



**“The situation needs us to be active”
Youth contributions to peacebuilding in Yemen**

December 2019

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Cover photo – A young Yemeni woman stands in an abandoned building in Sana'a.

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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A boy cycles past graffiti in Sana'a.
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Executive summary

More than four years of brutal conflict in Yemen have had a catastrophic effect on the country and its people, creating one of the world's worst humanitarian crises and leaving millions without access to adequate food, water, housing or healthcare. The war's devastating effect on the economy has led to job losses for more than 70 per cent of the workforce. Families face difficult choices in order to survive, with more parents forcing girls to marry early, while young men and boys are driven to join militias.¹

The conflict has taken a heavy toll on the country's youth activists – a vibrant part of civil society that grew rapidly during Yemen's 2011 revolution. Young activists have been forced to retreat and adapt as the space for engagement narrows. But young people continue to play vital roles across Yemen, demonstrating adaptability, pragmatism and innovation in their responses to the challenging and changing context. They are spearheading humanitarian initiatives in spaces others are unable to reach, and contribute to social cohesion and well-being within their communities. They monitor human rights abuses and spread messages of peace at local, national and international levels.

The work young people are doing lays the groundwork for peace in the long term and makes immediate contributions to the well-being of their communities in three critical ways:

- 1. Keeping youth away from violent conflict and identity politics, and helping them choose alternatives to violence.** Youth activists are role models, providing an alternative vision of agency and empowerment for their peers.
- 2. Maintaining social cohesion and community relationships.** Communities are under huge strain due to the political and humanitarian impacts of the conflict, but youth initiatives help build solidarity and cooperation.
- 3. Creating hope and building support for peace, embedded in an effort to spread a 'culture of peace'.** Youth are promoting openness, inclusiveness and tolerance and building their peers' knowledge on peacebuilding and other issues that they see as crucial to preventing violence.

This type of grassroots, youth-led action is more than just a good news story amid a brutal conflict. Ensuring that international peace engagement in Yemen supports local conflict transformation is critical, as prospects for the mediation process led by the United Nations (UN) in the short term are – at best – to achieve some de-escalation between the main parties to the conflict at the national and international level. At a local level, the day-to-day realities of conflict and violence are affected by a much broader set of interconnected factors, from long-term, deeply rooted inequalities and exclusionary governance, to localised power struggles and conflicts over resources.

Part of Martin Griffiths’s mandate as UN special envoy for Yemen is to develop a framework for a long-term peace process, beyond the current focus on immediate de-escalation. He has publicly stated his commitment to ensuring an inclusive process. This paper echoes the calls of the ‘2018 independent progress study on youth, peace and security’ – mandated as part of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 – to address the ‘violence of exclusion’, where political exclusion is defined ‘as a form of structural and psychological violence that is deeply rooted in the reciprocal mistrust between young people, their governments and the multilateral system’.

But any efforts to support civil society, youth and women’s participation in formal processes risk being tokenistic and disconnected if they are not rooted in people’s experiences and needs, and should be sustained by diverse community activism. This is the essential basis on which independent, Yemeni-led influencing of the peace process can be built.

Decisions and activities at the national level are not the only ones that can have a positive impact on the lives of Yemenis during conflict. Of equal importance is supporting young people’s ability to address the conflicts they experience in their communities – through their own identified priorities and methods. As the youth who contributed to this paper have highlighted, empowerment activities, cultural and artistic spaces, advocacy for change, conflict mediation and humanitarian relief initiatives in their communities are all part of a spectrum of activities that they see as contributions to peacebuilding.

Based on our experience of working with youth organisations and activists in Yemen since 2010 and on interviews for this paper, we have identified areas for donors, diplomats, international non-governmental organisations and the UN to take action on in order to build on the vital work Yemeni

youth are doing and support the individuals and organisations on the front line of peacebuilding.

1. Support youth initiatives and their visions for peace with flexible and fast funding that meets their needs

“Youth are the main axis. If we help them develop themselves and build their capacity, we will be able to drive activities and work that contributes to peacebuilding and social cohesion”.

Buthaina, Programme Manager, Hodeidah Girls Foundation.

Flexible and rapid funding of relatively small amounts – usually less than USD\$20,000 – is what the majority of youth-led initiatives need. Microgrants can be disbursed rapidly, acknowledging that young people are best placed to identify how to contribute to peacebuilding in their communities. These smaller grants also need to be accompanied by flexible work plans and budgets that can be adapted and altered when needed. Strategies for supporting youth need to be based on a broad understanding of what contributes to peacebuilding and should encompass a range of small but joined-up initiatives that contribute in different ways to building the structures and relationships needed for long-term peace.

2. Bridge the gap between young people and power-holders: challenge the political exclusion of youth

“The international community, including the UN, are all now dealing with the old elite groups and not listening to youth. They need to get closer to youth and give them attention. Youth have the capacity to create solutions.”

Akram, Taiz.

Diplomats need to increase their direct political engagement with youth representatives and reflect the importance of the role of young people, in order to challenge their political exclusion and capitalise on their potential for building peace. International donors and diplomats should not put engaging with youth into a ‘post-conflict’ category – forgotten or sidelined while a national peace agreement may or may not be successfully brokered. New initiatives are needed to provide forums for young civil society activists to discuss critical issues in the peace process with international diplomats – facilitated in a way that puts young people on an equal footing with others in the room.

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3. Understand local dynamics and avoid reinforcing historic marginalisation

“There are many conflicts that need to be analysed and understood with local tools.”

Young man, Mukalla.

“I want the youth of the other governorates in Yemen to have the same chances, experiences and knowledge as the youth in Sana’a”.

Young woman, Aden.

Youth programming needs to take into account the legacy of historic marginalisation on activists, particularly those in the south of the country and in more rural locations, to avoid reproducing it. In particular, international organisations need to be careful that the bureaucratic requirements of the aid industry don't exclude more marginalised populations from accessing international funding and support on the perceived basis that they lack the 'skills' or 'capacity' to manage development projects. To ensure projects respond to local dynamics, a civil society organisation (CSO) based in the chosen governorate should be involved in both the design of the activities and in leading the implementation; if this is not possible, it should be a CSO that has strong links to the chosen location and staff based there. Conflict sensitivity should also be integrated into planning projects and activities.

4. Better understand the gendered impacts of the conflict on young women and act to support their participation

“The current situation has reduced the abilities of some women to participate and opened the door for others”.

Young woman, Taiz.

Youth programming needs to be based on an understanding of young women's and men's different experiences and roles in conflict that disentangles assumptions and expectations of gender roles from actual experiences within specific locations. While young women are defying expectations of outsiders by leading peacebuilding work, the challenges for women vary across Yemen. Supporting their participation needs to go beyond including a quota for women participants – good practice includes planning for gender-sensitivity training of project staff, budgeting for additional costs of women participants and ensuring planning activities take into account the timings or spaces for events that will make them accessible to women. Addressing the issues of entrenched inequalities is a

critical component of peacebuilding work: peace negotiations provide a chance to embed greater inclusion in political systems – a space which often shrinks after a peace agreement is negotiated.²

5. Give youth peacebuilders platforms for their work and support peer-to-peer learning

“It will be more beneficial to help them see beyond the immediate problem. Help them to think big. Link them to each other and with the world.”

Young woman, Sana'a.

There are no off-the-shelf models for peacebuilding. Yemen's youth activists already know their priorities and have locally appropriate ways of working. But more can be done to support them to 'think big' and learn to grow beyond their original ideas, or take inspiration from their peers. There are many examples of good practice across youth groups. Peer-to-peer learning could be more widely used to spread effective ways of working. Within this, the role of more established Yemeni CSOs is vital. These organisations have long-standing experience of designing and managing youth programmes, and they have skilled workers who have strong links to young people and communities. Yet Yemeni CSOs have been deeply affected by many challenges since 2015 – supporting them to rebuild and work sustainably should be a high priority for international donors.

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6. Provide opportunities to replace lost livelihoods and education

“It is really hard for youth to continue using their own money for activism as they themselves are struggling financially. It has become hard for them to even spend their money for public transportation”.

Young woman, Sana'a.

Many of the youth activists we spoke with see livelihood projects as going hand-in-hand with peacebuilding work, and want to engage youth through linked economic and peacebuilding activities. Donors and international organisations can build on locally designed peace and livelihoods projects or social enterprise initiatives by providing relevant funding opportunities for CSOs or other types of support. Those supporting youth programming also need to recognise that involvement in peacebuilding or civil society activities can be time-consuming, taking participants away from their jobs or livelihoods. Even participation in online initiatives can leave

young people out of pocket for the mobile data they have to use. Youth programmes should consider what indirect costs – such as transportation to reach an activity – exist for participants and how these can be supported, so as to open up participation as widely as possible.

7. Support the mental health of youth and support organisations' capacity to provide mental health support

“We did eight sessions of psycho-support for youth, and men were crying more than women. Men are under a lot of pressure to provide and the society doesn't understand that they are also victims”.

Young woman working directly on psychosocial issues.

Despite stigma around mental health issues, young Yemenis have recognised mental health as a priority issue and have started addressing it in their work. Our interviewees identified the need for both psychological support for themselves and their peers, as well as the need for advanced training for youth who are involved in front-line work and providing services to others traumatised by the conflict. Support could come in the form of mental health clinics and counselling services, but also through training on self-care techniques and collective and community approaches to dealing with trauma. An area of opportunity is integrating self-care and psychological support into different types of programming such as peacebuilding, youth empowerment and civic education.

8. Protect youth activists from risks and help them stay safe

“As a result of our activities in Taiz our names appeared on a blacklist issued by Houthis. As a result of the cultural, social and psychological pressures of the conflict our team broke into many factions”.

Young woman, Taiz.

Closing space for civil society is a critical threat – one that international governments and organisations need to act on more strongly. They should exert political pressure on power-holders in Yemen to lift the restrictions placed on civil society groups, to restore press freedoms, to release all detained journalists and civil society activists, and to end all forms of torture, arbitrary detention and human rights abuses. For the activists most at risk of political targeting – particularly journalists and human rights defenders – more protection grants and emergency funds are needed. While youth activists are best placed to evaluate the risks of their work and do so every day, international organisations need to listen to them to understand the risks they face in any given location or context, and to better tailor their security platforms and trainings to suit the needs of Yemeni staff and organisations.

Notes

- 1 UNFPA (2016), ‘Families increasingly resort to child marriage as Yemen's conflict grinds on’, 16 November.
- 2 Close S, O'Rourke C, Yousuf Z (2019), ‘Gender, inclusion and political settlements: Implications for peace processes’, *Accord* (28), p 28.

1

Introduction

More than four years of brutal conflict in Yemen have had a catastrophic effect on the country and its people, creating one of the world's worst humanitarian crises and leaving millions without access to adequate food, water, housing or healthcare. The war's devastating effect on the economy has led to job losses for more than 70 per cent of the workforce. Families face difficult choices in order to survive, with more parents forcing girls to marry early, while young men and boys are driven to join militias.³

So far, attempts to broker national-level peace negotiations and ceasefires have had limited success. As the war continues, underlying societal fractures are deepening and new divisions and conflict lines are emerging, increasing the fragility of Yemen's social fabric.

The conflict has taken a heavy toll on the country's youth activists – a vibrant part of civil society that grew rapidly during Yemen's 2011 revolution. Young activists have been forced to retreat and adapt as the space for engagement narrows. But young people continue to play vital roles across Yemen, demonstrating adaptability, pragmatism, and innovation in their responses to the challenging and changing context. They are spearheading humanitarian initiatives in spaces others are unable to reach, and contribute to social cohesion and well-being within their communities. They monitor human rights abuses and spread messages of peace at local, national and international levels.

