Transcript

Friends of Yemen: Aid and Accountability

Session 1: Civil Society and Local NGO Perspectives

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6 March 2013
Hany El Banna:

Good morning, everybody. Thank you for coming early this morning. It's a pleasure and honour to have you here at one of the most prestigious think tanks and institutions, not only in the UK but the whole world. We are very proud of our institution here and we are very proud of the people who come to support the institution as well.

Yemen is our topic. Yemen could be a cornerstone of the future of certain regional areas, such as the Middle East and the Gulf area. Without Yemen there is no stability, at least in the Gulf – maybe, in the Middle East. We have to value what Yemen is about as a culture, as a history, as an economy, as manpower and the labour force for the area.

I’m very happy today to have the local voices who have been pushing for this for a long time, years and years. So we have the youth, and we have the civil society, and we have the ladies with us as well – who can drive, because they are great drivers. Women are the drivers of men – that’s right?

Jamila Ali Raja:

If you say so. Let’s wait and see.

Hany El Banna:

In a consultation process in Yemen, the Humanitarian Forum Yemen – an INGO – has organized in Yemen a meeting in February this year. The outcome of this meeting was 95 per cent of the organizations agreed that the Friends of Yemen should consult with civil society before the conference takes place; 86 per cent stated that they would like to engage with the government to support the transition; 56 per cent of organizations stated that they were unaware of the government’s development planning in their area. Almost half of the people said they were unaware of the terms of the GCC-sponsored agreement for Yemen’s transition; 28 per cent of organizations said that addressing immediate needs is the top priority to be addressed in 6–12 months. This was the recommendation with the INGO Forum – the Humanitarian Forum in Yemen – which was in the consultation process which was held last month.

This is not the first time we organized a conference for Yemen, as the Humanitarian Forum. The first conference was in Cairo, with support or partnership with UNOCHA and OIC. This was in December 2011. The second one was in May 2012, with the Arab League. The third one was in Yemen in
August 2012. So we are here for Yemen. We are here talking about Yemen and the future in Yemen and the stability of the whole region, which is based on the stability of Yemen.

We have three distinguished speakers with us, the three that I love most. The first one who will be speaking with us is Mohamed Murad Mutahar. He is the founder of Hemmat Shabab Foundation for Development.

**Mohamed Murad Mutahar:**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for being here. Thanks a lot to the organizers who made this event come to happen. Thank you, Dr Hany, for the great introduction about Yemen. I'm here today to share with you – I will try to share with you a model of Yemen’s youth redefining the philanthropic approaches to development.

Let me start with a small story of one of the old women, who is actually over 75 years old. This woman actually came to see her after we had visited her house, which is a two-by-two-metres one room. We came to see this lady being alone in this house. She is actually food insecure and she would only depend on the food from the neighbourhood, who would sometimes come to give her food, and sometimes she would just remain with no food. She is one of many Yemenis who are actually food insecure. This lady was not in a rural area – she was in one of the cities of Yemen. She is a model of many other families who are now facing the poverty and the humanitarian crisis, when we talk about food insecurity.

Our volunteers who came up to do the surveying for the families who are facing poverty in Yemen came to see that the numbers we always see about humanitarian and poverty is not only figures – they are there in place, and they are actually families who don’t have their annual food sufficiency to cover their food.

That’s the lady I was talking about. That’s another two ladies who are really inspiring us – we started in 2009 – to continue in this direction, to tackle the poverty aspect and unemployment.

I will try to discuss with you three main points today. ‘Redefining the philanthropic approaches to development’ – that was adopted by one of the Yemeni youth CSOs, the Hemmat Shabab Foundation. I would like to share some of the voices of the youth about projects and concepts they aspire to achieve in the coming future. I will try to wrap up with some recommendations.
Before we start, the humanitarian crisis in data – maybe Yemen is not really covered when we see it in the media, but the humanitarian crisis is actually there. Between 2009 and 2011, the number of severely food insecure people nearly doubled. The civil unrest is exacerbating the food insecurity, where 10 million Yemenis are food insecure, out of which 5 million are severely food insecure. Yemen is ranked as the 11th most food insecure country globally, with one in three Yemenis suffering from acute hunger. Of course, malnutrition is another thing from the humanitarian crisis that we need many youth CSOs to be advocating.

