020).

weddings and festivals. Often such initiatives involve local authorities and security personnel. But CSOs also struggle with unresponsive and uncooperative state actors. In its attempts to enhance cooperation between security actors in Ta'iz and Aden, for example, the Yemen Polling Center witnessed political differences among stakeholders preventing progress in the dialogue. Only in Ta'iz did this initiative lead to further attempts to enhance the cooperation between the police and judicial institutions. In the last few years, in fact, Ta'iz has become a prime example for civil society engagement in the security sector. Ta'iz activists are working with neighborhood cooperatives and elected district councils to address security challenges. Youth Without Borders Organization for Development has so far trained 110 neighborhood authorities in security reporting and the regulatory laws. Similar activities have also been implemented in other areas of Yemen. In Shabwa, for example, al-Ikha' Association for Development and Civil Peace has held meetings, dialogues, and training workshops with local councils, youth, the media, and imams on conflict resolution and management. This initiative, funded by the local authority, re-activated the partnership between the local authority and the community.

Given the breakdown of national level politics and the growing importance of the local level, the Yemen Polling Center has published reports on how the war has impacted local security arrangements in terms of authority, hierarchies, communication and popular perceptions in Ta'iz, Marib, Ibb, al-Hudayda,

Aden, and al-Dhali'. The research center also assessed the capacity of district police to enhance community security in Ta'iz, Aden, Lahij and Shabwa. Working directly to make such structures more accessible to women, the Yemeni Women's Union provides protection and assistance for disadvantaged women subjected to violence through legal education, support for the issuance of identification documents, and the provision of lawyers. The Studies and Economic Media Center has also supported police departments and local courts through capacity building and facilitated a relationship between security and justice institutions.

Education

The educational sector has been devastated by the war: school buildings have been destroyed, universities politicized, and public employers, including teachers, have not received full and regular salaries since the fall of 2016. Conflict parties began using schools as weapons and ammunitions storage, as detainment centres, or as potential recruitment of soldiers for the front. All these actions place at risk the education of roughly four million children in Yemen, particularly affecting women and girls, as highlighted by the 'Women Team' of this project.²⁵

With the shift of international funds and donor attention to the humanitarian sector, activities of local organizations working in the education sector have dramatically slowed down. Most international funding

²⁵ Mareike Transfeld (2018): 'Yemen's education system at a tipping point: Youth between their future and present survival,' in: POMEPS (eds.): *Politics, Governance and Reconstruction in Yemen*, POMEPS Series 29, pp. 39–42; Iman al-Gawfi, Bilkis Zabara and Stacey Philbrick Yadav (27.02.2020): *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Yemen*, CARPO/GDRSC Brief 14, p. 11. Available at https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/carpo_brief_14.pdf (29.02.2020).

for education is designated to UNICEF and a cluster of organizations working on educational issues in coordination with Yemeni state institutions. Following donor funding strategies, local organizations' work in the sector has become limited to providing emergency and humanitarian aid only. In addition, the complexity and nature of projects in the education sector, which requires work and coordination with multiple local authorities, remains discouraging for many local organizations. Regardless, Yemeni CSOs and civil initiatives continue to address significant gaps in this sector, complementing the larger scale initiatives by UNICEF. The National Foundation for Development and Humanitarian Response have developed the 'Education Watch' project, an interactive smartphones application that engages the local communities in the process of monitoring and data collection. This database serves to support organizations in providing the support needed in communities.

Parent councils collect money in their committees in order to continue paying the salaries of teachers. Independent youth groups, with the support of philanthropists and individual donations, have created learning spaces, enabled temporary classes and restored schools. These initiatives include Aden Reads Initiative; Hemmat Shabab Foundation for Development in Sana'a and Ta'iz; and the Support Them campaign that assists families and children with school books and

uniforms. CSOs provide alternative buildings and spaces to hold classes, while other CSOs and civil activists self-organize reading and math classes for community children. While these efforts are important at community level, such initiatives remain infrequent and face various challenges with local authorities, as well as ongoing financial constraints.