The work young people are doing lays the groundwork for peace in the long term and contributes in the short term to improved social cohesion in their communities. They are also presenting visions of peace and hope in a context where there are few.

This paper focuses on young people who identify as community activists or peacebuilders, and who are active in civil society and voluntary work. It is based on learning and evaluations from Saferworld's collaborations with youth activists and youth-focused civil society organisations (CSOs) in Yemen since 2010. It builds on the wealth of briefings and reports by Yemeni researchers including analyses produced by Resonate! Yemen, Youth Without Borders and the Yemen Polling Center.

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Young activists have been forced to retreat and adapt as the space for engagement narrows.

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The paper draws on interviews conducted in July and August 2017 with young women and men activists based in Sana’a, Hodeidah, Hajja, Marib, Mukalla, Lahj, Taiz, Ibb and Aden, as well as youth now based outside of Yemen. It also draws on four focus group discussions run by Saferworld and Wogood for Human Security in August 2017 to contribute to the ‘Independent progress study on the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security’,⁴ as well as a roundtable discussion held by Saferworld in London in August 2017 with international donors, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and British Yemenis.

Interviewees and research participants have been anonymised, unless explicit permission was given to use names.

Notes

- ³ UNFPA (2016), ‘Families increasingly resort to child marriage as Yemen’s conflict grinds on’, 16 November.
- ⁴ These focus group discussions took place in Sana’a and Aden from 9–15 August 2017, involving youth participants from those cities and from Taiz, Hodeidah, Dhamar, Lahj and Abyan. The 28 participants (13 young women, 15 young men), between 18 and 29 years of age, were recruited from Saferworld and partners’ youth contacts. Some of the participants were internally displaced persons. A summary of the findings and a draft of this report were both submitted to the lead author of the ‘Independent progress study on UN Security Council Resolution 2250’ and are reflected in its findings and recommendations.

2

The changing roles of youth activists: a revolution and a stalled transition

The term ‘youth’ in Yemen is usually taken to mean young people aged between 18 and 39.⁵ However, during and following Yemen’s 2011 revolution, the term youth “came to represent a mindset as much as an age bracket”,⁶ where large numbers of men and women defined themselves as ‘independent youth’ or ‘youth activists’, brought together by a collective urge for cultural, economic, social and political change. “You have people who are in their 50s and they say they are part of the youth revolution”, Ibrahim Mothana, a youth leader, explained in an interview in 2012. “It’s those of us who are pushing to establish a civil, democratic state”.

Although young people were involved in activism prior to the revolution,⁷ most see the revolution as a watershed moment for their participation. “Before 2011 youth activities were very limited to some specific areas and activities like community services”, said a leader of a youth organisation in Taiz. “After 2011, there was a revolution inside the youth themselves to play more effective roles. They had the energy and desire to be active actors in political and social life.”

The ‘change squares’ and protest camps that sprung up around the country as part of the 2011 revolution provided an open space where young people could meet, debate and learn from each other. The revolution saw the formation of numerous youth-led coordinating councils and advocacy, media and monitoring groups, including groups led by young women. Initially, many youth were willing to step aside from political affiliations; over time, however, political divisions within the movement grew and were capitalised on and manipulated by political elites. Many youth activists who wanted to remain politically independent and stay active registered their groups as CSOs. Social movements such as the Marib Cause Initiative started to focus on addressing issues faced by communities, arranging tribal gatherings and sit-ins and demanding that revenues from oil and gas production go towards local development projects.⁸

Following a deeply flawed transition deal in 2011 which granted then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh immunity from prosecution and excluded youth activists and their demands from the negotiating table, most youth continued to distrust state

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The politicians stole our dreams, so I wanted to carry on our dreams in a more structured and institutionalised way.

Akram, a 28-year-old human rights activist from Taiz.

institutions and focused on advocacy and awareness raising. “The politicians stole our dreams, so I wanted to carry on our dreams in a more structured and institutionalised way so we can deal with the politicians, get involved with the community and amplify our voices”, said Akram, a 28-year-old human rights activist from Taiz.

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At the same time, the transition did usher in some additional opportunities and resources for youth, including a national dialogue process with a 20 per cent quota for youth participation and a 30 per cent quota for women, as well as new youth-focused international training programmes and funding streams. Activists were given a degree of access to decision makers unheard of before the revolution, and even the short-lived 2014 technocratic cabinet – formed on the basis of appointing ‘competent’ ministers rather than according to political party membership – drew heavily from youth leaders, including appointing the youngest-ever minister, Minister of Youth Rafat Al-Akhali.⁹

A number of the interviewees referred to this, in hindsight, as a ‘golden era’ for youth, where both youth and women’s demands were on the agendas of national government and the international community for the first time; political and identity divisions were apparent but mediated; and youth had “ample space to participate in community activities and in politics”.¹⁰ Eight years after the revolution, and over four years into the conflict, many youth activists feel this space has all but disappeared.

Notes

- 5 Alwazir AZ (2012), “Youth” inclusion in Yemen: a necessary element for success of political transition, Arab Reform Initiative.
- 6 2017 interview with a 27-year-old man from Ibb.
- 7 Seventy-seven per cent said ‘Yes’ to the question: “Before participating in the protests, did you participate in any public activism?” Answers included: ‘protests/sit ins’ (54.6 per cent), ‘charity/community work’ (15.6 per cent), ‘newspapers and journals’ (9 per cent), ‘rights activism’ (8.2 per cent), ‘political parties’ (7.7 per cent). From Youth Polling Center (2013), ‘Capacities and needs assessments survey: Youth’.
- 8 Al-Dawsari N (2014), ‘Marib Youth and Political Transition in Yemen’, Atlantic Council, 31 March (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/marib-youth-and-political-transition-in-yemen>); Toska S (2018), ‘The rise and fall and necessity of Yemen’s youth movements’, *POMEPS Studies: Politics, Governance and Reconstruction in Yemen* 29, pp 51–55.
- 9 Transfeld M (2014), ‘Houthis on the Rise in Yemen’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 October; Blavatnik School of Government (2014), ‘Yemen’s youngest minister, now a fellow of practice’ (<https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/yemens-youngest-minister-now-fellow-practice>).
- 10 Interview with young woman, Sana’a, 2017.

3

Fight, flight or adapt: the impact of conflict on activism

“I’d say I was more of a youth activist before. Now there is no space for youth activism and the space for freedom has shrunk. I’d have to follow a certain agenda.”

Young woman, Sana’a.

Unsurprisingly, the war has taken a heavy toll on youth and civil society activities across the country, with the 2015 escalation of conflict leading to an almost immediate closing down of physical, political and social space for youth activism.¹¹ The war has drastically reduced the resources available to pursue development, political participation or rights-oriented work. The limited government services that did exist have collapsed, opportunities to earn income have disappeared and, in 2015, most – if not all – INGOs quickly cancelled governance and youth programmes and switched to emergency humanitarian work. Many of the young people we spoke with talked about how political factions and armed groups – on all sides – have been deliberately targeting youth organisations and activists with violence and harassment, and how civil society work itself is under threat.

“War and conflict also replaced any political process that the youth might have hoped to engage with,” said the leader of a youth organisation in Taiz. “It’s no longer in their hands to make any change, or to have any interventions – it reduces them to just watching or observing the situation.”

The combined weight of these challenges meant that a large number of youth activities in Yemen stopped altogether. “As a result of the cultural, social, psychological pressure we divided into many factions”, said a 25-year-old woman, also from Taiz. “Some members supported the resistance, some joined the Houthis, some left, and others decided to remain neutral”.



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Women have also been taking on more active roles as combatants, including manning checkpoints and repressing demonstrations.

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Most of the young people we spoke with were particularly concerned about the numbers of young men from their communities who have been pushed into fighting as a way of obtaining income or finding purpose. “As there are no jobs, some youth are being recruited to one or other of the conflicted parties either to fight, or to speak on their behalf”, said 34-year-old Mohammad, a youth leader and peacebuilder from Sana’a. Other youth activists argue that it is also the suspension of the political process that has led many young men to feel that the only way of proving themselves as active members of the community is to go and fight, resulting in them going into battle untrained and at greater risk of being killed. Women have also been taking on more active roles as combatants, including manning checkpoints

and repressing demonstrations.¹² “Units of women combatants [are] in both the north and south” of the country, said one young woman from Taiz.

Many of Yemen’s more prominent ‘leadership’ youth figures, and those with greater financial means, have left the country to pursue employment and education opportunities abroad. This brings with it a risk of ‘brain drain’ – though many continue to support activities from outside Yemen, and in some locations this allows new leadership figures to emerge. However, the majority of youth activists do not have the opportunity to leave or do not want to: in a 2016–2017 youth survey by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) foundation, 71 per cent of the Yemeni respondents stated that they had no intention of leaving the country.¹³

Other youth have simply stopped working on their activities, for a number of reasons: their work was no



An artist paints a mural as part of a campaign to depict the suffering of cholera patients in Sana'a, April 2019.
© Reuters/Mohamed Al-Sayaghi

longer relevant to the new context, it was too dangerous or traumatic to continue, or they were busy “looking for their next meal” according to one young person in Aden. “It’s a really hard context to be talking about activism or rights”, said Awssan, a UK-based British Yemeni young man now working for a large INGO. “It’s a prison without walls that’s imploding on them.” When asked what hinders youth participation in peacebuilding activities, one young woman in Sana’a said, “The absence of motivation for participation and change. There is no solution or hope.” Another echoed her by saying, “There is no hope or trust in anyone for change.”¹⁴

A significant number of both young women and men continue to be actively engaged however, and have adapted their work to respond to the changing context. Awssan noted that in some areas, including Hadramawt and Aden, there is even a “flourishing

youth movement” where young men and women are as important, if not more, than international organisations. “Although the conflict has affected the situation negatively and the role of youth and women has noticeably shrunk, there are still youth groups who are active and willing to engage”, explained a 30-year-old young woman who runs a CSO in Sana’a. “We are a team of 14 girls”, said Buthaina, Programme Manager at Hodeidah Girls Foundation, a young women’s organisation focused on development and women’s empowerment. “We’ve worked in the most difficult times. Even when all organisations closed down in Hodeidah, we didn’t stop.”

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We’ve worked in the most difficult times. Even when all organisations closed down in Hodeidah, we didn’t stop.

**Buthaina, Programme Manager,
Hodeidah Girls Foundation.**

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The youth we spoke to highlighted the ways in which the conflict is affecting their ability to work effectively as activists. These are outlined over the next few pages.

Limited movement and ability to meet

Movement is extremely restricted in the areas affected by airstrikes and the use of explosive weapons, and the risks of convening meetings have become extremely high. As the recent FES survey shows, youth are highly reliant on face-to-face communication for information and activities, with only a third of youth respondents having access to the internet.¹⁵

“In the morning, before you leave to work, you have to check where the expected places of bombardment [are] . . . in the last year it has become almost impossible to organise any [activities and] the number of evening activities has significantly shrunk”, explained a young woman working for a Yemeni non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Sana’a in 2017. Even when there is less risk of airstrikes, shelling or ground fighting, the security situation means that anyone moving between locations has to get permits from militia groups and face harassment at checkpoints: “Weapons were raised twice to my face at checkpoints,” one young person in Aden told us. Youth in Aden and the south mentioned their worries about the proliferation of weapons. “We became afraid about going out into the street, fearing falling bullets,” said one young man in Aden.