How did we start Hemmat Shabab? We started it as we tackled one of the studies back in 2009, to see that Yemen is ranked one of the highest countries when it comes to poverty. We started to consider unemployment and poverty as the main aspects of the foundation. Ever since its inception, we have served 17,000 families. We have a volunteers network of around 1,150 volunteers. We have served five main cities in the Republic of Yemen, including Aden, Hadramaut, Hudaydah, Sana’a and Taiz. Throughout the timeline of Hemmat Shabab, we have been seeing that the families who are benefiting from this food distribution have been gradually increasing year after year. But then it just clicked to us in 2012 that we need to institutionalize the foundation to make it a sustainable project that can help needy families over there.

As one of the Yemeni CSOs, we are having certain things that gave us strength to proceed with our projects. One of those was to attract youth from both genders, from diverse backgrounds that represent different cultures and regions, trying to bring them together. Such efforts will facilitate stability in a unified Yemen. We understand that success comes through partnerships and not with competition, because sometimes competition can create some conflicts and uncertainties. We empower talented youth in many activities, and the new college-graduate women mostly led many of our activities. We provide youth with leadership and teamwork, a sense of community and self-confidence.

I’d like to share as well that the ability to mobilize the youth and making them feel that they are important to build up the community was really one of the things that we looked at. Before we have done a strategic plan, we were working on seasonal projects. Out of these seasonal projects we used to do the monthly distribution of food to needy people. Another important event or activity that we used to launch was the youth conference that we do on an annual basis. We try to bring all the Yemeni CSOs together and tackle all the
concerns, and try to come up with a project that will unify all of these CSOs and efforts together.

But after that, we thought of having a five-year strategic plan focusing on two main things. The two main segments we are focusing on are the poor families and the youth, where we thought of having the continuity in awareness and empowerment advocacy. Here, we are thinking to have a social development of needy families to fight poverty by certain development programmes. Here, we are thinking to financially empower the youth through job opportunities. Of course, between these two you need to build partnerships with national, regional and international organizations. You need to have good raising of awareness through media and campaigns.

Of course public awareness is important in order to deliver your message, in order to have people and new partnerships involved with you. We used to have once a year what we call an AAA event – an Annual Award Appreciation – where we recognize the Hemmat Shabab pioneers and heroes who helped us to work out activities throughout the year. We aim that they could be – or they are, actually, Yemeni ambassadors to the world. They have been going out of Yemen to speak about their experiences.

Who are our local and national partners in Yemen? Maybe the private sector was the main strength in our work, because they have trusted us, they have given us opportunity to really show that we can do something. Before we were registered we just delivered them the data and they would give us donations or funds. The private sector was one of our strengths.

One of the short-term projects that some of the youth initiatives are looking at is the Yemeni Food Bank. In fact, some efforts now are being done to do a pilot project about this. Mobile health clinics are one of the important issues that we need to have in remote areas, rural areas. There are many other short-term, sustainable projects. The long-term strategic projects that youth aspire to achieve are, for example, raising awareness in health and education, precisely in supporting the standards in the school improvement plan.

I would like to sum up. International and potential partners that many CSOs are looking to partner with are those that you see. Accountability is an issue. Many CSOs need to consider all these points, including the governors and the building capacity, so that they will be able to absorb the pledges that are coming. I would like to sum up with a recommendation. One of the most important ones is to have acceleration in the absorption of the donor pledges by civil society empowerment and partnership. I would like to close with: we
always need to remember that it takes a village to raise a child, as once Hillary Clinton said. It’s friends like you who will be able to help make a difference in Yemen and a success. It’s partnership that we need at this point in time. Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.

**Hany El Banna:**

Thank you, Mr Mohamed, and for Hemmat Shabab. We also need to thank the organizers of this meeting, which is Oxfam, the backbone of the humanitarian movement in the UK and the whole world – and in Yemen as well; a Yemeni diaspora organization for youth and community organization, the Yemen Relief and Development Forum, YRDF, which started last year; and the Humanitarian Forum.

Our second speaker is Rafat Al-Akhali, co-founder and chair of Resonate! Yemen.

**Rafat Al-Akhali:**

I just want to start with a number that Dr Hany mentioned in his introduction, and it’s from the latest CSO consultation: 86 per cent of civil society organizations surveyed said that they would like to engage with the government in supporting the transition. That same 86 per cent said that either they never got consulted or if consultations happened in their communities they’re not aware of it. So I want to focus on inclusion – inclusion of civil society actors in the development agenda in Yemen.

