



# Locally Led Reconciliation in Yemen



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## Table of Acronyms

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>ABF</b>	Alf Baa Foundation
<b>AFP</b>	Accountability for Peace
<b>ASD</b>	Al-Shaima Foundation for Development
<b>AYF</b>	Abyan Youth Foundation
<b>CRC</b>	Conflict Resolution Committee
<b>CSD</b>	Civil Status Department
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization
<b>EUD</b>	The Executive Unit for the Displaced
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based Violence
<b>GEE</b>	Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen
<b>HRC</b>	Human Rights Committee
<b>HRV</b>	Human Rights Violation
<b>IDPs</b>	Internally Displaced Persons
<b>LCSO</b>	Local Civil Society Organization
<b>MOHR</b>	Musa'ala Organization for Human Rights
<b>PG</b>	<b>Partners</b> Global
<b>PLC</b>	Presidential Leadership Council
<b>PY</b>	<b>Partners</b> Yemen
<b>RAFD</b>	Rafd Association for Rural Development
<b>RASD</b>	Rawafid Association for Sustainable Development
<b>RC</b>	Reconciliation Committee
<b>RFD</b>	Roa'a Foundation for Development
<b>RFDHR</b>	Ruwwad Foundation for Development and Human Rights
<b>ROYG</b>	Republic of Yemen Government
<b>SYO</b>	Shabwa Youth Organization
<b>TFD</b>	Tahdeeth Foundation for Development
<b>VAW</b>	Violence Against Women
<b>YWC</b>	Yemen without Conflict

## Rethinking Reconciliation in Yemen

There have been numerous attempts led by the international community and the UN Special Envoy in Yemen to stop the conflict and reach a political settlement. These efforts arrived at an important milestone recently, which was the April 2022 ceasefire agreement between the Yemeni parties. The ceasefire was upheld with the support of locally-led efforts until September 2022.

However, Yemenis continue to suffer on a daily basis due to the deterioration of basic services, increasing displacement, and the prevalence of daily violations of their human rights.

This report focuses on **Partners**Global and **Partners**Yemen's approach in the implementation of the Accountability for Peace (AFP) Project based on local mechanisms that aim to resolve conflict, address grievances, improve human rights, and achieve social cohesion through community reconciliation. The approach provided local community members and local actors with opportunities for meaningful participation in the design and implementation of local initiatives with the aim of building long-term justice and accountability processes.

This report discusses how Yemeni stakeholders can leverage local mechanisms to overcome divisions, as such mechanisms can strengthen local cohesion and stability, regardless of national political settlements or the enactment of a comprehensive transitional justice process in the future. The local mechanisms can advance mediation, conflict resolution, and reconciliation efforts.

Additionally, this report discusses the types and methods of locally led reconciliations efforts and social cohesion processes led by Yemeni local civil society organizations who sought to address the needs of local communities, support basic service provision, and provide non-monetary mechanisms to address grievances and abuses.

Bolstering these locally led efforts and mechanisms based on the local context is essential to laying the requisite framework and infrastructure for an inclusive and sustainable peace process in Yemen that provides justice and accountability for Yemenis.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to rethink reconciliation in Yemen to invest in local communities and reconciliation committees to respond to grievances and conflicts and to lead local reconciliation efforts vis-à-vis a bottom-up approach that aims to achieve reconciliation and political settlement.

- Fahd Saif, Deputy Director, **Partners**Yemen



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Local civil society organizations in Yemen consistently do heroic work in unimaginably challenging conditions. **Partners**Global and **Partners**Yemen extend our profound thanks and admiration to the staff of Alf Baa Foundation and Tahdeeth Foundation for Development from Aden; Abyan Youth Foundation from Abyan; Development Pioneers and Rafd Association for Rural Development from Lahj; Roa'a Foundation for Development from Al-Dhale'e; Future Pioneers Association and Rawafid Association for Sustainable Development from Al-Jawf; Musa'ala Organization for Human Rights from Marib; Environment and Development Association and Al-Shaima Foundation for Development from Ibb; Yemen without Conflict from Taiz; Al-Ekha'a Association and Shabwa Youth Foundation from Shabwa.

Finally, this report is dedicated to the brave and resilient community members who participated in the *Accountability for Peace* project. Your work to improve your communities amidst an intractable civil war is inspiring and we only hope that this report does justice to your stories.

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## Introduction

### About this Report

As the conflict in Yemen enters its eighth year, internationally sponsored efforts to reach a negotiated solution have once again stalled. Hopes were high at the beginning of 2022, as the new UN Special Envoy negotiated the first truce since 2015 and the beleaguered Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) formed a Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) to unite disparate Southern groups in an attempt to reach a durable solution. The ROYG made significant concessions to Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthis, including resuming flights at Sana'a International Airport and allowing fuel deliveries in Hodeidah to provide relief for millions of citizens in northern Yemen. Unfortunately, in the six-month process that followed the ceasefire, Ansar Allah negotiators failed to hold up their end of the bargain and remove road blockades around Taiz City. At the same time, the PLC's legitimacy flagged as violent clashes continued in the South. On October 2, the truce expired. Many fear that a return to open warfare is imminent.