The continued closure of Sana’a airport – Yemen’s primary international airport – to commercial flights, and regular closures of Aden International Airport due to insecurity, have also meant that opportunities for young people to attend trainings and other activities abroad have largely vanished. This has increased the political isolation of Yemeni peacebuilders from international support and solidarity networks or from opportunities to influence the international stage.

Young women across the country feel particularly constrained. They described how it has become even harder for them to participate in trainings and workshops – which even prior to 2015 were often organised outside of Yemen for security reasons – and their movement is often restricted by their families. “Some girls just don’t feel safe at all, and now just stay at home”, said a 25-year-old Yemeni woman, who is now based in Germany. “We are

subjected to violence in all forms and kinds of war. It is a state of violence”, said one young woman from Sana’a. “If I do not lose someone from my family, I will lose a neighbour. I cannot go out because of my mother’s fear of kidnapping.” This was also reflected in the results of the FES survey, where 59 per cent of the women respondents stated that their families do not allow them to be politically active.¹⁶

Direct targeting of youth activists

There were many reports of threats against youth activists – as well as against their friends and families – from Houthi-controlled security forces and forces that were previously under the control of former President Saleh, United Arab Emirates (UAE) forces, various resistance militias, criminal gangs, and groups affiliated with al-Qaeda. Gatherings of young activists are frequently subjected to harassment or are shut down. Many activists are profiled and their social media and email accounts are hacked. Early in the conflict, Houthi fighters raided the offices and the homes of youth activists in Aden and Taiz, stealing computers, hard drives and other equipment integral to their work. Now, youth activists in Aden speak of being threatened by other extremist armed groups such as Emam Al-Noubi, Salafist groups and criminal gangs with no obvious affiliation. Since the killing of President Saleh in December 2017, political arrests and harassment in Houthi-controlled areas have increased significantly. A young woman from Sana’a told us that during an activity that involved making 1,000 peace candles, “armed militias threatened me and interrogated me. They took the camera”.

The young women we spoke to experience significant levels of intimidation and threats through phone calls and social media, and feel forced to reduce their visibility online and offline.¹⁷ Several women in Sana’a mentioned verbal sexual harassment, especially towards women who are politically active, and said that security agencies are infiltrating women’s activities and demanding donations to the war effort.

Young women and men who are perceived to present any political dissent to local power-holders – including but not limited to civil society activists, human rights advocates and young journalists – are also at increasing risk of arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and even assassination at the hands of a number of violent and repressive armed groups.

According to a poll conducted by the Yemen Polling Center in late 2017, the spread of robbery, kidnapping and assassinations in the southern governorates were reported as the greatest threat (23 per cent) to young people between 15 and 25 years old.¹⁸

After the assassination of his friend Maher,¹⁹ a young culture and education activist in Aden explained how threatened he felt: “After Maher’s death, many of my friends received death threats. I used to teach guitar – now I can’t even post something on Facebook to promote my courses. I now hate the streets in Aden; I am always cautious. When someone walks behind me, I feel so threatened and scared.”

Rising costs, loss of income and fewer resources

Destroyed roads, slow internet, intermittent access to electricity, and the difficulty and expense of purchasing fuel, food and water present huge obstacles to carrying out activities. Young people running the Basement Cultural Foundation in Sana’a estimate that the financial costs of their activities have nearly doubled since the war began. At the same time, youth working on community-oriented projects have found that the needs of their participants have increased, creating a further burden. “Our governorate was struggling even before the conflict, but the conflict has exacerbated the situation”, said Buthaina from Hodeidah Girls Foundation. “Now, whenever we go to the field to organise activities people say that they need water and food.”

Dwindling opportunities to generate income through employment have also placed a severe burden on youth activism. “At the beginning, youth were able to use their own pocket money to participate and conduct activities, while now it is really hard for youth . . . as they themselves are struggling financially”, said a young woman working for a Yemeni NGO in Sana’a. Non-payment of government salaries and private businesses closing or laying off staff have placed young people under tremendous pressure to generate income for their families.²⁰ Ala Qasem of youth-run foundation Resonate! Yemen estimated that by November 2015, 26 per cent of all firms in Yemen had shut their doors – and out of these, 58 per cent were run by young people aged 35 and under. Walid from the Sana’a Centre for Strategic

Studies said that it was increasingly difficult for people aged between 18 and 29 to get microfinance or loans from banks.²¹

The loss of internationally funded roles in the development sector has also particularly affected youth activists. When international donors and INGOs suspended governance and development programmes in 2015, a large number of jobs and partnership roles that had been filled by youth activists went with them. “Donors lost interest and stopped funding projects”, said a 30-year-old woman director of a development organisation in Sana’a, “while other INGOs started implementing their projects directly and stopped funding local NGOs”.

In the past, writes Ala Qasem of Resonate! Yemen, when ‘faced with more moderate economic hardships, young Yemenis would exploit what little political space they had to protest their conditions and demand corrective actions, however small these might be. Their political activism helped them release some of the stress of their daily pressures, and whatever gains they realised helped sustain their hopes that they could stand a chance of starting a family and securing a dignified life’.²² With schools and colleges across the country closed or too dangerous to attend, many families are pushing young men and boys to join armed groups as a source of income. “University graduates are diverted [from their life plans] because of their inability to find jobs or because they take up arms, which psychologically damages them,” said one young person in Aden. Girls and young women on the other hand are often seen as financial burdens and are increasingly at risk of being married off at a young age in return for a dowry payment.²³

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The conflict has exacerbated underlying societal divisions and created new ones along religious, sectarian and political lines, even at the family level.

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Increasing social divisions and problems engaging with local authorities

The conflict has exacerbated underlying societal divisions and created new ones along religious, sectarian and political lines, even at the family level. A young woman in Sana’a described how “At the level of the community, the culture of war spread

negative social norms. People would ask what you're wearing, what you're listening to, how you behave. These things increased massively. There are differences within the same household. Religious differences, differences in opinion. When a family member is a social activist and another member of the family perceives community work negatively. The social fabric has been torn apart.”

Many post-revolution, pre-war youth activities involved bringing young men and women together across divides – but the war has polarised people to such an extent that this has become much harder. “There is a social gap between youth and an increasing culture of calling people by their areas: ‘you are a southerner, a Taizi, a northerner’”, said a 25-year-old woman from Taiz. “Sadly, there is also religious division that we are witnessing for the first time in Yemen: ‘you are Zaidi, or you are Shafa’i.’” A young man from Sana’a said that, “Before, we were hosting political discussions and figures from all sides as a part of [the] cultural scene, and now we don’t”. “Children are affected by regionalism and racism in schools

and in the community,” one young person in Aden told us, referring not only to prejudices between north and south but also to more localised differences such as those between Adenis originating from different governorates such as Abyan and al-Dhale’a.

These divisions and tensions are also playing out online, with people posting highly politicised stories without context, and posting deliberately hostile messages to Yemenis outside their circles, particularly on Facebook. As a result, some youth told us that they have retreated from using social media and deactivated their social media profiles entirely, while others write anonymously or choose their words very carefully.

While the levels of trust in local government and state authorities were already low before the war, and the distinctions between state and non-state authorities already extremely blurred,²⁴ the conflict has exacerbated these issues and made relationships with authorities particularly complex and dangerous for youth. “The concept of security became ‘those who protect me are those who have the right to control my life,’” said one young person in Aden. Another described how “The political parties do not support you unless they are sure you are with them. They would always ask: ‘with us or with them?’ ‘Ours or theirs?’” Several youth activists also told us how the limited relationships between young people and the local authorities make it

difficult to carry out activities. One young woman in Sana’a said, “The relationship [with local authorities] is almost non-existent, as there is nothing that makes us need to communicate with them. Even if we need authorisations, we have someone else who can take care of that.”

Strains on mental health and psychological well-being

Yemen’s conflict is exposing an entire population to extremely high levels of trauma. ‘Right now we have an entire generation of youth that have been terrified or terrorised by this war and who have been going through one of the most devastating psychological impacts imaginable’, wrote Farea Al-Muslimi.²⁵ Farea is the co-founder of the Sana’a Centre for Strategic Studies, a Yemeni youth-led think tank based in Beirut and Sana’a, which estimates that 15 to 20 per cent of the population are likely to develop mild to moderate mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress, with 3 to 4 per cent likely to develop severe mental health conditions, such as psychosis or debilitating depression and anxiety, which affect their ability to function and survive.²⁶

This was a concern reiterated by many of the Yemeni youth we spoke to, who were very worried about the increasing rates of trauma, anxiety, depression, self-harm and even suicide among youth, especially among youth activists involved in community and peace-oriented initiatives and Yemeni youth in exile or studying abroad.²⁷ In all of the focus group discussions, participants mentioned how the conflict and violence surrounding them has affected them psychologically. “I lost two-thirds of my friends to the war which shook my inner peace,” said one young person from Aden. They talked about how people have been going through mental breakdowns due to the lack of security in their lives, the anxiety linked with protecting family members, and the obligation to stay indoors. They also talked about the pain for families of being separated because of the war, and parents’ fears for their children’s future. The Sana’a Centre for Strategic Studies found that Yemenis suffering from mental health conditions have been ‘detained in family homes’ or abandoned and left homeless, and that women face particular challenges in accessing treatment.²⁸

“**Right now we have an entire generation of youth that have been terrified or terrorised by this war and who have been going through one of the most devastating psychological impacts imaginable.”**

Farea Al-Muslimi, co-founder of the Sana’a Centre for Strategic Studies.

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A lack of hope, and the negative impact this has on their emotional well-being and capacity to engage, was frequently referred to by interviewees. “We were so hopeful”, said the young man education activist from Aden. “But when they assassinated the governor Jaffar, I cried like I never did for a government official – they killed hope in us. Then they killed [my friend] Maher. I was with him the evening before. Can you imagine what kind of psychological state I’d be in after I saw my friend’s face full of bullet holes?”

