Transcript Q&A

Friends of Yemen: Aid and Accountability

Session 1: Civil Society and Local NGO Perspectives

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**Question 1:**
I’d like to ask the board what they see as the future challenges to stability in Yemen.

**Question 2:**
Working across the Arab world, it seems to me there’s a huge imbalance between politics activity and policy and creation of jobs. The people who create more jobs are the job creators, which is the businesspeople – and I see that Mohamed mentioned that part of his programme is entrepreneurship. Some countries don’t have a tradition of that. Yemen has. Wherever in the world I’ve been, there are entrepreneurs. Do you feel that that is given sufficient priority in Yemen, to actually get job creators rather than creating jobs?

**Question 3:**
Being the humanitarian coordinator, I would like to highlight that we are working very closely actually with the civil society. We had last year 66 partners. When we speak about partners, it is not only the UN agencies – it is mainly local and international. This year for our new cap we have 89 partners, and you know that very well, Hany. That is something I would like to highlight.

I don’t think I need to go into figures, except adding a little bit to what Mohamed has said in terms of the crisis. We have today 1 million children with acute malnutrition. This is 47 per cent of the children below five years old. We have 3,000 of these children – their life is under threat if they don’t get assistance. Particularly on the issue of acute malnutrition, it’s a major problem and a chronic problem in Yemen. We have half a million IDPs, internally displaced people. Also we have seen a huge return to Abyan – that’s something we are happy about and we are trying to assist Abyan in reconstruction. And we have over 300,000 registered refugees. When we speak about registered, probably the figure is much higher. This is something because we have actually three ministers – the minister of planning, the minister of finance and the minister of foreign affairs – to thank the government of Yemen, because Yemen, despite all this, has never closed its border to the refugees. It’s the only country in the region who has signed the 1951 convention.

My last point will be to Rafat and Mohamed, because we need – obviously we have been having, we organized last week an interesting workshop with
Resonate. This is the UNDP side trying to see how we can get youth involved more. As you said, we had actually 10 NGOs represented from outside Sana’a, which is something very important. Our vision has been always: show them the way but get out of their way also.

My question is simply: I want to understand better how we can partner. I would like to hear even criticism; I would like to hear how we have been, as the international community, not giving enough space for the local NGO, especially the youth NGO. Thank you very much.

Mohamed Murad Mutahar:
I will start with the entrepreneurship subject which was raised. Yes, I think entrepreneurship needs to have sufficient focus in the coming period. It’s always been raised, some questions about – if you do really invest in entrepreneurship programmes, then the question would be, who is going to get the funds for these entrepreneurs who would like to start their businesses or ideas? So I think it should come in parallel, working with entrepreneurship programmes, fostering it in Yemeni society, but as well to help and have an integrated solution to the ideas or the new projects that are going to come.

The second point is about the partnerships with international NGOs. I think when we started it was mainly an initiative and we didn’t really know how to do more institutional work. But then now, after we have been registered, I think it’s now time to open space and have partnerships with international NGOs. We have been working together. We have also organized the UNV volunteers, so we have a good relationship with UNDP. I think this has to be fostered with other CSOs as well.

Rafat Al-Akhalí:
With regard to the future challenges to the stability of Yemen, I would say that as far as I’m concerned, the major challenge is building the government capacity. Whether we agree to it or not, the government is the biggest player in the economy, in everything else in Yemen. Whatever CSOs and NGOs and donors do is all complementary to what the government does. The government is the centrepiece of all this. Unless we can make the government – and when I say government, I’m talking about the civil service – able to attract talented and skilled people to work in it, it will continue to be the black box where everything comes in and nothing comes out – or very little comes out – because of this major thing. So to address all other challenges
we need to first work on the government, because it’s the one that begins the whole process.

If I go back to the [previous] question, I think two things are key: raising the level and capacity of the local civil society organizations and building their capacity to engage and consult with their constituencies. Because again, in Yemen we tend to – you get invited to represent but you really don’t represent as a CSO because you never do your consultations with your constituencies. So we play the same games. We need to train all these CSOs on how to do consultations with their constituencies and raise their level to be able to be part of these consultations.