The persistent failure of Track I negotiators to reach a durable solution to the conflict has frustrated international observers. At the 2021 and 2022 High-Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen, donors fell far short of the UN's goal, dedicating only a third of required funds.<sup>1</sup> The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shifted international attention and funds from Yemen, with many donors redirecting critical peacebuilding and development resources to Central and Eastern Europe. The prevailing mood of international donors regarding Yemen is one of frustration and resignation with the lack of progress toward peace. Exacerbating this situation, parties to the conflict are also credibly accused of disrupting largescale humanitarian aid efforts to fund the war effort and line the coffers of powerful leaders.

Meanwhile, as the war drags on, Yemenis are suffering needlessly. Yemen's precarious infrastructure has been further destroyed by the fighting. Displacement, hunger, and disease affect large swaths of the population. At the same time, all parties to the conflict have been credibly accused of committing serious violations of both international human rights law and international humanitarian law.<sup>2</sup> Some of the most common violations have included indiscriminate attacks, including airstrikes and the planting of landmines; arbitrary detention of innocent civilians; and the use of child soldiers. Already oppressed groups, such as women and *Muhamasheen*,<sup>3</sup> are being further marginalized. Notably, according to numerous international gender indices, Yemen is one of the worst places in the world to be a woman, and Ansar Allah authorities continue to tighten restrictions on women's participation in public life.

Amid this dire situation, there remains cause for optimism when it comes to Yemen and other protracted conflicts and crises around the world. Increasingly, international development practitioners are recognizing the significance of locally led approaches to effective and equitable assistance. Locally led approaches refer to processes where local actors, including individuals,

<sup>1</sup> "Oxfam response to today's high-level pledging event on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen," 16 Mar. 2022.

<sup>2</sup> International humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law are two distinct but complementary bodies of law. They are both concerned with the protection of life, health and dignity. IHL applies in armed conflict while human rights law applies at all times, in peace and in war. <https://www.icrc.org/en/war-and-law/ihl-other-legal-regimes/ihl-human-rights>

<sup>3</sup> Literally meaning "marginalized ones," *Muhamasheen* are a visible minority in Yemen who suffer from caste-based discrimination. <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/muhamasheen/>

communities, networks, organizations, private entities, and governments, set their own priorities, develop solutions, and acquire the capacity, leadership, and resources to implement these solutions.<sup>4</sup> For **PartnersGlobal** and **PartnersYemen**, local leadership has informed and guided work in Yemen for over a decade. By deferring to communities to create their own solutions to the micro-level implications of conflict that most directly affect their quality of life, an intervention can lead to concrete, meaningful results that are not only relevant to the individuals directly affected by a conflict, but are also coherent with the context in which they live. Often, these solutions are squarely at the center of the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus, centering on urgent humanitarian needs while building building a culture of peace and democracy that can be drawn on to contribute to an eventual national-level transition.

To that end, this report will serve to answer the key question of “why is it important to continue conducting local reconciliation work in Yemen without a foreseeable end to the conflict?” More broadly, this report provides an important example of successful implementation of a locally led peacebuilding approach that may be instructive for communities around the world facing protracted conflicts. The report highlights and amplifies the impact produced by the community dialogues and community reconciliation initiatives conducted by **PartnersYemen** and its partner local civil society organizations (LCSOs) and community leaders in nine governorates in Yemen from 2019-2022. The overall objective of these interventions was **local reconciliation** which, in the words of **PartnersYemen** staff, entails “restoring relationships at the community level, addressing root causes to prevent conflict from returning, and building confidence and trust between conflicting parties” for the benefit of local communities. Such impacts, manifested in success stories, provide proof for (a) the importance of the work conducted thus far; (b) the importance of continuing and sustaining such work at their current level; and (c) the importance of investing further to further upscale these initiatives.

### About the Accountability for Peace Project

**PartnersGlobal**’s Accountability for Peace (AFP) project promotes accountability for human rights abuses committed over the course of the ongoing conflict in Yemen. With local affiliate **PartnersYemen** and several local civil society and development organizations in nine of Yemen’s governorates, the project aims to bolster community reconciliation and set the stage for future efforts to hold human rights violators accountable for their actions through the following objectives:

- Creating a record of human rights abuses to support community reconciliation and inform future transitional justice processes; and
- Strengthening local capacity to promote the concept of ‘archival activism’ in which documented resources serve as the foundation of activism for social change by providing stories, evidence, facts, and arguments to further causes and advocacy campaigns.

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<sup>4</sup> “What is Locally Led Development? – Fact Sheet,” *USAID*, <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/what-locally-led-development-fact-sheet>

AFP adopted a multi-faceted approach, creating common spaces for actors, leaders, and community members to identify needs, priorities, and issues. It addressed institutional dynamics, local mechanisms to promote social cohesion, capacity building for stakeholders, and the relationships among local government institutions and citizens to facilitate discussions of solutions using a conflict-sensitive and rights-based approach. The project's activities ultimately enhanced the accountability and governance environment to achieve cohesion, stability, and development in the targeted governorates of Taiz, Ibb, Aden, Lahj, Abyan, Shabwah, Marib, Al Jawf and Al Dhale`e.



Men and women in Lahj discuss the primary human rights issues impacting their communities.