Notes

- 11 ‘The war environment limits the capacity and scope of peaceful political tools and helps strengthen the role of armed groups and violence on the ground. The consequences of related repression against public and personal freedoms also limit the options for youth.’ Resonate (2015), ‘Implications of the crisis in Yemen on youth political participation’.
- 12 Saferworld (2017), “‘Women nowadays do anything’: women’s role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen,” June; Wert L (2018), ‘Yemenis demand accountability from conflict parties in “Revolution of the hungry” protests’, Yemen Peace Project, 13 October (<https://www.yemenpeaceproject.org/blog-x/2018/11/27/yemenis-demand-accountability-from-conflict-parties-in-revolution-of-the-hungry-protests>).
- 13 Transfeld M (2018), ‘Waiting for the state, relying on the family: Yemen’s youth in peril: FES MENA Youth Study: Country Analysis Yemen’, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p 11.
- 14 Focus group discussion, Sana’a, 2017.
- 15 Transfeld M (2018), ‘Waiting for the state, relying on the family: Yemen’s youth in peril: FES MENA Youth Study: Country Analysis Yemen’, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, pp 8–9.
- 16 Ibid, p 9.
- 17 See also Yemen Polling Center (2019), ‘Youth Activism in the Yemeni Civil War’, February.
- 18 Transfeld M (2018), ‘Yemen’s education system at a tipping point: Youth between their future and present survival’, *POMEPS Studies: Politics, Governance and Reconstruction in Yemen* 29.
- 19 Name has been changed.
- 20 Internal Saferworld programme evaluation, 2017.
- 21 Notes from: Arab Gulf States Institute (2018), ‘Bringing Yemen back from the brink: What role for youth activism?’, February.
- 22 Qasem A (2018), ‘Gasping for hope: Yemeni youth struggle for their future’, *POMEPS Studies: Politics, Governance and Reconstruction in Yemen* 29.
- 23 Recent data on the prevalence of child marriage is limited, but in a September 2016 survey by Yemen Youth Leadership Development Foundation, 66 per cent of women in the governorates of Sana’a, Hodeidah, Dhamar, Hajjah, Ibb and Aden said they thought there was an increase in the number of girls marrying early during the war. However, only 28 per cent of men agreed. In November 2016, a UNFPA-INTERSOS assessment interviewing over 250 people found that the majority of participants were of the opinion that child marriage has increased in their community. YLDF (2017), ‘Tadhafur Program for Safe Age of Marriage: Child Marriage Survey’, May (<http://www.yldf.org/uploads/publications/Child%20Marriage%20Survey%20-final%20draft%20May%202017.pdf>). UNFPA (2016), ‘Families increasingly resort to child marriage as Yemen’s conflict grinds on’, 16 November.
- 24 For more on local governance, state and non-state authorities, and youth perceptions, see: Transfeld M (2017), ‘Coming of age in a fragmented state: Everyday struggles and perspectives of Yemeni youth’, Yemen Polling Center; Salisbury P (2017), ‘Yemen: national chaos, local order’, Chatham House.
- 25 Bowen J (2015), ‘In Yemen, “One more day of war means 10 more of rebuilding”: Q&A with Farea Al-Muslimi’, Global Observatory.
- 26 Sana’a Center (2017), ‘The impact of war on mental health in Yemen: A neglected crisis’.
- 27 Ibid. ‘Sources at the Ministry of Interior and other mental health experts in Sana’a also reported that suicide rates in the capital rose some 40.5% from 2014 to 2015.’
- 28 Sana’a Center (2017), ‘The impact of war on mental health in Yemen: A neglected crisis’.



Yemeni youth sweep the street as they take part in a clean-up campaign in Sana'a, December 2016.
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AFP via Getty Images

4

“The situation needs us to be active”

How Yemeni youth are working towards peace

“The situation needs us to be active and we have to be active as youth, we shouldn’t wait for people to come and help us in Hodeidah, we should be active and do what we can to help.”

Buthaina, Programme Manager, Hodeidah Girls Foundation.

Despite facing tremendous obstacles, many Yemeni youth activists around the country – both women and men – are still convinced of the importance of civic engagement, and believe that they can play a positive role in their communities during the conflict. The majority of young men and women we spoke to continue to be involved in collective initiatives and associations, often creating new ones as needs emerge. “We don’t have the means to make all the contributions we would like, but we are working with what we have”, one young woman running a development organisation in Sana’a told us.

Many are only able to work in their immediate localities. Some youth activists shifted away from more overtly political or rights-oriented work, particularly during the early stages of the conflict when the greatest space and perceived need was in humanitarian relief. A similar trend is reflected in the results of the Yemen Polling Center’s 2017 youth survey, in which respondents stated they were directing their activities towards society rather than politics.²⁹

Engagement has gradually shifted from concerns about immediate needs to a more sustainable approach, linking and combining humanitarian responses with development and local-level conflict mediation. Young people have also worked to combat increasing levels of hostility and community division by using artistic and new media tools – such as music, painting, social media, photography and videography – to promote peace and coexistence. Youth have launched projects to monitor and document human rights violations in several governorates. The traumas of the conflict have created demands for civil society to work on mental health projects, leading to youth-led initiatives such as ‘children’s safe zones’ and counselling sessions for survivors of sexual- and gender-based violence.

Many small businesses and projects have been set up to overcome economic challenges. Some young people have invested in innovation and entrepreneurial activities, starting home-based businesses or launching phone apps to fill a gap in the market or help people find income-generating opportunities.

Regardless of scale, activists felt that their interventions were necessary for dealing with immediate needs and long-term peacebuilding. “We see that our existence does make a difference, even if it is on a very small scale”, said a young woman co-founder of a development CSO in Aden. These

interventions help communities cope with the direct effects of war in the short term; address the consequences of conflict that are less visible, such as psychological trauma and societal fragmentation; and help develop a new generation of leaders who can offer peaceful alternatives to conflict in the future. “Although the dissemination of a culture of dialogue and coexistence, peacebuilding and social peace may not be the direct way to mitigate immediate dangers,”

explained a 25-year-old man from Lahj, “it raises awareness and develops people’s thinking, helping people think of the future away from the conflict and extremism.”

“
... youth are putting forward alternative narratives and visions for peace, as well as developing skills and resources that will contribute to long-term peacebuilding in Yemen.”

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“Driving peace”

“Reducing the suffering of people – this is one way of driving peace... bring[ing] people together to help them understand each other’s opinions is another way of driving peace and... involv[ing] youth in social work is also a way of driving peace.”

Buthaina, Programme Manager, Hodeidah Girls Foundation.

The wide range of activities that youth have been engaged in during the conflict in Yemen is indeed ‘driving’ peace, in a number of important ways:

- **Keeping youth away from violent conflict and identity politics, and helping them choose alternatives to violence.** The majority of the young people we spoke with said that one of the overriding objectives of their work was to provide alternative visions and options for young people to keep them from being drawn into conflicts. Across the country, youth activists saw every project as a conflict prevention activity – as opportunities to dissuade young men and women from becoming combatants or from being drawn into identity-based politics and violence. Youth activists have become role models, providing an alternative vision of agency and empowerment.

“I sold my personal gold to continue our work because I saw how important our work is”, recalled one young woman leading a CSO in Sana’a. “We’ve got to do it, otherwise no-one will do it. If we don’t engage with youth, we’re losing more of them to the battlefields. [We are] selling [our] own things because we value the lives of others.”
- **Maintaining social cohesion and community relationships.** The various youth activities help sustain community-level relationships that have been put under huge strain due to the conflict. Youth we spoke with said they are noticing more solidarity and cooperation among people, as well as better understanding of the hardship that some people are facing, thanks to a stronger culture of dialogue that is emerging from their work.
- **Creating hope and building support for peace, embedded in an effort to spread a ‘culture of peace’.** Through various activities, youth are putting forward alternative narratives and visions for peace, as well as developing skills and resources that will contribute to long-term peacebuilding in Yemen. The youth activists we spoke to talked about their personal efforts to spread a ‘culture of peace’ – one of openness, inclusiveness and tolerance – through their work. They said that their activities are bringing back hope to communities and youth who have been disenfranchised. An important part of this has been supporting each other, coming together regardless

BOX 1

Case study: Camps for internally displaced persons – Sana’a and Marib

Across Yemen, youth initiatives have set up, worked in and managed IDP camps, providing immediate assistance, negotiating with authorities and fundraising locally. These interventions have taken place across the country in Mukalla, Ibb, Taiz, Hajjah, Hodeidah and Amran – areas that have hosted the most IDPs. Some have gone beyond immediate response, providing psychosocial support sessions for children and fundraising for the reconstruction of IDPs’ homes.

The Marib Dam Foundation, a local youth-led CSO, managed an emergency IDP response and is supporting over 4,500 families (around 27,000 people in total) in Serwah, Vally, Al-Maghzar, Raghwan and Marib city – providing water, sanitation, blankets, solar lamps and emergency shelter materials. The project ran in collaboration with the Sama Foundation and was funded by the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees. Through a UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs fund, the foundation also documented a further 17 IDP groups in Marib. The absence of an accurate IDP database is one of the main challenges: “It is very hard to have a database when people are constantly moving and changing their locations”, said a 26-year-old working with the foundation. “The very hot weather, and the rough road are also very challenging circumstances that we have to deal with whenever we go to the field to provide services . . . however, due to our impartiality, the organisations were able to provide services to IDPs both in Marib, which is a government-controlled area, and Sana’a, which is controlled by the others.”

of the activity, and contributing to building their peers’ knowledge on peacebuilding and other issues that they see as crucial to preventing violence.

Humanitarian relief and community organising

Faced with urgent needs and a vacuum in government services and international support, many young activists have turned their attention to emergency humanitarian efforts at the local level – and have found they are quicker in their response, able to mobilise their networks, and able to access locations that larger organisations struggle to reach.

“We have never carried out any humanitarian or relief work before. However, we had to respond to the growing local needs. We couldn’t just sit and wait,” said Waleed, the 29-year-old executive director of Bader Foundation for Development in Sana’a.

“**Youth activists have become role models, providing an alternative vision of agency and empowerment.**”

Providing and regularly filling water tanks became one of the most popular charitable activities nationally, carried out by both CSOs and communities, with huge support from youth activists. Many youth initiatives also helped provide clothes, food packages, first-aid kits and medicine for patients with chronic diseases, and they provided tailored support to internally displaced persons (IDPs) (see box 1, left). Khormakser Youth Union in Aden has worked on cholera response in Mahfad District of Abyan, organising a convoy of medical and sanitation supplies in an effort to help people in what they called ‘the forgotten district’. A British Yemeni working for a large INGO told us that local organisations like these were able to react much faster than international organisations on issues such as the cholera outbreak.

However, many interviewees noted that this type of humanitarian relief support is not sustainable. Instead, they have started to inject humanitarian initiatives with development and livelihood components, such as complementary programmes to support families in establishing their own small businesses like food carts, home delivery kitchens, and *bakhoor* (incense) and traditional scents projects.

Youth groups are also using their skills in social media, awareness raising and graphic design to educate communities on public health and safety issues. For example, in Marib, one activist told us how youth volunteers worked in coordination with local authorities to raise awareness of landmines and explosives among more than 30,000 residents, including over 7,000 IDPs. During the cholera crisis, groups in Aden and elsewhere designed graphics on sanitation and how to avoid contaminated water sources.

Young people see these humanitarian efforts as contributing to peace, as the livelihood and immediate aid families receive reduces the likelihood of men family members joining armed groups for economic reasons. Even activities that look fairly basic on the surface are actually working at multiple levels, creating space for cooperation and establishing trust. By working collaboratively on projects, there is potential for this safe space to lead to dialogue beyond the immediate task – helping to instil a sense of cooperation, solidarity and public spirit among participants that can last beyond a single activity or initiative.³⁰ Some youth activists also noted that one effect of their awareness-raising work is growing compassion towards other people’s problems, which is fundamental for social cohesion.

Art, peace messaging and peace education

Youth are using multiple artistic mediums and spaces to spread peace messaging locally and nationally. Increasing numbers of young men and women artists across the country – singers, painters, filmmakers and photographers – are tailoring art and cultural activities towards peacebuilding. Several exhibitions have taken place in Sana’a and Aden showcasing art projects on the conflict and the resilience that artists are exploring in their daily lives. Women artists in particular are finding more space to express themselves, with exhibitions like ‘Basma w Rasma’ organised by the Basement Cultural Foundation. Street art, especially graffiti, has become a prominent form of advocacy and awareness raising in Yemen – such as Haifa Subay’s murals to help ensure that victims of Yemen’s war are not forgotten, and Murad Subay’s campaigns for peace in the streets of Sana’a.³¹ Youth groups in Sana’a designed stickers with peace messages and quotes from the Quran, disseminating them on public transport.

These activities not only spread messages of peace but also provide avenues for youth to maintain a sense of hope. A number of interviewees mentioned that this form of activism helps to contain the depression and helplessness that some experience as a result of the conflict. “Our work is seriously involved in the peace process because it moves people from the sphere of war to another sphere. Arts and culture shows that life is much more worth living than being involved in war”, said one of the young leaders of Sana’a’s Basement Cultural Foundation.

