



Yemeni girl carrying water. © Reuters/Khaled Abdullah

WHERE THERE'S A WILL

Tackling the humanitarian crisis in Yemen

The Yemeni people are facing a worsening humanitarian crisis, yet instead of providing adequate levels of desperately needed assistance, many donors are still finding reasons not to give. Rather than imposing ever shifting political benchmarks, they should address the emergency levels of food insecurity, water scarcity and fuel shortages, and making long term commitments to promote development. It is vital that an integrated approach, which focuses on immediate humanitarian needs as well as productive, sustainable solutions, is adopted without delay. The international community should seize the opportunity provided by the upcoming Friends of Yemen meeting to make a difference in the lives of millions of ordinary Yemenis.

1 INTRODUCTION

Ten million Yemenis are food insecure, double the estimates from 2009.¹ The UN estimates 267,000 children under five are at risk of dying from malnutrition.² Close to half a million people have already been displaced by conflicts. While Oxfam cannot verify these figures, Yemen is certainly facing an alarming humanitarian crisis. However, international attention on Yemen has remained fixated on short-term political developments and the security situation.³ Since last year, when many donors suspended aid,⁴ the political situation has changed significantly. Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation and the election of the Transitional Unity Government were key moments in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) backed political transition. But as these developments changed the political landscape, the humanitarian crisis has deepened. Failure to act now will put more lives at risk; it will further entrench poverty in the country and risks undermining the political transition process.

An inclusive and stable political transition, which involves all elements of Yemeni society, will be vital for Yemen's economic future,⁵ but donors should not make humanitarian aid flows contingent on the meeting of political benchmarks or addressing narrow security concerns. The international community should pursue a two-pronged approach which marries immediate humanitarian assistance with long-term development programming to build resilience. An integrated approach which focuses on productive, sustainable solutions offers the greatest chance of breaking the vicious cycle of food insecurity, poverty and violence in Yemen.

The Friends of Yemen ministerial meeting in Riyadh is a critical opportunity for donors to be decisive, creative and generous if they are to break the cycle of hunger and poverty in Yemen.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Donors and Friends of Yemen** should take immediate, concerted action to address the food security needs of millions of Yemeni families. They should not make the provision of life-saving assistance dependent upon achievement of political stability or security concerns. They can do this by:
 - Ensuring that the Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP) receives the necessary funding and that the midterm revision reflects the true scale and nature of the crisis.
 - Scaling up funding of social safety net programmes, including cash transfers.
- **Friends of Yemen** should demonstrate leadership and vision by providing predictable, long-term funding which responds not only to the immediate crisis but promotes early recovery, builds resilience and enhances local capacity.
- The **Gulf Cooperation Council States** should engage strategically to ensure the escalating humanitarian crisis does not undermine political transition by funding **transparent and accountable aid mechanisms**, such as the multilateral Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan and scale-up of social safety net programmes.

- The **Transition Unity Government of Yemen** should:
 - Prioritize building capacity for social safety net programming by working with others to strengthen the verification and accountability systems of the Social Welfare Fund and other social safety nets.
 - Revise the National Food Security Strategy and ensure that it is inclusive, representative and workable. It should include clear recognition of women's role as food producers.
 - Redouble its efforts to find political solutions to the ongoing conflicts in the country.
- **All parties to the conflicts** should ensure that the necessary measures are taken to protect the civilian population from the impacts of the continuing conflict, and that humanitarian access is ensured in hard to reach areas.
- **NGOs and UN agencies** should coordinate more effectively and share good practice and working models for Yemen, based on successful experience in Yemen and similar contexts. Despite the challenges of restrictive cultural norms, humanitarian actors must find creative ways to engage women at the assessment, programme development and monitoring stages.
- **The World Food Programme** should upscale their cash transfer programmes and ensure that any food aid is carefully targeted and distributed in ways which minimise disruption to local markets and maintain the local trading system.