We have to admit that there has been a lot of progress in the past few years in terms of inclusion. We now have inclusion on the agenda. If we look, for example, at the Mutual Accountability Framework that was signed between Yemen and its development partners, there is a main pillar there for civil society empowerment and partnerships. So it’s there, and the government in its transitional programme for stability and development also had a whole section for a strategic partnership forum which is supposed to bring together civil society actors with the government and development partners in the development process. If we also look at the major donors in Yemen, for example, the World Bank held consultations on their plan for 2013–14; the UNDP is supporting a youth observatory project to engage youth in policy formation. So I think we’re at a point where really no one dares to even go and speak about development without mentioning that there will be inclusion and we will have consultations with people.
I really believe that the intentions are there, whether it's the Friends of Yemen or the government or civil society – everyone has the intention to work together on this. But there seems to be an inherent assumption in all this that we have the required experience to do consultations in Yemen. Unfortunately, that's not the case. In Yemen, we never had this accumulated experience of running wide-scale consultations across the whole community or at a major level. The British that are here might know that the UK has a very good example of public consultations – they have their own code of practice for consultations, every department has a consultation coordinator. It's been there for long years and the process is well mature now. But we don't have that in Yemen. So when we do consultations – we joined in a consultation, for example, for the Mutual Accountability Framework, and it's not well facilitated and the outputs are not there, there's no follow-up on it. So we are lacking a lot of process. We need to start with the process first and then get to the point where consultations are really meaningful.

On the other side, the civil society organizations don't have enough capacity to participate in this. Again, we haven't had the experience to participate in this. So again, we go to consultations all the time with the World Bank, the government, everyone, and we see that civil society actors would come not prepared, don't know what the strategy is, haven't done their homework as well. They don't know how to participate in these.

We also see a lot of these consultation efforts and inclusion efforts are very much Sana’a-centric. When we talk to our partners in the different governorates, they always complain that all this is happening in Sana’a, they’re not part of this at all. It’s also not really grassroots. I’m happy to be part of these consultations but I’m not representative of the whole of Yemen. So we really need to work on expanding that circle that gets consulted and gets included in these discussions.

If we want to look at, what are the priorities to try and address this so that we actually have meaningful inclusion and consultations, of course we need to work on establishing the process. First, as I mentioned, we need to really make sure that we have people able to design this process so it’s a meaningful exercise. That might be something that the upcoming executive bureau can work on. We also need to build capacity. I know we talk a lot about building capacity of civil society actors – we are almost tired of that. But what we need to do is try and do it in non-traditional ways, so it's not about bringing someone, giving them a workshop, but really trying to engage them in different ways. We have done previous projects where we used game simulations, like a democracy game where youth get to work on designing
policies and see what it is. It was funny, when we finished that exercise with the youth, everyone said: I don’t want to be in the place of a prime minister or a president anymore, because this is so complicated. There are all these different actors and we have to take care of all these different policies, so this is actually really complicated.

I also want to highlight one major thing, which is the use of technology. This has really not picked up in Yemen as much as in the rest of the African continent. Yemen has, especially when we talk about SMS technology, we have over 12 million mobile subscribers. The adult population in Yemen is about 13 million so really we have about 100 per cent penetration of mobile phones in the adult population. But it’s not really used – it’s somewhat used in some awareness-raising exercises, for the elections or health, but really not in a way to engage the citizens in the process. So we’re talking with some donors now to launch a project maybe to do grassroots monitoring of donor-funded projects by youth, so they can use SMS technology. We’re also working on engaging citizens in the national dialogue process using SMS polling, so it’s a much more inclusive and grassroots process and not just 500 people that claim to represent the whole of Yemen.

So we need to work on all this and try to expand our circles, both geographically and grassroots-wise as well. I think if we try to focus on that both from the Friends of Yemen, the government and civil society, we will really be able to make a difference in Yemen. Thank you.

**Hany El Banna:**

Thank you, Rafat, for that concise presentation – and on time. We follow with the presentation of Jamila, the founder and manager of Consult-Yemen.

**Jamila Ali Raja:**

Good morning, everybody. Consult-Yemen would like to thank first Chatham House for organizing this special event, especially before the official meeting of the Friends of Yemen. It’s a step forward. It’s true that we did not have the chance – that civil society did not have the chance to be part of the consultations in the ministerial meeting, but the ministers came to this meeting, which is an asset.