AFP built the capacities of 14 LCSOs across Yemen and 10 community facilitators trained on transitional justice, documentation, and international law. 800 data points were collected on grievances and abuses; 104 community dialogues were conducted, which aimed to enable community members to work together with local authorities to address emerging community issues and needs. 1,250 local authority members, social leaders, activists, influencers, community members, and religious leaders participated to formulate community solutions to address communal grievances. 28 community reconciliation initiatives were implemented, and 27 community committees were established to continue to address local reconciliation challenges and social cohesion issues beyond the timeline of the project.



14

LCSOs

Capacity Building



10

Community Facilitators

Trained on transitional justice, documentation, and international law



800

Data Points

Collected on grievances and abuses



104

Community Dialogues

Address emerging community issues



1,250

Participated Member

Address communal grievances



28

Initiatives

Collected on grievances and abuses



## Implementation Approaches

Over six years of implementation, the **Partners** team employed innovative, creative, and adaptive approaches to enable reconciliation and resilience in communities in Yemen. Working in close partnership and solidarity with local stakeholders, the team provided a safe space for community members to discuss the most important issues affecting their communities amidst the ongoing conflict. Together, these stakeholders formed local committees to address these issues, building social capital and enhancing community cohesion. Critically, the **Partners** team worked with local civil society organizations (LCSOs) based in each governorate. These LCSOs are deeply rooted in the local context, enabling the project to successfully adapt to the incredibly complex, shifting conflict dynamics in Yemen. Despite the ongoing conflict and repeated failure of Track I negotiations to produce a durable agreement, these micro-local achievements will provide the building blocks of lasting peace in Yemen.

The **Partners** team applied both a **rights-based approach** and **conflict transformation approach** throughout implementation.

A **rights-based approach** is rooted in the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and seeks to promote and protect human rights in relief and development interventions. Under this approach, the project team aimed to operationalize principles such as universality, indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, participation, and accountability, among others.<sup>5</sup>

A **conflict transformation approach** emphasizes the relationships, concepts, and environment surrounding the conflict and the groups involved and affected. Constructive conflict transformation seeks to amplify the voices of stakeholders and aims to bring their interests closer to each other. This approach places importance on influencing the context of the conflict, which requires dealing with the various social and political sources of conflict.

### Phase 1: Preparation

Together, **Partners** and the LCSOs engaged in several preparatory steps prior to any intervention, including:

- **Documentation of Violations:** By collecting information on wartime violations, including human rights violations and violations of economic, social, and cultural rights, the team provided an important input to the facilitation of community conversations, often drawing attention to overlooked issues.
- **Conflict Analysis:** Conducting participatory conflict analyses in each governorate through communication with local experts, community members, local government officials, religious leaders, and informal leaders (including dignitaries, sheikhs, tribal leaders, and influential personalities). These assessments not only highlighted important information about potential challenges to implementation, but also served to ensure the support and cooperation of local leaders, both formal and informal.
- **Gender and Inclusion Analysis:** In addition to more general conflict dynamics, **Partners applied** a gender and inclusion analysis approach to ensure the meaningful participation

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<sup>5</sup> “Universal Values: Principle One: Human Rights-Based Approach”, *UN Sustainable Development Group*, <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>.

of marginalized groups, including women, youth, members of the *Muhamasheen* community, and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

## Phase 2: Community Dialogues

Following the preparation phase, LCSOs in each governorate convened community dialogue sessions to give community members a safe space to constructively discuss issues facing the community. From 2017 to 2022, The **Partners** team facilitated 104 local community dialogues, implemented by fourteen LCSOs in nine governorates, in which more than 3,900 male and female citizens participated.

LCSOs invited a diverse group of stakeholders, including local activists, journalists, community leaders, members of displaced communities, *Muhamasheen*, women, youth, and victims of human rights violations to participate in dialogues. The participation of local government officials was especially critical as LCSOs worked to leverage their participation to gain support for future activities and to help resolve any conflicts or challenges that might hinder future implementation. In addition, LCSOs invited religious leaders, encouraging them to utilize their platforms at Friday sermons to raise public awareness about key issues facing the community.

In close partnership with **Partners** Yemen's experts, LCSOs in each governorate carefully designed a facilitation methodology, and handled what in many cases was a complex set of logistics, in order to ensure a safe space for all participants to engage in dialogue sessions in a meaningful way. Given the challenging context of the war, certain critical factors influenced the facilitation design and delivery:

- **Trauma-informed design:** Facilitators developed the dialogue sessions with the assumption that most participants had experienced at least one life-altering or traumatic event over the course of the conflict. Activity design incorporated trauma-informed principles to provide a safe, supportive, and non-judgmental environment in order to avoid re-traumatization. Facilitators focused on promoting active listening and encouraging honest and helpful discussion that moved participants towards community reconciliation.
- **Meaningful participation of women and other marginalized groups:** Facilitators prioritized the full and meaningful participation of women and other marginalized groups who are not often able to participate in public decision-making and adopted different approaches in each governorate to achieve this goal. In some more conservative areas, such as Lahj, separate women's-only dialogues complemented mixed-gender conversations, to provide women a more open, comfortable space to express their opinions.