Social and cultural activities like Aden’s Exhibition for Architectural Heritage and Aden’s summer festival have brought people together and provided a safe and joyful space for people to enjoy cultural activities. Participants in the focus group discussions mentioned organising popular games, sports activities, plays, exhibitions, sermons, discussions about their cultural heritage, storytelling, and music events geared towards spreading a culture of peace. The Volunteers Foundation in Mukalla started the Atelier of Peace Project to encourage peace messages and coexistence in schools. ‘With the state, for the community’ campaigns in Taiz (implemented by an independent women’s group) highlight the importance of the role of the state, and spread education messages on citizens’ rights and duties as part of the state.

Activists also stressed the importance of meeting open-minded friends and building bridges, which helps “them be more tolerant and moves them away from extremism”, as one young Adeni man told us. For example, the Youth of Peace Foundation trained youth from IDP and host communities in filmmaking, later showing the short documentaries they produced to a Sana’a audience. Another example is *Hadramtoon*, an animated series that discusses social issues in the governorate of Hadramawt. The series producer, a youth from Mukalla, explained: “I can now comfortably say that we have now reached every Hadrami house, by speaking the local dialect and making it WhatsApp-friendly.”

Many youth activists have also been able to maintain some links to other youth groups across the country. Projects like the Rights Activists for Peace work across Aden, Abyan and Sana’a, training human rights activists to “promote how human rights can protect people from extremism”, and sharing success stories through social media “to promote peace and co-existence between the three governorates”, said the woman co-founder of Aden’s Alef Ba’a Foundation.

For young people, these interventions are helping to establish a culture of peacebuilding. These experiences embolden youth to “define their goals and national interests and to employ social media and other cultural expressions so as . . . to renew social mobilisation [cautiously] in times of danger”, as one young man from Ibb told us. “Spreading and consolidating the concepts of coexistence, peacebuilding, tolerance, reconciliation and acceptance is one of the most important steps in laying the groundwork for building a modern civil state.”

Psychosocial support

Many Yemenis are struggling with depression, helplessness and trauma as a result of the conflict and youth activists have attempted to provide their communities with some form of psychological support. In Aden, immediately after the Houthis were expelled, local organisation Wogood for Human Security – whose projects are run primarily by young women and men – self-funded psychosocial support for women, men and youth. Another Adeni organisation voluntarily ran a programme reintegrating child soldiers, providing them with psychological support and basic civic education. In Sana’a, the Bader Foundation and Ejad Foundation voluntarily organised group sessions for young people to share their experiences. “We didn’t have funds to arrange psycho-support sessions for youth, but we did it anyway. During the sessions, young men were crying more than young women. Every single one of them had lost a loved one and experienced fear and loss”, a spokesperson for Ejad Foundation for Development told us.

Some youth-led CSOs have received international funding to implement psychosocial support projects for women and children, mainly in central cities like Sana’a, Aden and Hodeidah. Child ‘safe zones’ are safe spaces created by CSOs to help children express their experiences during the conflict through painting and puppet theatres. When schools were shut down, the safe zones gave lessons to keep children connected to their education.

Some support exists for victims of gender-based violence, primarily for women IDPs, and some training courses have been organised that educate respondents on issues related to psycho-support: “I trained six youth organisations who are responding to the conflict and targeting vulnerable communities like IDPs and others. Lately, there has been an increasing interest in psycho-support, especially from youth. The idea of ‘safe zones’ has become

BOX 2

Case study: ‘You can’ video – Hodeidah Girls Foundation

The Hodeidah Girls Foundation produced a video project promoting ‘peace, charitable acts, and education’, with the peace component as the dominant focus. Forty-seven men, women and children participated in the production. Prior to promoting the video on social media, the team disseminated it among youth in Hodeidah and organised a screening to get feedback, which was attended by 50 people. The video was shot in Hodeidah between January and March 2016, with the team overcoming obstacles including getting filming permits from the local authorities and raising additional funds to complement Saferworld’s microgrant. The team created questionnaires to assess the messages youth received from the video, and then uploaded it to their YouTube channel. “The video spread between youth and it attracted their attention . . . they asked us to address other issues in a similar way, because the videos are an easy and effective way to drive change among youth,” one of the team told us.³²

popular, especially for children. However, more work needs to be done to support vulnerable women”, said a woman psychosocial support consultant from Yemen.

The activists we spoke to want to continue providing even limited psychological support, as young people need safe spaces to express themselves as the situation deteriorates across the country. Those who provide aid and support to communities also need safe spaces and access to support, where they can unwind and share their experiences and fears.

Social entrepreneurship

The precarious economy has encouraged creativity, innovation and tenacity. Some youth have started enterprises providing solar energy services or food carts. Youth activists in Aden are particularly keen on social enterprises that provide opportunities for unemployed people. In Sana'a, some noted the positive changes associated with greater reliance on locally produced goods – such as clothing, bags and gifts – as an opportunity to support families and encourage young entrepreneurs.

A number of youth activists are designing web and phone apps. FindAp, designed by Yemeni developers and led by Dr Adel Salah, provides information on local services and providers, such as people selling groceries or gas cylinders, or cleaners and others providing one-off services. Users are rewarded 50 Yemeni rials for every service they add, and owners of the services can alert people to their businesses. Ana Mehani is a social labour market app that connects vetted community-based workers like plumbers and painters with households.³³

Home-based online businesses run by women have also become prominent, in part due to the loss in income from men providers. Younger women have

“**Home-based online businesses run by women have also become prominent, in part due to the loss in income from men providers.**

turned their interests and hobbies into small businesses, such as selling cakes and delivering homemade food, or selling body care products, clothing and accessories online. “My sister in Turkey and her friend in Yemen started a business together. She is managing the shipping in Turkey and sending it back to Yemen”, a young man now living in Germany told us. In Aden, two women have started mobile repair

shops, which have become popular with women as they feel more secure handing over their data and mobile content to other women.

Economic opportunities – such as the 1000 Bakery (see box 4, right) – not only provide people with food and jobs, but the income gained from these paid jobs helps prevent young men from fighting. One young woman from Sana'a explained the difficult choices being made by young people: “His mum was a civil servant, and as a result of . . . not being paid, she started working as a housekeeper. [He] then became a fighter . . . because he thought when he died his mum would get a martyr's salary. He died and his mum got nothing.”

BOX 3

Case study: Aden radio

“Radio programmes reach a large number of youth in a short time, which is why we chose to use it for our peacebuilding work”.

Member of Riwa'a Youth Foundation, Aden.

‘For a Better Life’ was a ten-episode, weekly radio programme which ran in 2017, launched by Riwa'a Youth Development Foundation in cooperation with Radio Lana and funded by the European Union through Saferworld's ‘Youth agents for peace’ project. The programme raised awareness among the communities of Aden, Lahj, Abyan and some areas of Yafa' on peacebuilding, social cohesion and coexistence.

The project team got the community engaged with the programme by starting a Facebook page where questions were posed and discussed, with the opinions of the audience aired during programme segments. The inclusion of a diverse group of community leaders, activists, local authority representatives and religious leaders helped the team tackle peace messages from different perspectives: coexistence, forgiveness and reconciliation, and principles of peace and justice.

These innovative, alternative livelihood models provide dignified ways of earning income and have positive effects on young people's mental health and their hopes for the future. They also create new markets within a war-affected economy. For many women, the war has meant taking on the role of primary breadwinner for their families. For some, starting small businesses helps them reshape some gender norms in their households and within their wider communities, as they become economically active and gain more authority and independence. However, this is highly dependent on family dynamics and social class.

Human rights monitoring

Many youth stressed the importance of monitoring, documenting and reporting human rights abuses and breaches of international humanitarian law, including domestic violence and gender-based violence. Documenting human rights violations will be crucial for future transitional justice and accountability and necessary for long-term sustained peace. As Akram, a young human rights defender from Taiz, argued, “Any peace agreement without granting justice for the victims will only lead to more conflict in future”.

Yet this remains one of the most challenging issues. For example, in March 2015 the Bassma Foundation for Development started documenting violations in Lahj governorate – such as the use of snipers in civilian areas, house demolitions, and armed groups preventing citizens from accessing healthcare or water supplies. They also brought cases to other larger organisations working on human rights issues in Aden, such as the Women’s National Committee and the Yemeni Women’s Union. But they say they faced a number of obstacles that prevented them from continuing this work, including “victims refusing to testify because of fear”, lack of experience and capacity on human rights among NGOs in Lahj, a lack of a human rights network to plug into, and “difficulties in dealing with official bodies, who did not accept the idea of human rights”.

Human rights initiatives are particularly constrained by their location; what they can report on depends on the extent to which different political factions or armed groups feel threatened by reporting on violations. It is easier to report Saudi- and UAE-led coalition violations in Houthi-controlled areas, whereas in the south – where there is an increasing number of activist detentions by UAE forces – it is much harder to speak out.³⁴ Some southern activists persist, in part because they “see these detentions as deeply detrimental to a future southern state” based on human rights and the rule of law.³⁵ For safety, some young people channel information and documentation via secure networks to foreign journalists and international human rights organisations. Many international reports tend to focus on coalition and Houthi violations in the main cities; however, local documentation initiatives provide a much wider picture of struggles and abuses.

BOX 4

Case study: The 1000 Bakery

“The bakery provides people with the bread they need without harming their dignity, away from the cameras and media campaigns; we support ‘usr mutaeafifa’, families in need, and we have our guiding principles in our work which is no defamation to anyone that benefits from our initiative.”

Ammar, Project Founder, 1000 Bakery.

Ammar’s project started with a Facebook post to a thousand friends, suggesting each friend contribute 1,000 Yemeni rials (approximately USD\$2) to help open a charity bakery. Within two weeks the first bakery was opened and 600 donations were made to the project account. Proceeds from the sale of bread are used to provide families with a stamp, which they can use to get bread from a local distributor (a grocery store or mini-market). The first phase supported 270 families in Sana’a, and the project continued to draw attention, with 1,200 families being reached daily by Ramadan. The 1000 Bakery also created employment opportunities for five volunteers.

The project’s success meant that the charity bakery was able to replicate its model in other parts of the country. It is currently also serving 300 families in Hodeidah, and the team plans to open a new branch in Aden. “We believe that this bakery is a great achievement because it has a role in promoting community peace, social cohesion and strengthening the social fabric. The Yemenis have sent a message to the world that they are a cohesive people, through turning one person’s idea into a project that serves more than 8,000 people per day”, said Ammar. Although the bakery provides for a large number of people, the team is struggling: “To continue the project we need financial support. It’s hard to sustain the project without funding because the amount of bread we give for free is more than what we sell”, explained Ammar.

BOX 5**Case study: The *rasd* ('documentation') project – Taiz**

Despite starting with few resources, the *rasd* ('documentation') project, run by the Youth Transparency and Building Foundation, has become one of the most credible and trusted sources reporting on and documenting the human rights situation in Taiz. Akram – the 28-year-old co-founder of the organisation – and the team faced numerous challenges setting up the project, including a lack of financial support, difficulties with travelling between the locations they were documenting, and threats from different political factions. The *rasd* project is still active, however: “Seeing what people are struggling with and how things are going, the impact of our work is the thing that keeps us going. It is important to grant fair transitional justice, which is why documentation is crucial at this point”, said Akram.