And again, as I said, I think there is a huge space to use technology in Yemen. It has not been overlooked. Even if we look at the internet, and I don’t like to advocate for using the internet in Yemen because everyone just raises their eyebrows, but everyone is still stuck on the two per cent penetration of internet in Yemen. I think I read an article this week that still mentioned the two per cent internet penetration. But in 2012, the latest IT report, it’s already got 15 per cent. So in five years we went from two per cent to 15 per cent, but everyone is still stuck at two per cent. Just on Facebook, we have 660,000 users was the latest statistic. In a country like Yemen, that’s a really good number. If for every person there, he has a family of 7.1 on average, you can really reach a lot of people on internet. But even if we don’t focus on internet, just using SMS, there is a huge potential for that.

**Jamila Ali Raja:**

I will answer to the question of stability challenges. I think the challenges to stability are inclusion and serious work on national dialogue and consultations. Without really being done in the national dialogue conference, I don’t think we are going to reach any kind of peace and stability. The other thing of course is to implement the reform of the military and the security forces. I think there has been now an agreement, a republican decree on the plan for reformation, but of course we are awaiting the implementation. So these two factors will play a role, in addition to, of course, working on the Executive Bureau and the MAF projects, because development is one of the real safety nets for security and stability.
Question 4:
I have a question in response to a few things I heard this morning, especially related to civil society lacking experience and the lack of an inflow of talented people into government, thus making a ‘black box’, as Rafat said. What is your assessment of the capacity of higher education in Yemen and its ability to produce people that can function in effective roles in both sectors?

Question 5:
My question is to all the people here. I am disappointed, because how can you fulfil or implement these illusions or goals if there is no political determination by the government? Secondly, how could you reach these goals as long as the corrupted system from the past is still sharing the same position, over the court, the representatives of the revolution? Where are the youth who brought out this revolution of change? They were ignored totally. A third question is: where is the main issue, the key issue of the whole problem in the southern Arabian peninsula, which is the cause of the south? The south is never, ever considered as a separate issue to get a solution for the whole problem. That’s why you’re still having the same people from the past now in the present, and they will be also in the future. Thank you.

Question 6:
I was doing my research on the post-Soviet countries of transition and the driving force that NGOs were trying to play, and I found a few problems where the assistance was not given through the wider generation, where citizens could not become the drivers of change. So my question is: what is the image of civil society organizations? What is the actual level of penetration in the society, through membership, through some kind of volunteering? What do common citizens of Yemen think about NGOs?

Question 7:
I’m glad to be here in Chatham House and also to hear the NGOs. As you said, it’s very important that we listen to you and that we have a close consultation process. We are in close consultation with the government of course, and we’ve been discussing the progress in the reforms and in the new budget. We know the views of the minister about where we should be heading. I’d like to hear from you. What is your view about the improvements
in the budget, in this year’s budget, in the areas of creating growth – employment in particular – and in better targeting the poor in social protection? Any views on that, that you can share with us now? Or even later, you can always send us emails with your views on that. Thank you.

**Hany El Banna:**

Thank you. I will just make a brief statement about the culture of the Arab region. In the good old days we used to have the government’s role was security, maybe foreign policy, finance and military. The rest of the services were actually done by civil society. It was a region which believed strongly in the action of civil society through the *waqf* endowment system. Most of the services – education, health and others – were run by the civil society itself, in its forms at that time.

What happened now from the recently developed governments, especially maybe after the revolutions in the 1950s and 1960s, is that the government has overtaken all these sectors to run it by themselves. They disempowered the civil society as a whole. This is a time now we revisit this chapter again and give this sector back to the civil society. This is one of the causes of the instability of the whole region: there is no civil society. If you go to Libya – we used to go to Libya – there is no organization at all, 2011 and 2012. Nothing. In Yemen, very weak. If we talk about 13,000 registered organizations, half of them are not functioning; the other half of the half is temporary or reactionary. Very few of them are functioning. The same in Egypt, the same in the rest of the Arabic – in the Gulf states, extremely weak or nonexistent civil society.