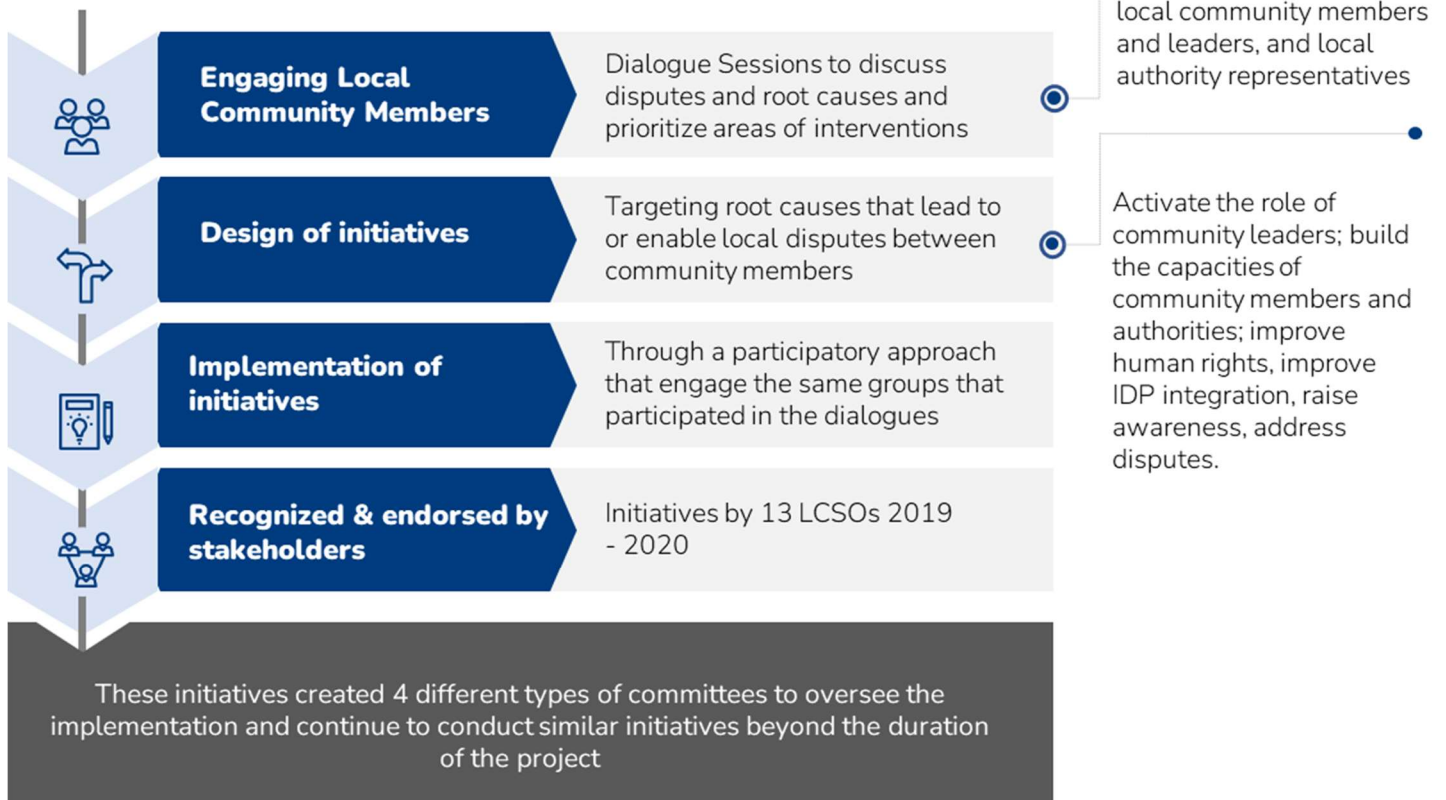


*A girl in Taiz participates in an activity to provide trauma support for children in the community.*

- **Cultural and educational factors:** Facilitators considered cultural factors particular to each governorate, such as attitudes towards women’s participation in public life, as well as participants’ level of education.

During the dialogues, facilitators first set the stage for a productive conversation, guided by Do No Harm principles as a tool to ensuring proper conflict sensitivity,<sup>6</sup> by clarifying the differences between needs, problems, and issues to build an understanding that the focus of the discussion should be on societal issues. In this way, participants would be able to identify the nature of community conflicts and grievances for each issue separately and then determine workable solutions. This approach minimized potential for frustration on the part of some participants whose expectations for the discussion may not have been aligned with other participants and/or the project team.

## Design and Implementation of Locally Led Reconciliation Initiatives



<sup>6</sup> “Do No Harm: A Brief Introduction from CDA,” CDA, <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Do-No-Harm-A-Brief-Introduction-from-CDA.pdf>.

### **Phase 3: Reconciliation Committees Implement Community Initiatives**

After discussions in small groups concluded, facilitators presented the outputs from each group and led a participatory discussion to select three issues that group members agreed by consensus were the most important. After the selection process, participants designed small initiatives to address the issues. To oversee implementation and ensure representation of communities' issues, needs, and priorities, participants formed Reconciliation Committees. A PY staff member notes, "Yemeni society has an old heritage of collaboration, illustrating certain prerequisites for reconciliation and conflict resolution. To that end, the initiatives implemented under the AFP project had to leverage the entrenched sense of collaboration among local community members and to contribute to the development of state institutions to assume their role on the table."