Organisations attempting to report violations face threats from all sides: “We have faced so many challenges, including campaigns against us and many accusations that we are working for Houthis, as a result of some people’s lack of understanding on how documentation activities work”, explained Akram. “The situation in Taiz was very polarised by political actors on the ground, and it was hard to get accurate information and stats on the situation in the city because most local CSOs are owned or follow the agendas of political parties.”

The Youth Transparency and Building Foundation continues to work on issues of security and on the judicial system with the Governor of Taiz, local authorities and military leaders in the areas under government control. Akram notes that the “security and judicial systems are crucial for bringing back life to the city. A lot of people are struggling because of the lack of security and there are a lot of violations as a result”. The team organise open hearings for the public, where government and security personnel discuss the security challenges in Taiz.

Influencing local authorities, local mediation and conflict resolution

Although it is often ad hoc or responsive to a particular issue, youth are in some cases playing a role in local mediation – despite the conflict and setbacks. In 2015, before Taiz was beset by heavy violence, a small group of youth activists organised talks with conflict parties: “We co-founded a team made of activists and doctors from Taiz; we visited all political parties; we met with the Sheikhs in Taiz, as well as public figures. Our aim was to pressure leaders of political parties to reach an agreement to help Taiz avoid any conflict. Sadly, our efforts didn’t work”, recalled a young woman from Taiz.

In the district of Damt, between al-Dhale’a and Ibb, young people played a significant role in facilitating an agreement in which the community agreed to not take part in the conflict and to provide a safe haven for IDPs. Similarly, activists for a local initiative in Hodeidah – the Al-Khairiah Al-Shababiah Initiative – were able to use knowledge they obtained on conflict resolution in a training from Youth Without Borders and resolve a local land dispute.³⁶

Efforts are also being made to equip active youth networks with the skills to become future mediators, as well as to engage with youth who were trained by international organisations during the transition period in 2011–2015 – such as Search for Common Ground – and encourage them to train others. In Ibb, Mobaderoon Foundation trained activists on conflict resolution. In Taiz, Saferworld provided a microgrant to a small team of youth activists, to produce a set of guidelines for educating youth who are new to peacebuilding work on basic concepts of conflict transformation and for promoting peace.³⁷ CSOs like Youth Without Borders are also increasingly drawing on UN Security Council Resolution 2250 to promote the importance of youth’s role in conflict resolution.

Youth taking part in mediation efforts in local disputes are building their capacity for future participation in higher level talks, both at the local and governorate levels. This participation is also important for showcasing youth as active, engaged and reliable actors within the community. The majority of youth activists we spoke to believed that Yemen’s current local and national political leaders do not have the answer. Instead, youth tend to have more trust in themselves, their peers or civil society, and they are hopeful about the possibility of a new generation of youth leaders.

Differences across locations

The kinds of activities that are most meaningful for peacebuilding tend to vary according to both time and location. Most youth in the south consider that they are in a post-war period, though research participants also discussed the “new conflicts emerging after the war” (in this context, ‘the war’ refers to March–July 2015 when Ansar Allah and Saleh forces entered Aden and a violent battle for the city was fought until local resistance groups, with the backing of the Gulf countries, pushed them out). Discussing obstacles to peace, one young person in Aden said, “The victors of war especially in the south feel that they are in control, and violence is the only way to govern and administer.” For youth in the north, their experience of insecurity and the nature of their activism is framed by the feeling of being continually at war.

In smaller cities or towns such as in the governorates of Abyan, Lahj and Hajjah, interviewees reported workshops and trainings as the main activities for peace messaging, while the focus of interventions in rural areas remains mostly humanitarian due to the dire levels of need. In main cities there is clearer support for art, filmmaking, puppet theatre and other creative outlets. Youth who travel from their villages or smaller cities to more highly populated centres for education voluntarily spread the knowledge they have gained and cascade trainings in their hometowns. “The special thing is that some of the youth we trained were students coming from al-Dhale’a, Abyan, Ibb, and Hadramawt, and after the training they surprised us by taking the initiative and conducting the training in their governorates”, said one of the woman co-founders of Alef Ba’ Madania Foundation in Aden.

Since unification in 1990, resources, education and opportunities have been centralised and unequally divided – mostly to Sana’a’s benefit and the benefit of former President Saleh’s immediate networks – which has made it difficult for youth outside Sana’a to make their voices and stories heard internationally. For the past decade or more, international support to civil society has been similarly centralised, particularly when it comes to youth programming.³⁸ “Sometimes donors force you to work in certain places. It is something we would like to see changing as there are a lot of activities and projects happening in Sana’a while other governorates need more attention”, said Waleed from Bader Foundation in Sana’a.

Due to language barriers and a lack of experience in documenting human rights violations during active

conflict, activists in Aden and Taiz found it harder to communicate their situation to the international community, while activists in Sana’a were able to report the situation easily, thanks to better internet access and fewer language hurdles. “We were voluntarily documenting everything in Aden. We risked our lives to be able to make our voices heard; however, international organisations wanted a Sana’a-based CSO to be the one who gets funded to do the work we were doing”, said Warda, a women’s rights activist from Aden and Chair of Women of Adalah Foundation for Rights and Freedom.

The effect of the conflict on the ability of young women to participate in activism also depends on location. “The current situation has reduced the abilities of some women to participate and opened the door for others”, said a 25-year-old woman from Taiz. In larger cities, like Sana’a and Aden, women are frequently leading CSOs and initiatives, and in Marib an influx of displaced Yemenis from different governorates has had the effect of opening up more spaces for women’s participation.³⁹ However, in other areas where historically women were more active participants in civil society work – such as in Taiz – the impact of ongoing fighting has been to reduce women’s ability to participate.⁴⁰ And despite high numbers of women working in NGOs (local and international) in Sana’a, women who are seen as political dissidents are being increasingly detained or harassed by the Houthi-controlled security forces, who also spread rumours about women to damage their reputations.

“
We were voluntarily documenting everything in Aden. We risked our lives to be able to make our voices heard

Warda, Chair of Women of Adalah Foundation for Rights and Freedom.

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The role of Yemeni diaspora

Often overlooked is the role played by Yemenis who are outside of Yemen – both the established diaspora population and those who have left or been exiled from the country more recently.

Large numbers of the young people we spoke to in Yemen mentioned the importance of support they received from the diaspora, in the form of small aid shipments, remittances, and facilitating international links to set up small export or import businesses and other job-creation projects. Some youth activists are also acting as trusted focal points for diaspora money, often raised by friends from across the globe who are running fundraising campaigns that use their network and social media

presence. Money is channelled within Yemen and from outside Yemen through the trust-based *hawala* remittance system to overcome the complications and restrictions the Yemeni banking system is experiencing as a result of the conflict. This financing approach is helping local initiatives to support humanitarian and relief responses in rural Yemen.

Yemeni youth around the world also help friends and networks back home through visa support, education programmes, sponsorship and even informal counselling support. As one young woman from Hodeida explained, “We have Yemenis outside Yemen who contribute to a programme of adoption that we run; some people send money to help adopting orphan kids through providing financial

support”. One 24-year-old man continued his activism in the education field after leaving Yemen for Canada, building ‘EduYemen’, one of the first online educational platforms built specifically for Yemenis: “Keeping youths busy with educational sources online can prevent them from getting involved in any activities that can harm them and cause more violence in the region”. Similarly, a 25-year-old told us about the work she did supporting visa applications when she was in Lebanon, so that others might also be able to get rest and respite and educational opportunities outside of the conflict.

She also continues to provide support to traumatised friends and family members over the phone.

“

Keeping youths busy with educational sources online can prevent them from getting involved in any activities that can harm them and cause more violence in the region.

24-year-old man who built ‘EduYemen’, an online educational platform.

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Many exiles continue to play a role in linking back to the work of their families and friends in Yemen and raising the voices and stories of Yemenis in international spaces. “Yemenis outside can be a bridge between the grassroots activists in Yemen and the international organisations in the countries of their residence”, said a 33-year-old women’s rights activist based in Jordan. “Those of us outside Yemen are a support network”, said the leader of a youth organisation in Taiz, who was himself based outside Yemen for two years of the war: “In being able to communicate with others, to travel, to speak about the issues, about youth, all this contributes to supporting activists on the ground.”

Young Yemeni activists around the globe, like their counterparts in Yemen, are also frequently turning to artistic projects to convey global messages of peace and understanding, and promote coexistence and hope within communities connected to, and affected by, the violence. For example, the video ‘Let’s Co-exist’, by the youth-led NGO House of Ideas, shows the many commonalities that exist between Yemenis by drawing on Yemenis in exile to talk about the things that make them Yemeni,⁴¹ while the Yemeni Arab Arts Festival in Liverpool, UK, and the international Yemeni-led Comra Documentary Camp provide support to young Yemeni filmmakers to make short films about Yemen. *Al Madaniya* – Yemen’s first online arts and culture magazine – describes itself as ‘a manifestation of a particular kind of hope’, a ‘space where the hopes and dreams, stories and traumas, questions and visions of Yemen’s past and future are presented and discussed. Our goal is to document the resilience of the people of Yemen: through their writings, their art, their poems and their voices. In times of instability and in times of war, their voices continue to speak against injustice.’

Notes

- 29 In response to a question about their areas of activism, respondents said they directed their activities towards society rather than politics, for example to support old and vulnerable people (17 per cent do so frequently) or youth (14 per cent). Interestingly, many are active for a better and cleaner environment (15 per cent). Fewer are active in politics, with only 5 per cent stating they frequently engage for social and political change, while 10 per cent said that they are active for gender equality – from: Transfeld M (2018), ‘Waiting for the state, relying on the family: Yemen’s youth in peril: FES MENA Youth Study: Country Analysis Yemen’, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- 30 For more analysis of how community-level activism can build peace and social cohesion in various contexts, see: United Nations, World Bank (2018), ‘Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict’.
- 31 Sharma G (2018), ‘Meet Yemen’s street artist: “We want peace”’, *Middle East Eye*, 15 January (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/streets-speak-yemen-1283037878>); *Reuters* (2018), ‘Street artist in Yemen remembers casualties of war’, 1 March (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-art/street-artist-in-yemen-remembers-casualties-of-war-idUSKCN1GD6oW>)
- 32 The video is available with English subtitles on the organisation’s YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diDxo7C-R_o&feature=youtu.be
- 33 Visit their website here: <https://www.anamehani.com/>
- 34 Amnesty International (2018), ‘Yemen: ‘God only knows if he’s alive’: Enforced disappearance and detention violations in southern Yemen’, July.
- 35 Interview with Kristine Beckerle, Human Rights Watch, 2017.
- 36 Internal Saferworld evaluation, 2017.
- 37 The guidelines are available at: <https://shebayouth.org/resources/>
- 38 ‘In a country like Yemen where civil society in its peak in 2013 had only 19 percent of its organizations focus on local issues and where aid funding was directed mainly to Sana’a-based organizations’ – from: Qasem A (2018), ‘Gasping for hope: Yemeni youth struggle for their future’, *POMEPS Studies, Politics, Governance and Reconstruction in Yemen* 29. ‘The Sana’a-centric outlook of the international community threatens to overlook urgent peripheral concerns and fosters a dangerous disconnect to concerns of Yemenis outside the capital’ – from: Saferworld (2011), ‘Public protest and visions for change’.
- 39 Roundtable event, Oxford Research Group and Sana’a Centre for Strategic Studies, ‘Local Peacebuilding in Yemen: Opportunities and Challenges’, London, 19 March 2019.
- 40 Ibid.



