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# The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding in Yemen

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## Introduction

This Brief focuses on the contributions of Yemeni youth to the economy, society and culture, politics, education, security and justice, and the environment. It is part of 'Research Cooperation on Peacebuilding in Yemen', a wider project that encourages Yemeni-international research cooperation on peace requirements in Yemen. CARPO is implementing the entire project on behalf of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and by commission of the German Federal

## Executive Summary

Following five years of devastating civil war, around 30 million people in Yemen are suffering from multiple crises – violent conflict, a collapsed economy, looming famine, displacement, loss of livelihoods and collapsing public services. However, such dire conditions have not stood in the way of young people across the country seeking to contribute to restoring and building peace in their war-torn country, as they play vital and positive roles in different sectors for the purpose of not only helping to voice people's hopes and desire to live in a stable and safe state, but also in cementing solid ground and the foundation for sustainable peace.

Despite its major transformative potential, local level youth work is often overlooked by mainstream international discourses on national level peace processes and violent conflict.\* This Brief sheds light on young peoples' activism before and during the war, the challenges they are currently facing, their visions for the future of Yemen and the kind of support they need. The contributions of young men and women to the economy, politics, culture and society, education, security and justice, and the environment show how youth are laying the groundwork for peace and social cohesion in their communities.

\* Kate Nevens, Marwa Baabbad and Jatinder Padda (December 2019): "The Situation Needs Us to Be Active": Youth Contributions to Peacebuilding in Yemen, Saferworld. Available at <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1241-athe-situation-needs-us-to-be-activea-youth-contributions-to-peacebuilding-in-yemen> (21.01.2020).

Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).<sup>1</sup>

Youth activists<sup>2</sup> are facing a wide range of seemingly insurmountable challenges – from a failing economy and a collapse in educational opportunities through to direct security threats and restrictions on their speech and movements. Even so, large numbers of youth across the country have sought out ways to positively contribute, particularly at community level, finding new spaces and new ways of working.<sup>3</sup>

Travel restrictions have forced activism to the local and community level, and the security situation has shifted the focus of youth to supporting humanitarian, health, environmental and social causes rather than overtly ‘political’ work.<sup>4</sup> Youth initiatives are providing public services amid collapsing state services and a lack of international development projects. The types of work that youth engage in vary significantly from one governorate to another, influenced by the level of direct conflict in their area, the attitudes and behaviors of the local de facto authorities, and the amount of support being received from the international community.

Young men and women in rural and urban areas see their potential to positively contribute to peacebuilding across six areas specified above: the economy, politics, culture and society, security and justice, education and the environment. Many youth believe that small, community-level contributions are significant in themselves, as they contribute to building relationships and social cohesion in their communities; lay stepping stones to sustainable peace in the longer term; and reduce the cycle of violence by providing productive opportunities for young men and women outside of violence.

## Youth Activism Before and During the War

Before 2011, few youths felt able to challenge President Saleh’s repressive regime outside of formal political opposition parties and coalitions. Youth activism was thus mainly limited to social and cultural activities, rather than political, economic or security-related issues. However, in 2011, when popular uprisings started to spread across the Middle East, Yemeni youth quickly focused on politics. Driven by social, economic

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**1** For a more complete discussion of the six areas and their centrality for sustainable peacebuilding in Yemen, see 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, published in March 2019, is available at [https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/carpo\\_policy\\_report\\_06\\_2019.pdf](https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/carpo_policy_report_06_2019.pdf) (22.10.2019).

**2** The term ‘youth’ in this paper is not restricted to the common definition of people aged between 18 and 35 years old, but looks in particular at young people (who may be younger than 18) who identify broadly as part of a Yemeni ‘youth movement’ and are already playing active roles in their communities.

**3** The paper is based on qualitative data collected through eight focus group discussions (FGDs) in Hadhramawt, Ibb (in urban and rural locations, with separate FGDs for young men and young women), two FGDs with youth and peace-building specialists in Ta’iz, and additional key informant interviews (KIIs) in Aden, Sana’a, Hadhramawt, Shabwa, Lahij and Ta’iz.

**4** Youth Without Borders Organization for Development (May 2017): *Youth Political Participation in Taiz: Challenges and Opportunities*. Available at <http://ywbod.org/english/images/doc/pub12.pdf> (21.01.2020).

and political exclusion,<sup>5</sup> youth took to the streets to peacefully protest for changes to the political structure and governance of Yemen and the removal of the 33-year president. This historic ‘youth revolution’ created an image of youth as agents of democratic change. All political actors, including the political parties, rushed to use youth as leverage in the political scenario. International actors and NGOs designed large youth-focused programs, aimed at increasing the participation of youth locally and nationally.