2 THE UNFOLDING CRISIS

The most recent data on food insecurity and malnutrition from the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF, as well as reports from Oxfam's work in rural Yemeni communities, paint a bleak picture. Forty-four per cent of Yemenis are food insecure. Women are particularly at risk, as they generally eat last and least, and have limited economic opportunities. Acute malnutrition rates, already at 30 per cent in some places since last year, are likely to rise significantly without preventative action.⁶ Ongoing conflicts in the north and south of the country have already caused 500,000 men, women and children to flee their homes, increasing their vulnerability and contributing to food insecurity in host communities.

Yemenis have exhausted their coping mechanisms. 25 per cent of the population has fallen into debt trying to feed their families.⁷ Protracted displacement and conflict in the northern governorates has led to the destruction or loss of agricultural equipment, livestock and crops. As far back as, July 2011, an Oxfam assessment in the western governorate of Al Hodeidah found that people were already on the brink, engaging in negative coping strategies, such as skipping meals, selling assets and removing children from school to work.⁸ An increase in early marriage is condemning another generation of girls to poor health and social outcomes, as families marry off their daughters young in order to ease the burden of the crisis.⁹

Humanitarian aid is slowly flowing into Yemen, but there is still a significant gap between what has been made available and what is needed.¹⁰

Though the 2012 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP), the UN's consolidated appeal to donors, currently stands at \$447m (almost double the 2011 appeal),¹¹ only 43 per cent has been committed by donors so far, and funding requirements are expected to rise as a result of the mid-term review.¹²

Notably, Canada, Germany and Japan have increased their humanitarian aid to Yemen substantially since last year. The European Commission has also increased its aid. Additional funding and in-kind donations have been made outside of the consolidated appeal.¹³ While these are welcome signs, a number of donors are still not contributing their fair share. As a result, the amount of aid given so far is insufficient to address the scale of the problems facing Yemen, putting lives and livelihoods at risk.

3 NO MORE EXCUSES

Donors have justified their reluctance to respond swiftly and at the scale required by pointing to the security situation and the continued political instability in the country, and by questioning whether aid can be effectively delivered. The GCC's assistant secretary for humanitarian affairs, Abdel Aziz al-Awisheq, recently suggested that 'aid efforts were dependent on the restoration of stability at both the security and economic levels'.¹⁴ However, the steps which have already been taken should mean that Yemen is in a better position now than it has been at any point in the last year to take concrete steps towards receiving aid.

Escalating conflict, particularly in Abyan Governorate and the south, has created additional displacement, and heightened food insecurity and a lack of access to basic services. While humanitarian access and aid delivery is difficult, it is critical that these very vulnerable populations are protected and that their humanitarian needs are addressed. Although challenging, experiences in Yemen, and in other conflict-affected settings, proves the security issues are not insurmountable.

There are existing channels available to deliver aid. Oxfam's recent cash transfer programme, which reached 100,000 people in Al Hodeidah, in parallel with Save the Children's programme in Sa'ada and the WFP's work in Hajjah and Ibb, illustrate that it is possible to act quickly and effectively and in ways which address the needs of vulnerable women, men and children, despite the challenging context. Government programmes like the Social Welfare Fund (SWF) and the Social Fund for Development (SFD), which already support millions of people, could be further supported and scaled up. Many of the projects in the YHRP also offer viable avenues for tackling food insecurity. While effective channels for aid delivery remain open, evidence suggests that Yemen cannot absorb further aid funding is simply incorrect.

4 SEIZING THE MOMENT

Genuine opportunities exist for Friends of Yemen to make a difference in Yemen – but it is critical to act now. A lasting solution to the problems facing Yemenis depends upon an open, inclusive and democratic political transition process. However, the political transition alone will not address the immediate needs of vulnerable Yemenis, and the escalating humanitarian crisis could actually put the transition process at risk.¹⁵ Real progress will require a combination of immediate action to tackle the humanitarian needs of vulnerable communities alongside broader interventions to address the systems and structures that exacerbate poverty and inequality in Yemen.