Environment

The war has caused enormous damage to the environment. For example, the Saudi-led coalition bombed the main waste treatment plant north of Sana'a; as a result, toxic waste, including medical waste, is no longer managed properly. Roughly 60 percent of Yemen's waste remains uncollected, and poor waste management – a problem even before the war – has led to pollution of water and air that causes various diseases, including gastrointestinal diseases and asthma.²⁶ Only a few Yemeni CSOs are engaging in waste management, as water management is a better-funded and more visible public concern. The 'Youth Team' in this project interestingly found that youth mainly associate 'the environment' with "public spaces and public health (such as garbage collection)."²⁷

According to the study *Yemen Civil Society Organizations in Transition*, the number of CSOs working on environmental issues has increased since the 1990s.²⁸ About 15 percent of the total number of CSOs work – at least

26 Conflict and Environment Observatory (2019): *How Yemen's Conflict Destroyed Its Waste Management System*. Available at <https://ceobs.org/how-yemens-conflict-destroyed-its-waste-management-system/> (14.02.2019).

27 Maged al-Kholidy, Yazeed al-Jeddawy and Kate Nevens (27.04.2020): *The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding in Yemen*, CARPO/YWBOD Brief 17. Available at https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/carpo_brief_17_27-04-20_AR.pdf (30.04.2020).

28 World Bank (2013): *Yemen Civil Society Organizations in Transition*. Available at <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/248881468171555118/Yemen-civil-society-organizations-in-transition> (14.03.2020).

partially – in the field of environmental protection, and an additional 10 percent work in the management of natural resources. The interests of CSOs have since broadened to include reducing chemical and radiological pollution, preserving land and marine biological diversity, combating desertification and preventive health, organizing rationalization of water use, and awareness raising of the dangers of pesticides and agricultural fertilizers. The majority of environmentally focused CSOs work in the field of water resources. Local water users associations, for example, manage water projects in rural areas, while beneficiary committees oversee water distribution schedules in neighborhoods. The Yemeni Women's Union and al-Islah Charitable Association support citizens' initiatives for rainwater harvesting through building dams and water barriers, increase drinking water through the expansion of wells, reservoirs and water networks. Other organizations consulted for this paper provide training in managing shared resources and the resolution of conflicts over resources and services.

Although Yemen, like the rest of the globe, is affected by the consequences of climate change, environmental issues do not rank high on the agenda of CSOs. The 'Youth Team' of this project found that most youth initiatives concerned with the natural environment are concentrated in Hadhramawt, where environmental concerns are many.²⁹ Local and international actors have neither a long-term plan nor an emergency strategy to respond to critical environmental changes in Yemen. Most plans that do exist concern the water and sanitation sector and are currently

part of OCHA's Humanitarian Response Plan. Besides the issue of water scarcity and conflict over water resources, there is little published knowledge on environmental issues nor their effect on communities. However, as the 'Media Team' in this project reports, the *Hulm Akhdhar* [Green Dream] media platform attempts to raise awareness on environmental issues across Yemen.³⁰

Cooperation and Conflict between Civil Society and Other Actors

CSOs interviewed for this Brief believed that the war has created new opportunities for the *private sector* and civil society to cooperate, seeing that both perceived a need to step up to fill gaps left by a collapsing state. Organizations established by the private sector, such as the Yemeni Food Bank and the National Prisoners' Foundation are a testament to how the private sector meets its social responsibility. In Aden, Lahij and Hadhramawt, CSOs in partnership with the private sector are implementing projects in the field of livelihoods and recovery, and the rehabilitation of state institutions such as universities, technical institutes, and schools. However, interviewed CSOs believe that the private sector is still hesitant to work with CSOs, as private sector companies do not want to be involved in politics. As such, most private sector contributions are limited to individual donations and partnerships in emergency assistance.

Since 2011, *youth* have become increasingly involved in civil society, either establishing their own CSO, working for one, or

²⁹ Al-Kholidy, al-Jeddawy and Nevens (27.04.2020).

³⁰ Saleh, Preston and Transfeld (17.04.2020).

volunteering. Youth make a substantial contribution to civil society, such as in the form of the Youth Without Borders Organization for Development, Resonate!Yemen or Bawadir al-Khayr Youth in Shabwa. The war has had a tremendous negative impact on youth. Financial hardship and psychological trauma led many youth to withdraw into their private realm. The need to contribute to their family's income also forces many young people engaged with civil society to opt for a better paying job, or even to join armed groups to fight at the front. The humanitarian interventions implemented by CSOs, since 2015, have provided an opportunity to target young people through cash-for-work programs, and thus improve livelihoods, enable economic empowerment and increase community participation. In this context, CSOs are an important avenue to ensure youth stay active in a meaningful way and in a supportive environment.