The traditional elites negotiated the final Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) deal that secured the removal of Saleh, but they excluded the youth activists and ignored their social justice demands. In the transition period that followed, however, youth activists played important roles, such as through participation in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which had a 20 percent youth quota.<sup>6</sup> Youth activists registered new NGOs and formed nation-wide advocacy networks or political parties; others accepted government positions, including as ministers and deputies.

In March 2015, the outbreak of conflict and the collapse of the transition process quickly reversed many political or social gains, and also caused an abrupt downturn in youth activism. The security and economic challenges posed by the ensuing conflict took an immense toll on young people’s ability to meet and collaborate. The suspension of the transitional political process interrupted all

formal, peaceful avenues for youth political participation. Many of the international NGOs who had set up youth-focused programs suspended their work and left the country.

## The Role of Youth During the Conflict

### General Findings

The lack of security across the country, a rapidly deteriorating economy, loss of donor funding and opportunities, lack of mobility, increasingly severe restrictions on freedom of expression and a near to complete collapse in state services have all affected youth’s ability to continue in activism and voluntary work.<sup>7</sup> Youth in Hadhramawt and Ibb focus groups expressed concerns about the weak capacities of local civil society organizations (CSOs) and state institutions to support youth work, as well as the lack of partnerships with national level NGOs, government departments, or even youth networks.

Youth across all our research locations highlighted economic and security challenges as the main barriers to their contributions. Lack of employment opportunities, unpaid salaries, rising costs of food and fuel, water shortages and lack of basic services have forced many youth away from activism, in order to focus on their daily needs. Paradoxically, while these challenges make it harder for youth to remain active, it is also motivating activists to help other young men and

5 Lydia Funck and Mareike Transfeld (November 2013): *Supporting Youth Activism in Yemen: Challenges, Priorities and Needs*, Yemen Polling Center. Available at [http://www.yemenpolling.org/advocacy/upfiles/YPCPublications\\_Policy-Brief--Supporting-Youth-Activism-in-Yemen-Challenges-Priorities-and-Needs--November-2013.pdf](http://www.yemenpolling.org/advocacy/upfiles/YPCPublications_Policy-Brief--Supporting-Youth-Activism-in-Yemen-Challenges-Priorities-and-Needs--November-2013.pdf) (21.01.2020).

6 Rafat Al-Akhali (April 2014): *What Yemen’s Youth Got Out of the National Dialogue Conference*, Atlantic Council MENA Source. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/what-yemen-s-youth-got-out-of-the-national-dialogue-conference/> (21.01.2020).

7 Kate Nevens, Marwa Baabbad and Jatinder Padma (2019).

women to find income-generating opportunities as alternatives to fighting. In Ibb, where the main concern of youth is securing jobs and an income, participants worried that many youth are “becoming criminals or joining illegal groups to improve their incomes”.

Although face-to-face communication remains important for youth, it is increasingly hard to organize beyond their immediate communities.<sup>8</sup> City-to-city travel is impeded by checkpoints, the threat of detention, and increasing hostility to northern Yemenis in the South and vice versa. International travel is increasingly impossible for much of the population, due to the closures of airports, lack of functioning embassies, costs of flights and difficulties obtaining international visas.

Direct security threats to young activists are becoming increasingly serious and widespread. Youth worry about the risks of arrest by various security/conflict actors, or “being [falsely] accused or framed as implementing the agenda of a particular political party”. Many of the youth hesitated to speak in detail about these risks, but talked instead about the need for freedom of expression, particularly in Houthi-controlled Ibb – “a post on Facebook can cause your death,” said one young man. Women in Say’un also expressed concerns about the rise in sexual assault, and a sense that women were being explicitly targeted.

Psychological trauma from the war is another serious challenge. “Many youths have started thinking of committing suicide,” said

a young activist in Ibb, while others spoke of being distressed and having sleep difficulties. These comments reflect a growing body of research that suggests young activists in Yemen are suffering deeply from trauma and feelings of hopelessness, insecurity and anxiety.<sup>9</sup> In addition, however, our research findings also suggest a growing space and acceptance for young men and women to talk about these issues.