GIVING CASH

Oxfam advocates for the use of cash transfers in areas where food commodities are available in markets, and uses this in its own programmes. Cash transfers not only have the potential to tackle food insecurity, but also empower vulnerable people by giving them greater control over their household budget. By giving cash rather than in-kind aid, families can prioritise their own needs and expenditures.¹⁶ There is also growing evidence that, alongside complementary interventions to improve livelihoods, cash transfers can help lift people out of poverty, support local economies and promote development.¹⁷

Cash transfer programmes have been piloted in conflict- and crisis-affected governorates across Yemen by Save the Children, WFP and Oxfam. These programmes have successfully targeted and delivered much needed humanitarian aid to rural communities around the country. Oxfam achieved disbursement rates of 97 per cent¹⁸ and WFP reached 96 per cent of their target population.¹⁹ Not only have they improved the purchasing power of vulnerable households, they have also provided valuable lessons about verifying recipient lists and accountability, which can inform emergency response scale-up across Yemen, as well as build capacity of the SWF to take over from international donors in the longer term.

Cash transfers have the potential to deliver food security, access to safe and clean water, and social outcomes for women and their families. However, ensuring that interventions taken to improve women's access to resources have a positive impact on gender relations in the households requires both gender analysis and needs assessments.²⁰ Oxfam chose to target women headed households and managed to ensure that 40% of the payments went to women. Traditional culture in Yemen restricts women's mobility and visibility in public places, particularly in rural areas, but donors and aid agencies must follow the lead of women themselves. 'Most women in crisis situations are actively seeking to earn money, despite knowing the risks that having money may bring, and both accept and learn to manage this risk.'²¹ Strategic engagement of women at all stages is critical to good programme design and to managing expectations about empowerment.

Indeed, evidence across a broad range of contexts has demonstrated that cash transfers are a viable tool to meet immediate needs while supporting the transition from relief to recovery. In Somalia, small cash transfers to drought-affected pastoralists allowed families to purchase food,

water and health items, and pay off existing debts. Debt repayment helped revive the credit market and kick-start the local economy.²² Furthermore, cash transfer programmes have the potential to play an important role in supporting the conflict prevention and peace process necessary for creating a stable environment for renewed growth and investment in fragile states.²³

Innovative partnerships with mobile phone and food distribution companies provide viable options for private sector support to scale-up responses through their networks in rural areas and across Yemen. The Hunger Safety Nets Programme in Turkana, Kenya successfully piloted the use of smart cards to distribute money to beneficiaries.²⁴ By relying on a payment service provider and local traders, the geographic spread of distribution sites was increased. Engaging with the private sector has the added benefit of stimulating the local economy and promoting long-term development.

There are areas and situations where in-kind food aid is still the best option, particularly in areas of mass displacement. Where possible, distribution should be organised with local partners and distribution networks to minimise disruption to local markets and help build the local economy. It is also important to establish food price monitoring systems, so that timely action can be taken.

RESTORING LIVELIHOODS AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

Humanitarian aid is only one part of the solution. The emergency response must be complemented by measures to stabilize the economic and social environment and build resilience at household and community levels. These require predictable, longer-term investment. Immediate infusions of cash can help to restart local economies, but value chain development and support for enterprise and employment creation are necessary to build resilience against future shocks.

Yemen has a number of social protection programmes in place: the SWF, the SFD, and the Public Works Programme. The SWF already provides a national safety net supporting a million households with small quarterly cash transfers, while the SFD has maintained cash for work programmes helping hundreds of thousands of poor people in different parts of the country. These could be improved and scaled-up to provide a basic social safety net for the most vulnerable families. Oxfam has been working alongside the SWF in Al Hodeidah to improve their accountability and transparency, providing valuable lessons that can be rolled out across the country.

Further reforms are needed to enable the transition towards medium and long-term development strategies. These should include: support for farmers and other small-scale producers, especially women; guaranteeing land and other resource rights; and investment in education. As the performance of Yemeni institutions improves, community-based micro-credit schemes will offer a viable mechanism for supporting local economies, promoting enterprise and increasing economic self-sufficiency. By facilitating income diversification, these schemes add another layer of social protection and enhance the resilience of vulnerable but economically active individuals and households. In the future, Oxfam will work

with local communities to facilitate the establishment of community groups, especially women's associations, as possible vehicles for micro-financing.