The following sections highlight important issues that the project addressed at the local level through locally led reconciliation initiatives and describe the impact of these activities on the broader conflict context in Yemen. Each section aims to shed light on the importance of community-level peacebuilding and reconciliation activities in the context of a broader conflict.



## Countering Disinformation and Conflict Narratives

Disinformation has been identified as a leading conflict driver in Yemen. While propaganda sponsored by the conflict parties is shared widely in both traditional and social media fora, most Yemenis have identified “hyper-local disinformation,” rumors that have affected them personally as most concerning.<sup>7</sup> Often, rumors that permeate communities have led to assigning blame for wartime challenges to already oppressed groups, such as *Muhamasheen*, IDPs, and women, putting these groups at risk for further marginalization and even violent attacks.

To counteract these dynamics, the **Partners** team worked to ensure the full and meaningful participation of marginalized groups at the dialogue phase, providing communities with a safe space and protected environment to identify and discuss how to address malicious disinformation campaigns that targeted these groups. Trained facilitators helped community members break down misconceptions and establish lasting relationships that can prevent or mitigate future conflicts.


**Integrating IDPs in Ibb:** Ibb has been host to a massive influx of IDPs since the start of the war due to relatively stable conditions in the governorate. In 2020, Al-Shaima Foundation for Development (ASD) focused on increasing community support for inclusion of IDPs into host communities in Jiblah and improving their livelihood conditions. At the time, many community members blamed IDPs for the terrible conditions in their areas. Humanitarian aid distribution exacerbated these perceptions as IDPs were often prioritized for support opportunities.



*Local and IDP participants attending one of Al-Shaima Foundation for Development's Workshops*

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic created another opportunity for malicious disinformation to spread, as many community members started to blame IDPs for the spread of the disease in their communities. Through community dialogues, key stakeholders discussed the importance of refuting these rumors to lessen the stigma in the community against IDPs. IDP and host community leaders worked together on a COVID-19 Education Campaign. The campaign not only provided the Jiblah camp with additional resources to promote health and hygiene, but also encouraged collaboration between IDPs and the host community. The campaign culminated in trained IDP educators leading awareness workshops on COVID-19 and mosquito-borne disease prevention for mixed IDP-host community groups. Bringing communities together to fight the COVID-19 pandemic created a common cause and improved mutual perceptions between IDP and host communities. In addition, ASD invited government actors to participate in all activities, resulting in a pledge to provide additional support to IDPs in Jiblah.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Linn, “What Yemeni Media Can Teach Us About Disinformation,” *DT Global*, July 2021, <https://dt-global.com/company/blog/july-27th-2021/yemen-media-disinformation>.



**Leveraging Community Leaders’ Platforms to Fight Disinformation:** In 2019, an initial analysis of data collected on human rights violations showed a proliferation of violations related to the right to free speech in Shabwa. **Partners** and Al-Ekha’a Association in Shabwa worked together to provide a conflict-sensitive, low-risk forum for community leaders to discuss these issues by convening a series of dialogues on “disseminating a culture of peace and social cohesion.” Using this non-threatening language allowed participants to discuss serious issues around free speech and disinformation in a constructive way and get to the root cause of these challenges in the governorate. Together, dialogue participants designed an initiative to build the capacity of 10 journalists and 10 imams to disseminate peace narratives. The imams prepared Friday sermons advocating for community reconciliation, while journalists focused on disseminating peace messages through various media channels, including radio stations and social media platforms.



## Community Security

In the absence of functional security institutions in Yemen, several dialogues and initiatives focused on community security. Community security is both a process and an end state through which communities collaborate to help all members feel safer and more secure.<sup>8</sup> By identifying prevalent violations in each governorate and providing community leaders with a safe space to discuss potential solutions, the **Partners** team helped to not only reduce violence, but also increase social cohesion and community ownership.

**Raising Awareness about Landmines in Al Dhalee:** After documenting several incidents with landmines in Al Dhalee, **Partners** and LCSO Roa'a Foundation for Development (RFD) convened a dialogue session to discuss the detrimental effects of landmines in the governorate. RAFD trained 10 community members on the risks of mines and these trainers met with over 500 community members to raise their awareness. The organization designed and distributed 1,000 informational brochures and produced a short film on the hazards of landmines. Finally, the organization developed and placed billboards and road signs in minefields with warnings and instructions about dealing with the mines. RAFD's local connections ultimately contributed to the effectiveness of the initiative, as the organization was able to leverage its knowledge of the local context to create locally contextualized awareness-raising materials. Before the initiative, there had been 80 incidents with landmines in the community; since the initiative was completed in 2020, there have been only three incidents.



*Landmine awareness session in Al Dhalee*

<sup>8</sup> "Community-based Approaches to Safety and Security: Lessons from Kosovo, Nepal, and Bangladesh," *Saferworld*, March 2013, <https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/51739/829614/Community-based-approaches-to-safety-and-security.pdf>.