So let us discuss the reality of the issue. The civil society role in this region is either absent or been very weakened by the governments who took over every sector of life in the society.

**Mohamed Murad Mutahar:**

Maybe to share the point about how does youth, let’s say CSOs, look at the volunteering, that kind of thing. Looking at the whole aspect, I think the youth CSOs, before the revolution they didn't have that confidence to carry on contributing to the society. But now I think because they are put in a corner that they have so much to do, they feel that they are responsible to give back to where they are living. It’s now then the point where they need to contribute more, they need to be able to be building better capacities to try and help in a
partnership with different partners on all these projects. But I think now they have gained more confidence than before.

The other point about the projects that could be sustainable to help the poor families and unemployment – we have been really amazed to see that there are so many ideas of the youth CSOs. Some of these ideas of course – it’s like a system that they would go first on training these poor families in certain areas in a speciality and then they would start doing small projects, that don’t exceed over $1,000. Then they keep on monitoring these projects until they make sure that this small business is actually developing.

But the thing is, without having a closer interaction with international NGOs, I think they come into the middle and they don’t really continue on these projects. We really want to bring these CSOs who are having the ideas but lack the capacity to make sustainable projects out of it.

One more point is about the national food security strategy which was initiated in 2010. This strategy was supposed to reduce the food insecurity to one-third over five years through a combination of trade and agriculture, policy reform, population control, growth and water policy reform. We would like this to be re-triggered again, to be re-initiated, because it’s going to help in many areas.

**Rafat Al-Akhali:**

Maybe I’ll just address one of the questions, the budget question from the IMF. I think the latest budget for 2013 – we all know it was a very expansionary budget. The deficit in that budget was much higher. But I think the major concern that many people have is the unstable revenues. We pretty much know because of the attacks on the oil pipeline and what that is causing that most of the investment part of that budget is probably not going to happen. Already the current spending is very high in that budget and it will probably be a higher percentage because of that lack of revenues. I’m not sure where the negotiations with the IMF are heading. I know we got the rapid credit facility but not sure what happened after that in terms of the longer term. But we also noticed the huge increase in the defence budget as a percentage of the whole budget. Still no way to address the subsidies, so the subsidies are still not fully addressed in the new budget. It should be addressed and moved to cash transfers in my opinion, but that’s something we can talk about later.
It also doesn’t match with the TPSD [Transitional Program for Stabilization and Development], so we couldn’t really see how that matches the priorities of the TPSD. So that’s something that needs to be worked on as well.

**Jamila Ali Raja:**

Very quickly, the question of higher education in Yemen. I think we do have a lot of higher education graduates. What we need is actually lower graduates and vocational training, rather than higher graduates. But still, those who are qualified and good in higher education should be involved with the government, should be involved in this process of change and transition.

Number two, I do understand, sir, your grievances about the south. I think the best way always to deal with it is to engage. I don’t believe that – I understand you are disappointed as well but I think without working from within, trying and raising our voices and challenging all those who are stopping the factors of change, I think we should think about that more.

Number three, what’s the image of the NGOs? I think Mohamed answered that. In Yemen’s history, as Hany El Banna was saying, we too had this sense of cooperatives, CSOs, that naturally came in the villages. What we called agricultural cooperatives… they all came in a natural process. Once the government invaded them, it caused this break and it caused these ailments in the process.

On the budget, I will answer later. Thank you.

**Hany El Banna:**

Thank you very much to the speakers and all of you. I think I’ll leave a question for all of us, for the development of Aden as an international port. This is something that could bring a lot of revenue for Yemen, but this should be asked to the foreign minister: why are you leaving Aden, not developing it to bring a lot of revenues?

But first of all, I would like to thank you again, and again and again, all of you, and thank Oxfam, Yemen Relief and Development Forum, and Humanitarian Forum, and all the INGO – the members of the INGO Forum in Yemen and the UK – for bringing these august speakers here. We believe in youth, we believe in women, and you are the future leaders not only of Yemen but of humanity. So we thank all of you for doing it and for coming.