The youth we spoke to had clear visions for the future of Yemen and “building a safe and secure country for our future generations”, and named the need for an end to violence as the most urgent. Across locations and genders, the majority of youth saw sustainable peace in Yemen as involving a combination of the following: a) social cohesion, in which communities collaborate and help one another and promote coexistence and tolerance; b) equal access to resources, employment and services; and c) inclusive, accountable and transparent forms of governance and an effective rule of law, which protects and promotes human rights and freedom of expression. “It means a community in which people live in prosperity, equality, security and justice, and where human rights are respected and everyone can actively participate to achieve sustainable peace and development,” young men in Ibb told us. Women in al-Mukalla spoke about a “culture of peace that must be seen in the attitudes, actions, thoughts and practices of everyone in the community”.

Within this broader vision for Yemen, youth and women want to be included in all forms

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Mareike Transfeld (February 2019): *Youth Activism in the Yemeni Civil War. Internet Mitigates Effects of Violence as Local Factors Shape Activism Scene*, Yemen Polling Center. Available at <https://www.yemenpolling.org/2664-2/> (21.01.2020).

of decision and policymaking, from local level government and private sector through to national and international processes, citing a need for new faces to take the lead in governance structures. They also saw youth as playing a pivotal role across the different sectors in building ties between communities, raising public awareness of peace and peacebuilding, and providing income-generating and meaningful voluntary opportunities as alternatives to participation in violence.

### *Regional Differences in Youth Activism*

There are many commonalities shared by youth activists across locations, including many of the barriers to participation and their long-term vision for a peaceful Yemen. Yet, the types of peace-building work available to youth vary greatly across governorates, particularly related to the governing area authorities, and the degree of direct violence their governorate has experienced since the outset of the war.

Unlike the governorates of Aden and Ta'iz, neither Hadhramawt nor Ibb have experienced high degrees of direct armed conflict, allowing a certain degree of youth activism, particularly humanitarian activities and support to those displaced from other governorates. However, various youth in these two governorates relate very different experiences under their respective local authorities. For example, the nature of Houthi control of Ibb<sup>10</sup> has significantly impacted the perceptions and actions of youth. Each single activity requires formal approval from multiple

authorities; and receiving approval for political or peace-building activities is difficult. Youth in both urban and rural Ibb often repeated the words "in spite of the risks and threats" when speaking of the activities they were able to implement. A particular concern was the risk of any youth gathering or initiative being labeled as 'troublemakers' by the authorities, or being accused of alignment with extremist and radical groups. For reasons of safety, much of the youth activism, by men and women, takes place online.

Hadhramawt, on the other hand, is nominally under the control of the internationally recognized government. (In practice it is divided: 'the Valley' is controlled by the internationally recognized government with Saudi Arabia's support; and 'the Coast' is under the control of the Hadhrami Elite Forces, which are loyal to the United Arab Emirates (UAE)).<sup>11</sup> These authorities are perceived to place fewer restrictions on youth activities related to peacebuilding, social cohesion, politics and security and most of the focus group participants in Hadhramawt felt that youth activism in peacebuilding has been growing in the last few years. Hadhramawt is also home to many oil companies and businesses that have maintained a level of employment in the area, as well as support youth initiatives. While the oil revenue as a source of income for the authorities and conflict actors is seen as corruption by the youth, it also creates an incentive for the authorities to maintain peace and stability. The differences between governorates and the differing authorities in control influence the types and scope of

<sup>10</sup> The Houthis took control of Ibb in August 2015. Facing little resistance, they appointed their loyalists to high-ranking political and military positions.

<sup>11</sup> The coast of Hadhramawt was controlled by al-Qa'ida in 2015 before it was pushed out in April 2016 with the support of the UAE.

youth peace-building efforts more than the variations between urban and rural locations.

### **Gendered Differences**

A lot of the available research, including our own, contains conflicting analyses on how the war is affecting the activism of young men and young women: some papers show evidence of young women continuing to play crucial roles in activism, while other research portray young women as less active. The conflict has clearly reinforced existing gender gaps in certain areas, such as women's access to the internet, ability to move around and travel freely,<sup>12</sup> and access to community decision-makers. The war has also impacted safety and security along gendered lines, with women experiencing greater online and offline harassment, increasing levels of domestic abuse, and increasing numbers of forced marriages.<sup>13</sup>

However, the conflict has also created some spaces where traditional gender norms are challenged, with young women undertaking activities previously not deemed 'acceptable' in their communities. While we found that social and religious norms are repeatedly used to limit young women's activism, movement and communications, the increased economic needs of families have also relaxed some of these norms, particularly in allowing women to work. In some families, women have even become the main source of income, although the type of work they are 'allowed' to undertake is still highly gendered.