According to a 2018 study, *women* are more likely than men to work in local CSOs.³¹ The war has forced women to increasingly generate an income for their families; and given the influx of humanitarian funding to Yemen, women have become particularly active in this sector. CSOs interviewed for this Brief described how women are participating in distributing humanitarian aid; facilitating access to services and managing projects related to gender-based violence; promoting hygiene; as well as providing psychological support, livelihoods training and health education. As consequence, socio-cultural

restrictions on the participation of women in local affairs have eased. For example, the Social Development Fund, in partnership with CSOs and local councils, established 700 village cooperation councils in Ta'iz: Half of the 8,500 council members elected are women. However, the conditions for CSOs to advance political participation of women on the local level are difficult and such initiatives continue to have limited influence, with patriarchal norms remaining unchanged generally. For example, the Yemeni Women's Union stopped publishing certain educational material, on issues such as reproductive health or gender, due to opposition from political groups. As the 'Women' and 'Youth Teams' highlight through their research, women have gained both more freedoms and more restrictions due to the war.³² A coalition of women leaders and activists in Ta'iz, the so-called 'Women for Life' initiative, is an example of continued women activism in the civil society realm. This group has supported and contributed to resolving conflicts, for example, by opening corridors.

Since the beginning of the war, cooperation between the *media* and CSOs has declined sharply, mainly for two reasons: First, because media came under tremendous pressure, subject to violent repressive tactics on behalf of the de facto authorities in the North and other armed groups. Second, given the political capture of Yemeni media as a consequence of a lack of independent funding,³³ CSOs are limiting media coverage of their activities to avoid coverage of a politicized

31 UNDP (2018): *Yemen Multi-Sector Early Recovery Assessment*. Available at <http://earlyrecovery.global/sites/default/files/yemen-multisector-earlyrecoveryassessment.pdf> (14.03.2020).

32 Al-Kholidy, al-Jeddawy and Nevens (27.04.2020); Al-Gawfi, Zabara and Philbrick Yadav (27.02.2020).

33 Saleh, Preston and Transfeld (17.04.2020).

and distorted manner and to avoid unwanted attention from the de facto authorities in Sana'a. For example, when Youth Without Borders Organization for Development organized an event in al-Hudayda, a city under Houthi control, local media framed its coverage in the context of "rejecting the Saudi-led coalition against Yemen". Days later, the organization held the same event in an area in Ta'iz, which is formally controlled by the internationally-recognized government; here, local media contextualized the event as in support of the Ta'iz resistance. Due to such politicization, CSOs avoid the traditional media and rely on social media as their primary means of communication. Nevertheless, CSOs do have a pronounced interest in a relationship with the traditional media to publicize their work and as a communication channel to communities. CSOs thus invest into improving the conditions for media. For example, the Studies and Economic Media Center, a CSO based in Sana'a, trained more than 2,000 journalists in various fields, and has 80 correspondents in all governorates. The Center also established a media freedoms observatory, which monitors and advocates for cases of violations.

Meeting the Needs of Civil Society

CSOs in Yemen face a plethora of challenges. Since the beginning of the war, CSOs have come under increased risk of repression and have faced numerous violations including arrest, attacks, and the confiscation of property. While Yemen has never been free in terms of civic rights, the restrictions on the freedom of assembly and expression are now especially harsh. In order for them to be able to continue their work, CSOs must cautiously

avoid attracting negative attention that provokes repressive reactions. Many CSOs do this by avoiding work on risky topics, such as the promotion of peace, security or transitional justice. With most funding going into the humanitarian sector, many CSOs thus work in aid distribution, which is considered less risky in terms of repercussions. Organizations not directly under threat are affected by insecurity in other ways. The restricted mobility due to closure of roads, security checkpoints and tightened security measures can cause hours of delay or force CSO activists to walk or use donkeys. Restricted mobility has also made it difficult for CSOs to reach out to communities. Although there are some positive examples, CSOs often see themselves isolated from the state institutions they are trying to cooperate with. After the 2011 countrywide uprising, Yemeni civil society organizations took the initiative in building networks and coordinating their civic efforts with state actors. The war shattered these networks and made coordination difficult.