**Addressing Sexual Harassment in Lahj:** Due to Yemen’s conservative culture, violence against women (VAW) is rarely discussed in public. Nevertheless, when **Partners**Yemen and local partner Rafd Association for Rural Development (RAFD) brought together a diverse group of stakeholders in 2021, the group was moved by the comments of a sheikh representing the Muhamasheen community in Radfan district who discussed the harassment of women and girls in his community. Ultimately, stakeholders prioritized addressing VAW in Radfan through a comprehensive approach. RAFD held 40 awareness- raising sessions targeting 400 community members (200 young men and women, 100 girls, and 100 parents) and created a mechanism for victims to report incidents of VAW through a hotline connecting them with the security department in the governorate. These awareness sessions and the hotline service were considered to have served as a deterrent by contributing to a decrease the number of cases. In fact, the Radfan Reconciliation Committee clarified that it received nine sexual harassment cases in one year, compared to 34 cases in previous years.<sup>9</sup> The Reconciliation Committee also met with the nine alleged perpetrators and their parents to urge them to refrain from such conduct. In addition, RAFD built ten toilets for the *Muhamasheen*, each one dedicated to a specific group of families, with the idea that chances for women to be harassed would decrease with sanitary facilities closer to their homes. Due to the success of the initiative and the buy-in of key stakeholders, the Committee ultimately succeeded in scaling up the initiative to allocate one toilet per family.

**Drawing on Yemen’s Culture of Mediation for Safer Roads:**

In Marib, LCSO Musa’ala Organization for Human Rights (MOHR) facilitated dialogues between tribes, youth, and authorities around tribal road blockades in Marib. Setting up road blockades manned by armed fighters is a common tactic that Yemeni tribes use as a form of protest. In Marib, the tactic unfortunately began targeting IDPs travelling through and into the governorate as they fled their homes. The blockades also seized critical oil, diesel, gas, and food supplies that were badly needed as the government received more and more displaced persons. To address this issue, MOHR worked to broker a Pact of Honor, which stated that the practice of setting up roadblocks and of disrupting public safety is a “negative and unusual act.” Once the text of the document was agreed to by all parties, the Pact of Honor was handwritten by a notary on special paper, in accordance with traditional tribal community practices for preparing legal and other official documents. More than 235 individuals signed the document, including local government leaders, sheikhs, socially prominent individuals, figures, religious leaders, political party staff, military leaders, activists, academics, LCSO personnel, government, and private sector employees, as well as tribal youth and other residents.



A road sign in Marib

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that a decline in cases reported does not necessarily reflect a decline in cases, especially in a closed culture like Yemen’s that is resistant to discussing VAW openly. These results are being reported as they were reported by community stakeholders who participated in the initiative and continue to serve on the Reconciliation Committee.





## Improved Public Service Provision

Public service provision has been a flashpoint for Yemeni citizens over the last several years of war. Infrastructure for basic service provision, including water, sewage, electricity, health, and education, has been damaged or destroyed in battle and degraded further through neglect. In many cases, this infrastructure was lacking to begin with, particularly in rural and mountainous communities. Ongoing fighting impedes even limited access by both the Yemeni government and international humanitarian organizations to deliver these desperately needed services. Where service improvements do occur, local communities often express frustration that such improvement projects have overlooked their inputs and are implemented without informing citizens about sources of funding or the rationale behind how the funds were used. Given these realities, public service provision has remained a catalyst for local conflicts and disputes. This is especially the case where displacement exerts further pressure on the weakened capacities of public service agencies. Such pressure, coupled with misconceptions that certain groups, such as IDPs, are linked to the deteriorating state of public services, continues to lead to local disputes.

As with project initiatives focused on countering misinformation and improving community security, the formation of local Reconciliation Committees has been critical to ensuring consistent efforts to resolve disputes related to the provision of public services. These committees have assumed a key role in facilitating community reconciliation and advocating for the provision of basic services through coordination with concerning authorities, service providers, and operating organizations. Most of the initiatives resulted in the drafting of agreements, which were supervised by local authorities and observed by **Partners**Yemen. Following approval and implementation of these agreements, none of the local disputes worsened or were exacerbated.

**Responding to Conflict over Basic Services:** Salah district in Taiz is on the frontlines of a massive no man's land that delineates the stalemate between Ansar Allah's fighters and local forces loyal to ROYG. At the start of the war, the district's inhabitants, many of whom are originally from northern governorates, fled the area due to targeted violence and atrocities. Over the course of the conflict, many internally displaced and *Muhamasheen* families have relocated to the area because housing is affordable due to the ongoing active conflict. Potential injuries due to sniping, shelling, and mine explosions put these groups at risk daily. In addition, the local government has all but abandoned the area and is unable to deliver basic services.