Our research suggests that the ways in which young women's activism has been affected is strongly determined by their location. In Houthi-controlled areas, women face particularly heavy restrictions; likewise, women's activism is impacted in areas of highly explosive violence and checkpoints. In Ibb, for example, restrictions on the movements of young women are pervasive. "Men can travel and stay everywhere, while women cannot," said a young woman in Ibb. Conversely, in rural Say'un, female participants told us the opposite is the case: "Women have become braver to stand against security threats by protesting."

What counts as activism also depends on individual perspectives and assumptions. While a young woman and a young man may do the exact same activity, there is variance if others view it as activism or not. Young men often assumed women's activity as limited, when in fact women perceive themselves to be fairly active.

## **Contributions from Youth to Peace Requirements in Yemen**

### **Economy**

Improving the economic situation in Yemen was a key priority for youth in all our locations, and is an area in which young men and women have been particularly active. At the outset of the conflict in 2014/15, many youth quickly refocused their work to address immediate livelihood and survival needs of

<sup>12</sup> See also the paper from the 'Women Team' in this project: Iman al-Gawfi, Bilkis Zabara and Stacey Philbrick Yadav (27.02.2017): *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Yemen*, CARPO/GDRSC Brief 14. Available at [https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/carpo\\_brief\\_14.pdf](https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/carpo_brief_14.pdf) (20.03.2020).

<sup>13</sup> Brigitte Rohwerder (March 2017): *Conflict and Gender Dynamics in Yemen*, K4D Helpdesk Report, Institute of Development Studies. Available at: <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/conflict-and-gender-dynamics-in-yemen/> (21.01.2020).

their communities, and played a large role in humanitarian responses in locations beyond the reach of INGOs. Their tasks included organizing food, water, clothing and even electricity distribution, and assisting internally displaced people.

These humanitarian efforts continue on, in many areas. But almost five years into the conflict, youth activists are also turning to longer-term economic solutions: creating or supporting new small businesses, providing small grants to young entrepreneurs, and training young people in specific vocational skills. In al-Mukalla, youth activists have organized and provided vocational trainings for potential electricians, farmers, plumbers, sanitation workers and hairdressers. In Ta'iz, youth have trained others in key skills in the current job market such as online marketing; supported young people to develop skills for international development work; and trained young IDPs in solar maintenance.

In many areas, rural and urban, young women are active in entrepreneurship and small businesses, although they mainly focus on specific fields with women customers, or home produced goods.<sup>14</sup> These include setting up baking businesses, hair and beauty salons, and production and sale of perfumes and incense. In Say'un in March 2018, as part of local Women's Day celebrations, women's organizations ran a large 'women's bazaar' where women from the surrounding districts exhibited their homemade products and handicrafts. The bazaar also aimed to showcase the range of talents and skills of local women. In the more urban al-Mukalla, research participants spoke of many young

women using social media to market and sell products, referring to women in their community as "business pioneers".

### *Politics*

Across Yemen, youth voiced little trust in political parties, viewing the state as weak and local councils as ineffective. Yet they remain overall interested in politics and continue to see youth participation in decision-making as important to building a peaceful, inclusive Yemen.

Security risks and lack of accountable political processes have severely impacted the involvement of youth in influencing decision-making. This has pushed youth to other fields and made them more locally focused. When youth do engage in decision-making processes, or with decision-makers, it is often limited to influencing authorities around a very specific issue or incident, rather than being part of a broad decision-making body. This topic was fiercely debated in one of the Ta'iz focus group discussions, with some arguing that youth political activism should be limited to very local levels (neighborhood, village, district level) and to specific issues (social, livelihood, education, etc.) to lower the risk of potential manipulation or harm by armed groups or political parties while others emphasizing the relevance of youth participation both on the local and the national level. Despite these difficulties, youth-led activities have established effective communication mechanisms and partnerships in different areas, which may lay the groundwork for long-term relationships and more inclusive decision-making in communities.

<sup>14</sup> See also the paper from the 'Women Team' in this project: Iman al-Gawfi, Bilkis Zabara and Stacey Philbrick Yadav (27.02.2020).

Youth's political engagement and involvement in decision-making within political parties is even more complex and fraught with difficulties. Many are concerned that only youth groups affiliated with political parties or tribes receive support, and that political parties are exploiting youth and "do not give them actual and real opportunities in decision-making". In Ibb, where Houthis impose tight limitations on political party affiliations and activities, youth activists are concerned with being perceived as political opposition and "aligned to extremist and radical groups". Both the Hadi government and the Houthis claim to have functioning youth 'shadow governments', active on the ground and in social media. However, these shadow governments appear more concerned with political competition than with actual participation in decision-making.