The current National Food Security Strategy, which has been adopted by the Transition Unity Government of Yemen, but not yet implemented, could provide a framework to comprehensively address hunger in Yemen. Its ambitious aim is to make nine out of ten Yemenis food-secure within ten years. The first step to implementing the plan should be to consult with and involve local NGOs, civil society and the private sector. They can help to refine the plan and ensure that all stakeholders have informed it and feel ownership for it. A revised strategy should recognise and champion women's critical role in reducing household food insecurity. It should also look at ways to empower small-scale farmers by providing training in innovative agricultural techniques, loans for agricultural inputs, and technical support.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The more than 10 million men, women and children in Yemen who were driven into poverty or increased vulnerability during the crises in 2011 have exhausted most of their coping strategies. Supporting communities throughout the food crisis to build their resilience is critical to breaking the cycle of food insecurity, poverty and violence. Yet Yemen's future depends upon reducing people's vulnerability and building resilience for the long-term, breaking the hunger cycle, and empowering people to realize their potential. Cash transfers are a key mechanism by which to alleviate hunger and address worsening malnutrition in Yemen now. Complementary programmes to promote livelihoods, health and education must be developed to enable people to take the next step towards lifting themselves out of poverty.

NOTES

- ¹ WFP News Release 14 March 2012. *Food Security Survey to Reveal Alarming Levels of Severe Hunger in Yemen*.
- ² UN OCHA 8 May 2012, Yemen Humanitarian Bulletin
- ³ US plans to step up aid to Yemen if conditions are met' *Washington Post* 21 February 2012.
- ⁴ The World Bank suspended disbursements and withdrew from Yemen in March 2011. The suspension was lifted 23 January 2012. Similarly in April 2011 the Netherlands officially suspended development aid to Yemen. The suspension was lifted 3 February 2012. Other countries informally delayed aid payments until Saleh's resignation and, then, later until the new elections on 21 February 2012.
- ⁵ Charles Shultz (2012), *Building a Better Yemen*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington DC.
- ⁶ 'Yemen: Malnutrition data should shock' *IRIN* 27 December 2011.
- ⁷ WFP Comprehensive Food Security Survey Report (2012)
- ⁸ Oxfam (2011) *Yemen: Fragile Lives in Hungry Times* Oxfam GB: Oxford.
- ⁹ Yemen: Unrest puts child marriage issue on the back burner' *IRIN* 22 December 2011.
- ¹⁰ 'UN Security Council Presidential Statement on Yemen' 29 March 2012 available at <http://ukun.fco.gov.uk/en/news/?view=PressS&id=747866582>
- ¹¹ An increase of 54 per cent over the revised request from the Mid-Year Review.
- ¹² As of 11 May 2012 according to the UN Financial Tracking Service.
- ¹³ For example, Saudi Arabia has donated food aid and petroleum products.
- ¹⁴ 'Donor concern mounts ahead of Friends of Yemen meet' *AFP* 21 March 2012 available at <http://news.yahoo.com/donor-concern-mounts-ahead-friends-yemen-meet-173405629.html>
- ¹⁵ Henk-Jan Brinkman and Cullen Hendrix (2010) *Food Insecurity and Conflict: Applying the WDR Framework* World Development Report 2011 Background Paper.
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- ¹⁷ DFID (2011) *Cash Transfers: Evidence paper* (DFID: London): 19.
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- ¹⁹ WFP Monitoring Reports
- ²⁰ Concern Worldwide and Oxfam GB (2011) *Walking the Talk: Cash transfers and gender dynamics* (Oxfam GB: Oxford): 24.
- ²¹ Paul Harvey and Sarah Bailey. *Cash transfer programming in emergencies*. Humanitarian Practice Network at ODI, London, 2011: 34.
- ²² UK Department for International Development. *Cash Transfer: Evidence paper*. (2011): 41.
- ²³ UK Department for International Development. *Cash Transfer: Evidence paper*. (2011): 44.
- ²⁴ Jane Beesley *The Hunger Safety Nets Programme* Oxfam GB: Oxford

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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