*Installation of water network division room in Salah*

As a result of these stressors, the community has experienced a marked increase in conflicts. For example, the sewage overflow in upper and lower Al-Harazia and Al-Kuraimi areas is a big source of conflict. Some of the inhabitants of lower Al-Harazia seized the opportunity to escalate the conflict and incite locals against IDPs, claiming that IDPs are to blame for the clogged road and sewage overflow. The divisions in society subsequently

grew worse as a result of this incitement, particularly among young people, leading LCSO Yemen without Conflict (YWC) to select Salah district for its intervention. Participants designed a reconciliation initiative involving training on transformative mediation, discussions on accountability and reconciliation, and awareness-raising on hygiene and sanitation, along with repair of the sewage network in Upper Harazia. The level of collaboration between stakeholders, including the local authorities, served to enhance public confidence in the Reconciliation Committee. It is also worth noting that repairs were carried out under the supervision of the Water and Sanitation Corporation, which assumed responsibility for ongoing maintenance, contributing to the sustainability of the initiative. Most importantly, through the work of the RC, host community and IDP representatives agreed to share use of the new sewage line.

**Securing Water and Girls' Rights:** Ibb is a conservative governorate in North Yemen that has been under the control of Ansar Allah since the start of the civil war. Unfortunately, Ansar Allah's restrictive attitudes and policies towards women and girls have robbed these groups of key rights they previously enjoyed before the war, such as the right to education and participation in public life. At the same time, Ibb's infrastructure has been under intense pressure from an influx of IDPs into the relatively stable governorate. The governorate's water supply has been strained to the limit, causing several violent conflicts among communities. These compounding pressures have, unfortunately, led to many girls being forced to drop out of school to travel long distances to collect water for their families. This issue was front and center in community dialogues in Ibb in 2020 and 2021. Communities designed two initiatives, one in Manwar and one in Al-Jarajer, to both improve communities' access to water and help girls return to school. As new infrastructure was installed to improve water access, community members participated in awareness-raising sessions on the importance of girls' education. Communities also signed reconciliation agreements that included provisions on maintenance of the water supply and ensuring girls' continued access to education.



*Distribution of schoolbags to local girls*



## Resolving Local-Level Disputes

Local-level disputes that morph into violent conflict have unfortunately become all too common in Yemen during the civil war. Deteriorating or non-existent public services, shifting demographics, a collapsed security and justice sector, and the trauma of eight years of war have severely eroded the social fabric of Yemen, causing ordinary disputes to evolve into potentially dangerous situations. Amidst these stressors, the Yemeni tradition of local-level mediation remains strong. **Partners** worked together with local communities and LCSOs to leverage this tradition to great effect. Project initiatives paid significant attention to building community members' skills to analyze conflicts, discuss their causes and implications, understand the impacts felt by other communities and individuals, and agree to resolutions that benefited multiple parties. As a result, local communities became more aware of conflict implications as well as the issues and grievances from the point of view of other groups. They also developed capacities to address the root causes of conflicts, especially those involving displacement, inequality, marginalization, resource scarcity, and human rights violations.

**Creating Equitable Solutions in Lahj:** In the adjacent villages of Al-Sabbabah, Al-Najd, and Al-Gharameh in Lahj governorate's Radfan district, a dispute over power lines threatened to leave area residents without this vital resource. In 2019, residents of Al-Najd village would regularly threaten to disconnect the power lines to neighboring Al-Sabbabah due to their proximity to their houses. In turn, Al-Sabbabah residents would retaliate by threatening to cut the power lines not only to Al-Najd but to several neighboring areas as well – leaving some 3,500 people without power. In several cases, these threats led to physical violence between villagers. LCSO Ruwwad Foundation for Development and Human Rights (RFDHR) worked with community members to form a Reconciliation Committee to address concerns around the power lines and access to electricity. To ensure their voices were heard, each village had an equal number of representatives on the committee. After hearing from community members and discussing solutions, the committee members and the RFDHR jointly contacted the Public Electricity Corporation and petitioned them to expand the power lines for the three villages. Meeting daily throughout the effort, the committee worked to surface and mitigate disputes, ensuring the villagers' buy-in and helping to resolve conflict peacefully. The committee was also responsible for collecting community contributions to the effort and coordinating volunteers who helped the Public Electricity Corporation dig, rewire, and install the power lines. Today, access to electricity has been successfully expanded to all three villages, and the inter-village community committee is continuing its work to ensure that as new disputes arise, they will be addressed jointly, fairly and free of violence.

### Promoting Traditional Problem-Solving in Taiz:

Given the intense conflict in and around Taiz City, the governorate's judicial system essentially collapsed between 2015 and 2017. This situation led to the emergence of religious and customary courts to resolve disputes, many managed by clerics from extremist organizations. As Taiz is an urban center, the city had a less defined tradition of local level mediation and dispute resolution than areas of the country, putting intense pressure on these figures.<sup>10</sup> In 2019, dialogue participants in Taiz emphasized the limited capacity of the justice system to resolve local disputes. In response, YWC worked to strengthen the role of traditional neighborhood structures for conflict resolution as an



*Dialogue participants in Taiz deliberate on priorities for initiatives in their communities.*

alternative to both the over-stressed justice system and extremist clerics. YWC held capacity building workshops for neighborhood chiefs, or *Aqeels*,<sup>11</sup> and traditional trustees, or *Ameens*,<sup>12</sup> and officials from the formal judicial sector. The initiative also conducted a legal awareness campaign, broadcasting weekly and monthly awareness segments on local radio stations, focusing on peace messages and the importance of reconciliation. The neighborhood chiefs, according to Yemeni law, hold the status of judicial officers, and they rely on societal customs and the arbitration law in resolving disputes. The workshop contributed to a significant improvement in the neighborhood courts and their chiefs in the field of conflict resolution. One key issue that neighborhood chiefs resolved was the seizure of homes of displaced persons or individuals originally from North Yemen who were considered supporters of Ansar Allah and targeted in Taiz.