A Yemeni volunteer teacher talks to a girl inside a minibus that has been turned into a mobile classroom in Sana'a. The 'mobile school' project started from a youth initiative in 2013.
© Mohammed Huwais/
AFP via Getty Images

5

Conclusion

The majority of the youth activists we spoke with said they wanted international governments to exert pressure on the conflict parties to bring about an end to the conflict and agree a roadmap for peace. They underlined the urgent need for humanitarian support, infrastructure reconstruction and the resumption of state salary payments. However, almost every single individual we spoke to said that the world needs to support longer-term development and peace-oriented work now, during what is already a protracted and fragmented conflict – rather than wait for a national peace agreement.⁴²

Despite facing seemingly insurmountable challenges, there are youth activists in all corners of Yemen actively organising and engaging in their communities and demonstrating adaptability, pragmatism and innovation in their responses to the conflict. The work they are doing is the crucial groundwork of peacebuilding, contributing to positive communities and societies and presenting visions of peace and hope. Addressing youth across the country, one young man from Taiz said: “Never give up, work together; peace can be achieved.”

“
Never give up, work together; peace can be achieved.”

Young man from Taiz.

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This type of grassroots, youth-led action is more than just a good news story amid a brutal conflict. Ensuring that international peace engagement in Yemen supports local conflict transformation is critical, as prospects for the UN-led mediation process in the short term are – at best – to achieve some de-escalation between the main parties to the conflict at the national and international level. At a local level, the day-to-day realities of conflict and violence are affected by a much broader set of interconnected factors, from long-term, deeply rooted inequalities and exclusionary governance, to localised power struggles and conflicts over resources.

Part of Martin Griffiths’s mandate as UN special envoy for Yemen is to develop a framework for a long-term peace process, beyond the current focus on immediate de-escalation. He has publicly stated his commitment to ensuring an inclusive process. This paper echoes the calls of the ‘2018 independent progress study on youth, peace and security’ – mandated as part of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 – to address the ‘violence of exclusion’, where political exclusion is defined ‘as a form of structural and psychological violence that is deeply rooted in the reciprocal mistrust between young people, their governments and the multilateral system’.

But any efforts to support civil society, youth and women’s participation in formal processes risk being tokenistic and disconnected if they are not rooted in people’s experiences and needs, and should be sustained by diverse community activism at the grassroots level. This is the essential basis on which independent, Yemeni-led influencing of the peace process can be built.

Decisions and activities at the national level are not the only ones that can have a positive impact on the lives of Yemenis during conflict. Of equal importance is supporting young people’s ability to address the conflicts they experience in their communities – through their own identified priorities and methods. As the youth who contributed to this paper have highlighted, empowerment activities, cultural and artistic spaces, advocacy for change, conflict mediation and humanitarian relief initiatives in their communities are all part of a spectrum of activities that they see as contributions to peacebuilding.

“It’s really important that donors target youth. Even if that’s just with simple activities that can keep them away from violence,” a youth leader from Taiz told us.

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Youth support strategies need to encompass a multiplicity of small but joined-up innovative initiatives that contribute in different ways to building the structures and relationships needed for long-term peace.

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External assumptions about what constitutes ‘peacebuilding activities’ should be examined: youth support strategies need to be based on a broad understanding of what contributes to peacebuilding, and encompass a multiplicity of small but joined-up innovative initiatives that contribute in different ways to building the structures and relationships needed for long-term peace.

Based on our experience of working with youth organisations and activists in Yemen since 2010 and on interviews for this paper, we have identified eight

areas for donors, diplomats, INGOs and the UN to take action on in order to build on the vital work Yemeni youth are doing and support the individuals and organisations on the front line of peacebuilding.

1. Support youth initiatives and their visions for peace with flexible and fast funding that meets their needs.

“Youth are the main axis. If we help them develop themselves and build their capacity we will be able to drive activities and work that contributes to peacebuilding and social cohesion”

Buthaina, Programme Manager, Hodeidah Girls Foundation.

Flexible and rapid funding of relatively small amounts – usually less than USD\$20,000 – is what the majority of youth-led initiatives need. Yet few

donors or INGOs provide this type of responsive support. While interventions that provide training or dialogue spaces are important, small grants and microgrants can be disbursed rapidly; this acknowledges that youth are best placed to identify how to contribute to peacebuilding in their locations. These smaller grants also need to be accompanied by flexible workplans and budgets that can be adapted and altered whenever needed, and donors and INGO partners should not place too heavy an administrative or compliance burden on small, often voluntary groups. “INGOs need to forget the culture of the project when it comes to youth programming,” said Mohammad, a youth and peacebuilding specialist in Sana’a.

Yemeni NGOs such as Youth Without Borders and Resonate! Yemen and INGOs like Saferworld and Yemen Peace Project have been providing microgrants for youth-led peace initiatives (usually between \$500 to \$5,000). This model has been effective in widening the reach of peacebuilding support work to more difficult-to-access locations. Microgrants have had multiplier effects, catalysing a generation of more sustainable resources and bringing in more youth volunteers. This allows space for youth activists to try things that might fail.

2. Bridge the gap between youth and power-holders: challenge the political exclusion of youth

“The international community, including the UN, are all now dealing with the old elite groups and not listening to youth. They need to get closer to youth and give them attention. Youth have the capacity to create solutions.”

Akram, Taiz.

After the positive steps towards a more inclusive political process taken at the 2013 National Dialogue Conference, young people have felt doubly excluded since the escalation of conflict since 2015 – not only by political elites in Yemen but also by the international actors who had previously supported their participation during the transition process. “Even the INGOs have to rebuild the trust with the youth, because at the beginning of the war they disappeared from society. They have to study more the needs of the youth: it’s not like before”, said one young woman now living outside of Yemen.

All the youth interviewed for this paper see positive roles for international donors and INGOs in Yemen. However, with only a handful of people with non-Yemeni passports able to visit Yemen, ensuring that youth voices are heard by international interlocutors requires investments in outreach and relationship building. “Now there is a great need for our work,

people need to feel they are heard as they don't have a voice so when you go and speak to the people and ask them what are your needs it means a lot to them", said a young woman from Aden.

Diplomats need to increase their direct political engagement with youth representatives and reflect the importance of the role of young people, to challenge political exclusion of youth and capitalise on their potential for peace. "Youth are always full of energy and have voices to be heard. But, unfortunately, in this conflict, their voices are ignored. There should be a channel to amplify youth's voices to the conflict actors as well as to the regional and international community", said a youth leader from Taiz.

Few initiatives currently exist to bring Yemeni youth perspectives to international forums. One example is the 2011–2013 roundtable meetings organised by Chatham House and Resonate! Yemen, which brought together Yemeni youth activists with international policymakers working to broker the transition process.⁴³ With joint objectives of ensuring that international organisations and individuals heard directly from youth involved in Yemen's uprising and giving youth the chance to understand and influence international agendas, the meetings were unique in putting young civil society activists on an equal footing with international diplomats.

Yemen's youth activists are an important constituency for peace in the country: international donors and diplomats should not put engaging with youth into a 'post-conflict' category – forgotten or sidelined while a national peace agreement is brokered.

3. Understand local dynamics and avoid reinforcing historic marginalisation

"I want the youth of the other governorates in Yemen to have the same chances, experiences, and knowledge as the youth in Sana'a."

Young woman, Aden.

As the conflict in Yemen leads to greater political and social fragmentation across geographic divides, ensuring youth programming is based on a strong understanding of local needs and conflict dynamics is increasingly vital – and is best achieved by ensuring local CSOs lead youth programmes. "There are many conflicts that need to be analysed and understood with local tools," one young man in Mukalla told us. Projects such as Badr Bin-Halabi's work as a visual media activist could have been done from Jordan, but he is committed to working from Mukalla regardless of practical difficulties. "Hadramtoon as one of our projects, hav[ing] almost

reached to every Hadrami house; mainly because it speaks in the Hadrami dialect, it reaches to their homes with the messages."

Internationally supported youth programming should prioritise conflict sensitivity in planning projects and activities. To ensure projects respond to local dynamics, a CSO based in the chosen governorate should be involved in both the design of the activities and in leading the implementation – or, if this is not possible, it should be a CSO that has strong links to the chosen location and staff based there. "Many INGOs implement activities on priorities and issues though we don't think the timing is right for the activity, or the implementation mechanism does some harm in the community. They also need to involve local organisations when it comes to their annual plans, as INGOs' plans sometimes don't touch on the needs of the local communities," said Waleed from Sana'a.

The issue of centralisation of resources for civil society support has also been exacerbated since 2015, and movement of people to and from the capital – and between governorates – has been increasingly restricted. "We couldn't even get a small space to practice our music. Youth in Sana'a get supported and receive funds but we struggle to get any funding," said a young man activist and musician from Aden.

Youth programming needs to take into account the legacy of historic marginalisation of activists, particularly those in the south of the country and in more rural locations, in order to avoid reproducing it. In particular, international organisations need to be careful that the bureaucratic requirements of the aid industry don't exclude more marginalised populations from accessing international funding and support, on the basis that they perceive local groups as lacking the 'skills' or 'capacity' to manage development projects. "We always hear that you are still young and you don't know enough or you don't have the skills", says Buthaina from Hodeidah Girls Foundation.

Planning should examine how more marginalised youth might access information about the project or the places where the activities take place (for example, whether participants will need their transportation paid for). Any application-based selection processes should review how selection criteria might exclude more marginalised populations, since application processes often prioritise written skills over the potential of an applicant or the effectiveness of a proposed idea.

“ Youth programming needs to take into account the legacy of historic marginalisation of activists, particularly those in the south of the country and in more rural locations, in order to avoid reproducing it. ”



A member of a women's action group in Aden interviews community members as part of an anti-drugs awareness campaign.
© Saferworld

4. Better understand the gendered impacts of the conflict on young women and act now to support their participation

“The current situation has reduced the abilities of some women to participate, and has opened the door for others”.

Young woman, Taiz.

Many organisations still struggle to address the specific barriers to women's participation in youth programming (and peacebuilding more widely). Young women face different security risks to young men, and youth programming needs to be based on an understanding of young men and women's different experiences and roles in conflict – an understanding that disentangles assumptions and expectations of gender roles from actual experience within specific locations.

Recent work on women's experiences of conflict in Yemen by Saferworld, the Yemen Polling Center and others

documents the gendered expectations communities have of young women and how these expectations disempower them from political participation – or provide them with opportunities that can be leveraged.⁴⁴ Saferworld has also worked with Yemeni women activists to create a gender and conflict analysis training toolkit for activists to examine how gender norms interact with conflict dynamics, to build stronger and more inclusive peacebuilding strategies.⁴⁵

In a number of locations around Yemen, young women often lead community initiatives, defying the expectations of outsiders and their understandings of gender roles in Yemen. “Women activists in Hodeidah are actually now more active and more effective in their roles,” says Buthaina from Hodeidah Girls Foundation. In contrast, in Taiz – where historically there has been a great deal of women's activism – youth activists told us that women were increasingly less able to be active in their communities. This, combined with the general urgency and complexity of working in a conflict environment (in which addressing gender is an additional complexity), young women are often at risk of being overlooked or sidelined by international NGOs and donors who work either on youth or women – not on both. Supporting young women's participation needs to go beyond including a target number for women participants; good practice includes planning for gender-sensitivity training of project staff, budgeting for additional costs of women participants (such as childcare or needing to travel with a male family member), and planning activities taking into account particular timings or spaces for events – for example, not holding events too late when families expect young women to be home earlier.