Despite all the potential security risks and the lack of clear governance actors, young women and men continue to use peaceful protests, demonstrations and public advocacy campaigns to bring about positive changes in their governorates. In Say'un, for example, the Movement of Angry Youth have been protesting price spikes, abductions and assassinations. Young women have also taken to the streets to demand policy changes and protest high prices of necessities and poor infrastructure. In al-Mukalla, young people have implemented advocacy campaigns aimed at re-opening the airport and reducing costs of rent in the city. Surprisingly, it was noted in our FGDs in Hadhramawt that youth advocates who criticized local authorities are actually now at less risk of facing a violent response. In Ibb, however, such

actions are particularly risky and although public demonstrations still take place, social media is increasingly used for activism (although social media was also seen as especially risky for women, who usually use fake names). One example given: In response to a sexual assault on a child, youth successfully activated a social media campaign and marched for long distances in Ibb to pressure the authorities to accelerate the slow course of the suspect's trial.

### *Culture and Society*

Across all locations, our research participants felt that youth are making significant contributions to peacebuilding in the area of culture and society, notably through a) activities which promote social cohesion, bridging the gaps between people, building trust, strengthening cooperation and establishing common grounds; b) activities which engage youth productively and peacefully, so that youth can be peace practitioners instead of a part of the conflict; and c) activities that use the arts and culture to spread peace messages. "Youth's cultural and social activities contribute to reducing the tensions among people and make people feel hope and this paves the way of any peace-building process," said a participant in Ta'iz. Goals concerning social cohesion, community engagement and public education and awareness are embedded across nearly all the youth activities discussed in the paper.

Arts and culture were seen as fertile ground for youth involvement, though there are more societal and authority restrictions in Ibb, and a lack of art institutions and public



spaces in Ibb, Hadhramawt and elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> Young women and men in Hadhramawt spoke of the growing number of small ‘cultural’ spaces and initiatives for self-expression, “using art to send their peace message and spread a culture of forgiveness and humanity through the stage, painting, concerts, photo exhibitions and movies”, explained young women in al-Mukalla. In Hadhramawt, Ta’iz, Aden and Sana’a, young women are active in drama, painting, or singing; while in Ibb, women were perceived as less active in the arts due to conservative social norms around women’s behaviors. Most artists in Houthi-held areas cannot use the word ‘peace’ in their work: one young artist said the Houthis consider its use ‘treason’. However, many artists are still posting their work, with embedded messages about peace, on social media. In Sana’a, for example, a young female artist posts images of her oil paintings on ‘harmonic coexistence’ on Facebook.<sup>16</sup> These images are well received among Yemeni youth and more broadly.

A large number of the young men and women saw their work as directly contributing to social cohesion, as well as providing support to members of the community with mental and physical wellbeing needs. In al-Mukalla, the Club of Volunteers regularly hosts forums, programs, discussions and activities aimed at enhancing youth’s role and engagement in their communities. Women also report using women’s gatherings to raise awareness and provide advice on family, health and religion. In Ibb, there is a youth-led initiative, called the

Team of Hajir al-Bu’asi, that provides psychological support to IDPs and to orphans. The members of the initiative, all young females, visit IDPs centers and organize entertaining activities to help IDPs reduce their distress.

### *Security and Justice*

Most youth that we spoke to saw security and justice as essential conditions for peace in Yemen. The activists in Ta’iz prioritized security and justice over other peace requirements, though they had fairly mixed views on the possibilities for youth contributions to security and justice in their communities. The main themes discussed in the FGDs were community safety and local crime reduction, with some women also highlighting justice through the courts and legal provisions for women.

In Hadhramawt and Ta’iz, there was a sense that young men and women are able to make small contributions to security and justice, in partnership with local security, coastal security forces and the police. Many activities focus on raising public awareness regarding personal security and safety issues, with projects on stopping the firing of weapons at weddings, improving street lighting in unsafe neighborhoods, educating on fire hazards, land mines and crime prevention, and improving traffic safety. In Ta’iz, a group of young women coordinated with the city’s security institutions to help report robberies and land-theft. Also in Ta’iz, some youth initiatives have gone one step further

<sup>15</sup> In many governorates, there used to be public cultural institutions such as cultural centers, cinemas, institutes, and other. Private institutions also existed in a few governorates, such as Alsaeed Cultural Foundation in Ta’iz. Almost all such institutions are currently closed; some of them, particularly the cinemas, were closed before the war. An exception to this is Aden, where several cultural centers have re-opened since the armed conflict in of 2015.