To Friends of Yemen, Consult-Yemen says: thank you for continuing your friendship during this time of hardship for Yemen. We all know that the transition has not been, nor will be, an easy process for Yemenis, their
government and friends. Yet meetings and consultations such as these are marks of being on the right track.

Definitely we all know that there are four challenges that are facing Yemen at this time. I have these signs in the shape of barrels – this could be oil barrels, this could be checkpoint barrels, whatever we want to interpret them. But I wanted to say, the message in this slide is: can we all work on these four challenges at the same time? Because if we concentrate on security, humanitarian is being neglected. If we are focusing on national dialogue, sometimes the development – the middle and urgent needs of development – are not met. So my message here to the Friends of Yemen and the Yemeni government is: can we work at the same time, at the same level, with the same effort, with the same finances – provide finances – for these four barrels or these four challenges and pillars? Because they are creating a challenge. If we concentrate only on security, humanitarian issues definitely are affecting the security. They are all intertwined with each other so we do need to have that look.

These are the new factors that have happened. The CSOs are the newcomers, the youth and the women, after the uprising in 2011. Every one of these has a special part in the national dialogue and we have all followed up now – they are in the national dialogue, they are available. They have a voice there, youth and women as well. There’s a lot of challenges, which I will go onto later.

If we look at the political challenge, we find the national dialogue and the constitutional reform. These are the two big matters now, that we are going to start the national dialogue on 18 March and we are going to reform the constitution. So Consult-Yemen acknowledges that this national dialogue has made a change and has given 120 seats for CSOs, for women and for youth, but expresses concern at the same time that this agreement and the standards of selection and withdrawal of the members of the technical committee – how it’s going to affect the total income or the national dialogue conference itself. Consult-Yemen acknowledges the 30 per cent of women in the political parties but at the same time we recommend that this has to be followed up, because we know that some of the lists came back with not 30 per cent. But we hope that by sending them back to the political parties, they will address them to the 30 per cent.

Consult-Yemen supports the national dialogue timeline. We have six months, maybe two more months – eight months from beginning to end. But at the same time, can we deal with all the issues of the national dialogue? This is
one of the big concerns that Consult-Yemen is worried about. Maybe we can start with state-building and go gradually on other things that might take more time, but it has to be flexible.

Consult-Yemen worries that security and stability options should not prevail over change in human rights and equal citizenship. There is this consensus that we want stability, we want security. We are tired of fighting. Would that be at the expense of real change? This has to be outlined.

Very quickly, the major economic challenge of course is that the donors are saying that Yemen does not have absorptive capacities and the mismanagement. The government said that they are delaying their pledges. To deal with that, the treatment was the Mutual Accountability Framework. As you know, it deals with economic transitional priorities. It created an executive bureau, as all of us know, and those are the aims of the bureau: to accelerate the funds, coordinate and policy development. There are some concerns. We worry that this might be a shadow government. The other thing is that the CSO represented in the monitoring board is selected by the ministers. That might be some of the concerns we are talking about.

Humanitarian, the youth have set a very good example, that these youth can engage in humanitarian efforts. They are self-initiated. They did partnerships with the private sector. They have ownership, they have sustainability. They are setting an example that they can be included in partnerships with the government and with the private sector. I think this is a plus for this conference and for the Yemeni government and for change.

Oxfam and other relief agencies have been flagging the emergency flag for some time. We are in dire need for funding for humanitarian. It is urgent and we don’t want to wait until it is too late. This is part of the UN appeal request and two only – 20, I’m sorry, it’s two per cent only.

The last thing, very quickly. Of course, the Mutual Accountability Framework mentioned the CSO empowerment partnership, which is very important, I think. Consult-Yemen appreciates that and seconds that. But at the same time, we do need a local NGO (LNGO) assessment very urgently. I think the World Bank might be working on that, the need for a local NGO assessment and updates. The last assessment for local NGOs was in 2007. There are a lot of changes that have taken place. UNDP and the RC [Resident Coordinator] are doing some capacity initiatives now on local NGOs but we think that they should be concentrating on that the LNGOs could be a link between the government and could be a link between the local communities – and shift the whole process to responding to humanitarian crisis. We all
concentrate on programme design, on monitoring, on gender mainstreaming – but actually in the field there is lack of capacity.

Thank you for listening.