While these external challenges in themselves are immense, they are compounded by capacity weaknesses that many CSOs in Yemen exhibit. With the war driving human capital out of the country, CSOs are losing experienced experts of project management, monitoring and evaluation, impact assessment, analysis and more. This weakens an already weak civil society. Small organizations in particular have no experience in communicating with donors or writing project proposals, making funding, and capacity-building opportunities virtually inaccessible to them. In addition, donor requirements are difficult for small organizations to meet, such as having previous experience in implementing projects with large budgets. At the same

time, donors lack strategies to make small funds accessible to small CSOs. Civil society activity is also less effective, due to a lack of information sharing. Most information on projects and donors is shared and exchanged online, but many CSOs working on the sub-national level do not have regular access to the internet. Larger CSOs that do have access see themselves competing over donor funds, which prevents them from building strong alliances with each other. The end result of all these factors is a lack of a shared peace-building vision among Yemeni CSOs.

Recommendations

Support Coordination and Networking of Civil Society Organizations

Create and support opportunities for CSOs to unite their efforts, coordinate their projects and form advocacy networks. This can be achieved through workshops and conferences, but can also be incentivized through conditioned funding and the institutionalized exchange of practices. Further, international supporters can create platforms that would allow CSOs to develop unified visions, strategies or roadmaps for achieving peace and post-conflict development.

Defend Civic Spaces

With space for civil society engagement shrinking, international donors and organizations should continue to defend civic engagement. They can do this by ensuring non-humanitarian work, such as in the field of economics, politics, security and justice, culture, the environment and education, is not neglected in favor of humanitarian

engagement, and through advocacy in their encounters with the Hadi government and the de facto authorities. As the international community advocates for civic rights and spaces, it should always prioritize the safety of civic figures in humanitarian and development work.

Support Partnerships Between Civil Society and State Institutions

Beyond defending civic spaces, international organizations should contribute to facilitating constructive relationships between Yemeni CSOs and local authorities. While partnerships in some areas emerged as a result of projects, in other areas incentives for cooperation need to be created. What is missing is a comprehensive understanding of the interests and needs of local authorities, as well as ways to incentivize them to cooperate with local CSOs.

Support Development of Human Capital in the Civic Sector

Against the backdrop of the link between human development and peace, international organizations and donors must create real opportunities for capacity development within Yemeni organizations. In the context of a significant brain drain the country has been experiencing over the past years and a devastated educational system, many CSO staff need technical knowledge to improve their approach to their projects and their outcomes. This includes analytical skills, report writing, approaches to peacebuilding, or monitoring and evaluation. International donors can also assist in creating platforms to transfer expertise from similar conflict

contexts, such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Libya or Syria.

Build the Organizational Capacity of Civil Society

International organizations and donors should support organizational development within Yemeni CSOs. This can be done through training in administration and management processes, time management classes and the introduction of project coordination tools. Organizational development should have the goal to strengthen the CSO's governance, accountability and internal institutional capacity.

Diversify Funding Opportunities for Civil Society Organizations

International financial support is mainly directed at large CSOs and those with international partners. Donors should ensure that a diversity of organizations can benefit from their support through different funding schemes, also making small-scale funding available for small initiatives.

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About the Project

This project, which is implemented on behalf of GIZ, seeks to develop the capacities of Yemeni and international researchers and organizations in researching and advising on peacebuilding in Yemen. Within its framework, a *CARPO Report* on peace requirements in Yemen, as well as five policy briefs, each resulting from a Yemeni-international research partnership, on the role of the following actors in peacebuilding in Yemen, are being developed and published: civil society, women, youth, media and the private sector. For more information, please visit our *website*.

About CARPO

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers.

Website: carpo-bonn.org

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About Itar for Social Development

Itar for Social Development Foundation is a non-governmental organization founded in 2011 with a mission to empower Yemen's civil society by enhancing partnership, accountability, capacity, impact, and influence. Itar's vision is to ensure that the needs, interests, and rights of Yemeni people, regardless of their gender, age, disability, social or economic backgrounds, are at the center of social, economic, and political development efforts in Yemen.

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