<sup>16</sup> See the artwork here: <https://www.facebook.com/ShathaAltowaiArt/posts/1266037753784285> (10.02.2020).

and are hosting roundtable discussions between community members and security forces, playing a role in monitoring and evaluating the performance of the police,<sup>17</sup> and even providing trainings to police on human rights and international humanitarian law. However, a number of youth in Ta'iz raised concerns about working too closely with security or military forces, citing possible risks. In the FGDs with young men in urban Ibb, the participants were even more divided over whether youth should undertake any security and justice activities at all, due to the sensitivity of this topic to the Houthi authorities (particularly after the replacement of the chief officer of the security department) – although resolution of a land-grabbing conflict was cited as one specific example of effective collaboration between youth and the security department.

A common theme across all groups was the role young men can play in security provision, which was seen as positive when in support of a group considered a 'legitimate' force. For example, in al-Mukalla young men helped in securing and guarding the government offices after the retreat of al-Qa'ida fighters. In Say'un and Ibb, young men formed groups to protect neighborhoods, particularly at night. Similarly, in Ta'iz, youth participants reported neighborhoods becoming safer because of youth's contributions, and the growing number of young male *'aqils* [neighborhood representatives]. Participants in Say'un also noted a recent increase in the number of young women who serve in different sections of the security forces, and are seen in public gatherings and events. However, young men in

Ibb joining the Houthi authorities was generally seen as a problem, akin to joining local criminal gangs who violate human rights and have no respect for the law.

### Education

Youth are motivated to work on education projects or initiatives to "resume civilian life, away from fighting". Due to the war, many children and young men and women are missing key stages in their education; that is, missing key input necessary to enable the population to rebuild their country, contribute to the economy, and promote security, justice and good governance. Many young men from governorates across the country are also dropping out of school to join militias or criminal gangs, so efforts to keep these men in the education system can help to reduce violence. "Illiteracy or bad education is a key reason behind youth's engagement, not only in violence, but also in social trouble making and illegal actions," said a participant in Ta'iz.

Youth's activism in education is comparable across the governorates. In urban and rural areas of Hadhramawt, Ta'iz and Ibb, youth education initiatives are diverse: gathering funds to provide either financial or material assistance for students and universities such as school bags, uniforms, wheelchairs transportation vehicles or costs or fee payments; helping repair schools that have been damaged by the conflict; working as voluntary teachers, particularly in schools where the teachers have been displaced by the conflict; and running programs for illiterate adults,

<sup>17</sup> One YWBOD initiative of providing essential needs (stationary, solar power, etc.) resulted in authorities reactivating a local police station, alongside encouraging the police to reinstate the wearing of uniforms.

disabled children and children with health issues. In Ibb, participants spoke of work with Yemeni diaspora groups to provide financial assistance for remaining teachers, as no salaries have been paid for governmental employees in the Houthi-controlled governorates since 2016. In Ta'iz, a coalition of CSOs led by young activists implemented a project on advocating the evacuation of military barracks from schools in the city. Businessmen in Hadhramawt, as well as local charitable educational organizations, have provided hundreds of scholarships to students from Hadhramawt to study abroad.

Education-related initiatives were seen as an area where young women were particularly active, including rural areas, as women have easier access to educational spaces. In Say'un, many young women have taken part in mother's councils in schools. Originally, these councils were focused on raising funds and collecting donations from parents but since the onset of the conflict, they have become increasingly active and now help resolve student problems, including speaking with the families of those who stop their girls from attending school in order to marry. In rural Ibb, women mentioned helping girls who want to enroll in universities, by talking to families on the importance of obtaining university degrees and trying to convince them to allow their daughters to pursue higher education. These women pledge to 'keep their daughters safe' by accompanying them on their way to and from university. According to the participants in the rural Ibb young women FGD, the number of young women who enroll in university education in their area is on the rise.

## **Environment**

In comparison with other peace requirements, the environment, while perceived as an important issue, is not a priority concern for youth. Additionally, there is also ambiguity in definitions. While international discourse on 'environment and peacebuilding' often refers to the bigger picture of environmental and ecosystem protections and non-exploitation of natural resources and communities, most of the youth we spoke with thought of environment in terms of public spaces and public health, such as garbage collection.