Addressing entrenched inequalities is a critical component of peacebuilding work that should not be delayed until after the ‘urgent’ work of conflict resolution is done. This is especially the case as peace negotiations are a window of opportunity to embed greater inclusion in political systems, a space which often shrinks after a peace agreement is negotiated.⁴⁶

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Women activists in Hodeidah are actually now more active and more effective in their roles.

Buthaina, Programme Manager,
Hodeidah Girls Foundation.

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5. Give youth peacebuilders platforms for their work and support peer-to-peer learning

“It will be more beneficial to help them see beyond the immediate problem. Help them to think big. Link them to each other and with the world.”

Young woman, Sana'a.

There are no off-the-shelf models for peacebuilding, and Yemen's youth activists already know their priorities and have locally appropriate ways of working. But more can be done to support them to 'think big' and learn to grow beyond their original ideas, or take inspiration from their peers. There are many examples of good practice across youth groups, and peer-to-peer learning could be more widely used to spread effective ways of working. The evaluation of Saferworld's WhatsApp-based peacebuilding course (see box 6, right) highlighted a desire to learn from other Yemeni examples (over and above examples from other Middle Eastern conflicts, such as in Syria), and recommended that INGOs take time to research peacebuilding initiatives that are already taking place in Yemen.

Numerous useful resources are also being created by Yemeni groups that could be collated and disseminated, as well as preserved for future peacebuilding or transitional justice purposes. As Kristine Beckerle from Human Rights Watch observed, “There is a lot of info being produced by activists – hard copy Arabic reports chock full of info – [with] no one putting them online or translating. Setting up a website and posting stuff online, or on a database where people can add their work sounds technical but could be really useful.”

Within this, the role of more established Yemeni CSOs is vital. While many activists work in small, unregistered initiatives, Yemeni civil society more widely has recognised the importance of supporting these youth initiatives. CSOs have long-standing experience of designing and managing youth programmes, as well as skilled workers who have strong links to young people and communities. Yemeni CSOs have been deeply affected by many challenges since 2015 and supporting them to rebuild and work sustainably should be a high priority for international donors. Yet short-term funding cycles, constantly shifting donor priorities and limitations on non-project related costs that donors – and INGOs acting as intermediaries – are willing to cover mean that CSOs struggle to maintain the stability to support youth activists in their localities.

BOX 6

Case study: Building peace using WhatsApp

With mobility drastically reduced and many organisations – both local and international – unable to carry out their normal operations, Yemeni youth are increasingly turning to their smartphones to organise and share ideas. In 2017, Saferworld and the Yemeni development consultancy DeepRoot piloted an approach using WhatsApp's wide reach as the most popular online communication tool in Yemen to conduct a remote course on 'participatory peacebuilding'.

More than 120 applicants from across Yemen joined WhatsApp groups of 20 participants per group, creating communities where volunteer moderators guided them through interactive discussions and activities, using photos, audio, video clips and infographics. The aim of the course was to mobilise local knowledge and expertise, share experiences, and offer new skills and materials relating to local peacebuilding, including elements on self-care and personal resilience. Each group was carefully put together to ensure a variety of backgrounds and viewpoints, with the idea of maintaining links between youth activists across political and geographic divides.

The course was successful in building a safe space and facilitating productive engagement between youth, with a very low drop-out rate from participants. It may provide a model for participative remote training that could be applied by other organisations. The moderators observed that trainees were most motivated about the more interactive and less information-heavy activities. The participants found talking to other people with different viewpoints particularly beneficial and felt that the course helped them rethink the way they look at themselves and at others, and to be more receptive to forming and sharing new ideas.

6. Provide opportunities to replace lost livelihoods and education

“It is really hard for youth to continue using their own money for activism as they themselves are struggling financially. It has become hard for them to even spend their money using public transportation”.

Young woman, Sana’a.

Lost livelihoods were frequently mentioned by the people interviewed for this paper as a challenge for youth activists and for engaging communities in their work. “The community refuses to cooperate with awareness campaigns after the war, when they realise that they will not gain any material benefit or aid support”, said one Aden focus group participant. “There is constant skepticism in the added value of these campaigns.” The huge decline in formal educational opportunities due to the conflict was also mentioned frequently – many young people had dropped out of high school or university because it became unaffordable.

Yet the spirit of volunteerism has not vanished, with many young activists continuing to contribute their time without any financial incentive. Buthaina from Hodeidah Girls Foundation said, “Although voluntary work may not provide you with any financial income, there is a lot of knowledge and skills one can gain from volunteering. Personally, if I didn’t engage in voluntary work and social activism, I would have spent a lot of my money on courses and on trying to learn different things. So don’t focus on money, because there is much more value in volunteering than just the financial benefit.”

However, involvement in peacebuilding or civil society activities can be time consuming, taking participants away from earning a living; and even participation in online activities can leave activists out of pocket for the mobile data they have to use.⁴⁷

Youth programmes should consider what indirect costs – such as transportation to reach an activity – exist for participants and how these can be supported, so as to open up participation as widely as possible.

The economic crisis has also spurred an increasing interest in social enterprise, such as the 1000 Bakery (see box 4 on page 19). One 25-year-old woman, now based in Germany, said she is thinking of doing a master’s degree in

entrepreneurship in conflict zones. “Th[e youth] can find their customers and find their markets and there are plenty of opportunities to open small businesses, including IDPs in the camps”, she said. But “they need greater financial support and business skills to get started”.

Many of the youth activists we spoke with see livelihood projects as going hand-in-hand with peacebuilding work, and want to engage youth through linked economic and peacebuilding activities. In research by Youth Without Borders in Taiz, young people talked about how improving both the economic situation and their own roles in the economy would be a major step forward for their political participation.⁴⁸ One youth organisation in Ibb told us how it sees its work as falling under four main intersecting pillars: conflict resolution, human rights, dialogue, and social peace and economic development. Another youth organisation in Taiz is developing a programme of work around peace, economic empowerment and community services, which will provide ‘incubator space’ for young entrepreneurs and youth-led social enterprises.

These locally designed peace and livelihoods projects or social enterprise activities are something donors and INGOs can build on, through providing relevant funding opportunities for CSOs or other types of support.

7. Support the mental health of individuals and organisations’ capacity to provide mental health support

“We did eight sessions of psycho-support for youth and men were crying more than women. Men are under a lot of pressure to provide and the society doesn’t understand that they are also victims.”

Young woman working directly on psychosocial issues.

While the achievements of Yemen’s youth activists over the last few years have been significant, they are living in a situation that is taking its toll on the mental health of all young people. Many of the Yemeni youth we spoke to were highly concerned about the increasing rates of trauma, anxiety, depression, self-harm and even suicide among youth.

Despite stigma around mental health issues, young Yemenis have recognised mental health as a priority issue and have started addressing it in their work. A number of our interviewees identified the need for both psychological support for themselves and their peers, as well as the need for advanced training for youth who are involved in front-line work and providing services to others who are traumatised by the conflict; these youth are often in the position of having to facilitate trauma counselling themselves.

Support could come in the form of mental health clinics and counselling services, but also through training on self-care techniques and collective and community approaches to dealing with trauma. Many local organisations have good practice

“Despite stigma around mental health issues, young Yemenis have recognised mental health as a priority issue and have started addressing it in their work.”

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examples that can be shared, particularly around responses to critical incidences and providing space and forums for staff and volunteers to discuss the emotional impact of their work.

An area of opportunity is integrating self-care and psychological support into different types of programming, such as peacebuilding, youth empowerment and civic education. One 25-year-old woman told us of the group sessions her organisation ran in Yemen. These sessions brought community members together in single-sex safe spaces to express their feelings, play games and participate in therapeutic activities like weaving and storytelling – with the idea that they then go home and play the same games with their families and friends. When volunteer moderators facilitated sessions on collective memory, storytelling and personal resilience as part of a WhatsApp-based peacebuilding course, the sessions were highly rated by participants.

8. Protect youth activists from risks and help them to stay safe

“As a result of our activities in Taiz our names appeared on a black list issued by Houthis. As a result of the cultural, social, and psychological pressures of the conflict our team broke into many factions”.

Young woman, Taiz.

Youth activists in Yemen face risks every day, from being caught in the crossfire to being directly targeted as a result of their work or identities. They spend a lot of time evaluating risks on a day-to-day basis however, and constantly make adaptations and take mitigating actions to continue their work. “No one will make change if we in the civil society didn’t,” said a young woman from Sana’a, “Yes, it’s risky but it is important and it’s worth it.”

Closing space for civil society is a critical threat – one that international governments and organisations need to act more strongly on. “We as activists in civil society organisations focused on rights and freedoms were threatened, prevented from working in the field or even in our offices, and pressured to focus on issues we don’t normally deal with”, said one young man in Aden.

The youth we spoke to want to see international governments and the UN exert more political pressure on power-holders in Yemen to lift the restrictions placed on civil society groups, restore press freedoms, release all detained journalists and civil society activists, and end all forms of torture, arbitrary detention and human rights abuses. Strong, public condemnation is needed, alongside independent international investigation of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law on all sides. For the activists most at risk of political targeting – particularly journalists and human rights defenders – more protection grants and emergency funds are needed, as currently many international human rights organisations rely heavily on confidentiality to protect their local partners.

While youth activists are best placed to evaluate the risks of their work and do so every day, INGOs need to listen to them to understand the risks they face in a given location or context. When international organisations commission work (such as research) or design projects, understanding the risks is essential to ensuring the work is sensitive to the conflict context – this includes the language and wording being used. Youth also felt that the INGOs they work with could better tailor their security platforms to suit the needs of Yemeni staff and NGOs; they felt that currently the focus is primarily on the needs of international staff – or at least the needs of international staff come ‘first’.⁴⁹ Tailored training in security should be provided, and funds should be made available so that activists in the country can request support to deal with problems encountered, as well as receive mental health support.

Notes

- 41 See the ‘let’s coexist’ campaign Facebook page here: <https://www.facebook.com/LetsCoexistYemen/>
- 42 This sentiment is echoed by the civil society-led campaign, ‘Bring development back to Yemen’, spread through social media with the hashtag #BringDevBack. El Aabedy N (2018) ‘Yemenis launch social media campaign with focus on development’, *Al Jazeera* (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/yemenis-launch-social-media-campaign-focus-development-180301185823373.html>)
- 43 See, for example: Chatham House (2011), ‘Yemen: Strategies for Change – Playing the Policy Game’, October (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/180419>)
- 44 Saferworld (2017), “‘Women nowadays do anything’”: women’s role in conflict, peace and security in Yemen,’ June; Social Development Direct (2018), ‘Women as peacebuilders in Yemen’, June; Saferworld and Wujood, forthcoming report.
- 45 Saferworld (2018), ‘Building inclusive peace: Gender at the heart of conflict analysis’, January.
- 46 Close S, O’Rourke C, Yousuf Z (2019), ‘Gender, inclusion and political settlements: Implications for peace processes’, *Accord* (28), p 28.
- 47 For example, moderators in the first pilot of Saferworld’s WhatsApp-based peacebuilding course fed back that paying for the cost of the data was a burden. Recommendations Report, ‘Remote Learning Modules for Youth and Civil Society Peacebuilding Networks in Yemen’ (available on request).
- 48 Youth Without Borders (2017), ‘Youth political participation in Taiz: Challenges and solutions’, May, p 21.
- 49 For more analysis on INGO prioritisation of international staff security, see Jackson A, Zyck SJ (2017), ‘Presence and proximity: To stay and deliver, five years on’, OCHA, Norwegian Refugee Council, Jindal School of International Affairs.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

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