Most of the environment issues mentioned by the youth participants are due to the malfunction of state public services, such as uncollected garbage, sewage issues, and unequal water distribution. These issues are not only of short- and long-term public health concern, but can also trigger local conflicts. Many youth initiatives have taken place in Hadhramawt, Ibb and Ta'iz to try and address these issues, including groups undertaking repairs of sewage systems and water networks, providing clean water supplies, organizing street cleaning campaigns, and providing garbage bins and containers.<sup>18</sup> In Ta'iz, the Water Authority and the Cleaning and Improvement Fund have been restored after more than two years of neglect. Youth supported these projects by initially advocating for the restoring of these institutions and later supporting their effective performance by implementing planning workshops, needs assessments and joint initiatives, such as cleaning campaigns, fixing water networks, etc. As a result of such activities, public health risks are decreased

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Khair Coalition provided 300 trash containers that were distributed to the streets of al-Mukalla.

and some public services restored, and also tensions among local communities and individuals have been reduced.

The natural environment is more a matter of interest and effort in Hadhramawt and Aden than in Ta'iz and Ibb governorates, perhaps due to the many critical environmental issues that exist in rural and urban Hadhramawt. Many youth initiatives in Hadhramawt focus on protecting the local environment and green spaces, such as through park and beach cleaning outreaches, anti-littering and recycling awareness projects, and 'Grow a Plant' or 'Plant a Tree' initiatives. One youth initiative produced a training program for homemakers on making organic fertilizer from their household garbage. In Aden, one initiative visited schools to raise student awareness on climate change and the importance of protecting the environment. As a result, several schools, such as the al-Ma'ali school, organized beach cleaning trips for its students. Big picture environmental issues are also on the radar for young people in Hadhramawt. The pollution caused by oil companies located in Hadhramawt is one critical environmental issue, as well as the increasing number of severe storms. Both of these issues help bring the threat of climate change into public consciousness. In al-Mukalla, a group of young lawyers filed a legal case against the shipping company responsible for a large oil spill in 2013, an incident that had a substantial negative impact on the marine life and the local communities.

## Cooperation and Conflict between Youth and Other Sectors

The youth we spoke to for this research were very open to partnerships with other civil society groups and sectors, both as a chance to learn and gain skills, and to help bring a youth perspective to other areas of work. Youth initiatives themselves form a large and important aspect of the *civil society* landscape in Yemen, particularly since 2011. Many local and national CSOs, across sectors, are staffed by youth activists who 'cut their teeth' during the revolution, making them a significant and readily available resource for peace-building work.

One area of potential concern is that young *women*, and some other groups of youth – such as those who have been internally displaced, or young *muhammasheen* [marginalized people] – often are tagged with a single identity (i.e. categorized as either a young person or a woman, rather than both) and that the intersections of their experiences are then lost.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, youth organizations are often expected to focus on 'youth issues', which, while important, ignores the potential of youth to contribute effectively across many different issues.

Youth are already working closely with the *private sector* in a number of areas, particularly in Hadhramawt, with the support of both local and expat businesspeople abroad. Our research indicates that many young entrepreneurs, especially young women, are

<sup>19</sup> See also the dangers of sectioning off 'women' as a category of analysis, which can result in that all other spheres are then implicitly treated as 'male', as discussed by the 'Women Team' in this project in Iman al-Gawfi, Bilkis Zabara and Stacey Philbrick Yadav (27.02.2020).

setting up small businesses. These groups, however, focus more on economic empowerment in the form of loans and support from the Social Fund for Development rather than new or private sector partnerships.

There are opportunities but also risks associated with working with local *media* and social media. These platforms can raise the voices of youth and their concerns but they can also spread hatred, divisive speech, propaganda and harassment. There is much interest among youth activists in gaining skills as citizen journalists, with training programs offered across the country on topics such as writing humanitarian stories. Across many governorates, notably in Aden, Hadhramawt and Ta'iz, youth groups are driving the 'conflict sensitivity' agenda and working to combat hatred and violent speech in traditional and new media. Various youth groups are training journalists in conflict sensitivity, as well as developing social media guidelines around language use. Overall, youth view their roles in this area with much potential.

## Meeting the Needs of Youth Peacebuilders

Youth activists have a broad set of needs that are not currently being met. Against the backdrop of diminishing physical and digital spaces of exchange for youth, particularly across geographic and political divides, young people are in desperate need of safe spaces to express their opinions and beliefs. Youth, particularly young women, need support to move around the country safely, as well as attend meetings outside of Yemen.

Interestingly, a key area raised by multiple youth activists was the need for more art and cultural spaces, including youth clubs, forums, libraries, academies of arts, cinemas, theaters, art studios, recording studios and writing clubs. Engaging in arts and culture was seen as having particular potential in the complex political environment. However, many youth, outside of Sana'a and Ta'iz, lack access to these kinds of spaces.

There were other key areas mentioned. There is a need for greater financial support for social entrepreneurship, startups and microfinancing, and projects and initiatives. As well, trainings and capacity building in a wide range of skills were requested: mediation, conflict resolution, dialogue, political participation, decision-making, planning, advocacy, fundraising, networking, and institutional organizing. While youth had clear ideas on what they would find useful, it was also apparent that these are the 'go to' asks of international donors. There was a sense that a more sustained, ongoing support is needed, as opposed to one-off training events. Youth activists feel relatively abandoned by the international community.

Youth activists are increasingly willing to speak about and engage with issues around mental health. This is a positive development, although psychological concerns are not yet being met with the level of formal or informal support and mental health services required. There is a need for culturally and contextually appropriate forms of psychological support for those who have experienced trauma, as well as for those working with traumatized populations.

## Recommendations

Based on the existing contributions by young men and women to the requirements for sustainable peace in Yemen, as well as our assessment of the challenges they face, we offer the following recommendations:

***Prioritize the involvement of local youth initiatives when developing peace-oriented policy and programs.***

Youth are not only key stakeholders in long-term peacebuilding; they also bring skills, local understanding and innovative approaches to peace initiatives. Donors and INGOs need to involve and be led by youth, particularly young women, in all aspects of their programming, from design through to implementation, and across all sectors.

***Invest in existing youth initiatives and networks, provide opportunities for youth to share learning and build thematic specialisms.***

There are many small but valuable youth initiatives across Yemen, but they are often ad hoc and operate in isolation. It is important to help these existing youth groups to become sustainable, to create opportunities for youth to exchange knowledge, skills and lessons from their contexts, and to help youth build specialisms across the various sectors relevant to long-term peace. In this regard, the international community, local NGOs and other stakeholders should provide financial and technical support

through participatory designed, long-term programs for existing youth initiatives and networks.

***Create more livelihood opportunities for young men and women, including support for small-scale projects and startups, micro financing and loans.***

While many youth are proving themselves exceptionally creative and innovative, this resilience does have limits. There is a dire need to create livelihood opportunities for young men and women. Investing in youths' innovation and creativity and providing them with the tools and guidance to start their own projects and startups would eventually avert emerging conflicts and at the same time lay a foundation for sustainable development in Yemen.

***Support the establishment and expansion of art and cultural spaces, and make more grants available for young artists.***

Cultural spaces (cinemas, theaters, cultural clubs and cultural centers) and art activism are of great value in youth's peace-building contributions. Such institutions can be safe spaces for young men and women not only to practice cultural and artistic activities, but also to make explicit or implicit peace-building contributions. The support of existing cultural spaces in many Yemeni governorates, the establishment of new ones and the expansion of cultural and artistic activism should be a matter of focus in order to enhance the engagement of youth.

***Involve and train youth in mainstream and citizen media, and support youth-led initiatives that aim to improve and raise awareness of conflict sensitivity in local and social media.***

Many youth believe that their involvement in independent and unbiased mainstream and citizen media is indispensable for rebuilding the division in social cohesion and for promoting peace and coexistence in Yemen. We recommend instituting programs to train and support youth to gain the knowledge and skills to use media to promote reconciliation over violence, coexistence over hatred, and peace over war. Programs should establish and support independent and unbiased youth-led media platforms and academies to boost the voice and work of young people in promoting peace and development.

***Support youth at risk and develop culturally appropriate psychological support models for youth activists.***

In partnership with local CSOs and youth activists, national and international NGOs should start to develop models to support the mental health and wellbeing of youth. Larger organizations should offer psychological support for those beyond their own staff, employing informal and collective approaches, while learning from what is working on the ground. More funds are needed to support activists at risk, such as those being targeted for their activism or their identity, as well as collaborative action taken between international stakeholders to provide safe passage to third party countries when necessary.

## About the Authors

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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](http://carpo-bonn.org)

Facebook / Twitter: @CARPObonn

## About YWBOD

Established in 2013, Youth Without Borders Organization for Development (YWBOD) is a Yemeni NGO working on youth's empowerment, peacebuilding, coexistence and community peace and security through capacity building, awareness raising, research, and technical and financial support for youth initiatives at local and national levels. In its work, it establishes partnerships with local communities, state institutions, private sector and other CSOs. YWBOD is a member and currently the Steering Group Representative of the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY) for the MENA region. It is also a member of the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and State Building (CSPPS).

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