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<sup>10</sup> Mohammed Alshuwaiter, "Report: The Impact of the War on Yemen's Justice System," *International Legal Assistance Consortium*, November 2021, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5900b58e1b631bffa367167e/t/61dee94b6073db3fb6061779/1641998668657/The-Impact-of-the-War-on-Yemens-Justice-System.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Head of the neighborhood or village. Their duties are introducing citizens to government agencies to secure identification documents. They also resolve local conflicts at neighborhood and village levels in addition to representing communities before state institutions.

<sup>12</sup> Ameen is a trustee, legal individual in the community, or a person who is in charge of carrying out a public service in accordance with the Yemeni law and regulations, such as drafting contracts of sale, purchase, rent, and lease related to real estate. They also work on resolving inheritance disputes, and they edit and draft legal documents, such as marriage contracts and divorce papers.



## Addressing Human Rights Violations

It is widely understood that, over the past eight years, all parties to the conflict in Yemen have committed grave violations of both international human rights and international humanitarian law. Unfortunately, international accountability for these violations is at an all-time low, as the UN Security Council recently voted to disband the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen (GEE), “the only international and impartial body investigating serious violations and abuses” in the country.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, threats to human rights activists seeking accountability are at an all-time high. Despite this dire situation, **Partners** was able to conduct numerous initiatives to address serious human rights violations in Yemen from 2019 to 2022. Clearly, much work remains to be done, yet this approach offers promise in addressing human rights violations during an active conflict.

### Addressing Arbitrary Detention in Abyan and Shabwa:

Arbitrary detention was one of the most prevalent violations that the **Partners** team documented during the project’s data-collection phase, with 149 “right to liberty” violations verified throughout Yemen. In 2021, **Partners**Yemen and two LCSOs sought to address this issue and alleviate the immediate suffering of detainees in Abyan and Shabwa governorates. Both the Abyan Youth Foundation (AYF) and Shabwa Youth Organization (SYO) formed local Human Rights Committees (HRCs) that included lawyers, activists, and psychologists. First, the HRCs worked together to draft “Legal Procedures for Detainees,” drawing from both Yemeni and international law to set forth best practices for



*Abyan dialogue participants discuss human rights issues in their communities.*

handling and treatment of detainees and inmates during each stage of a criminal proceeding. The committees then met with security, government, and judicial officials and obtained their buy-in for the recommendations, which were subsequently distributed to key security officials, including those in charge of checkpoints. The HRCs took their work further, conducting visits with inmates and detainees in both governorates. Together, they managed to secure the release of 45 individuals who were being held unlawfully. Psychologists in Shabwa conducted sessions with seven individuals who had been subjected to acts of torture. Both organizations credited a non-confrontational and deliberate approach rooted in human rights and conflict transformation for their success. Their credibility as LCSOs who had been active in their community for many years undoubtedly influenced their ability to work on highly sensitive and difficult issues.

<sup>13</sup> “UN Human Rights Council Member States’ abject failure to renew Yemen investigation is a wake-up call,” *Global Center for The Responsibility to Protect*, October 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/un-human-rights-council-member-states-abject-failure-renew-yemen-investigation-wake>



## Meaningful Participation of Marginalized Groups

As previously mentioned, the meaningful participation of groups that have traditionally been oppressed in Yemen was critical to the ability of the project to promote true change at the local level. Without their inclusion, key viewpoints and perspectives would have been excluded from consideration, once again leaving those most in need of community support excluded. Trained facilitators worked to ensure equitable conversations and surface divisive or controversial issues in a respectful way. The following section highlights local initiatives that supported three key groups in Yemen.

### Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

By late 2022, over 4 million Yemenis, or 13% of the population, had been displaced from their homes.<sup>14</sup> As the conflict enters its eighth year, many displaced persons are being displaced for a second—or even third or fourth time. Notably, **Partners** documented the case of 750 IDP families living in Al Ghayl District in Al Jawf who, subject to indiscriminate attacks from both parties that directly targeted the camp during the Battle of Marib, fled to Marib in February 2020. In a country where resources are limited and socioeconomic conditions deteriorating, the influx of displaced persons is exerting further pressure on resources and services and sparking local disputes. Working through these disputes was a common factor in nine out of 28 local initiatives. Initiatives provided an opportunity for IDP and host community members to work together collaboratively and share decision-making power.

One such initiative took place in **Aden** in 2020. Tadeeth Foundation for Development (TFD) worked in partnership with IDP and host community leaders to advocate for improved conditions and access to basic rights for IDPs in the governorate, which did not have sufficient capacity to host the large numbers of displaced persons there. TFD held several community dialogue meetings where IDP and host community members discussed the challenges that IDPs faced in Aden, as well as suggested solutions. Using insights from these meetings, TFD produced a short film about IDP issues. The film was shared widely in Aden through both social and traditional media. The culminating activity was a final community dialogue that included representatives of IDP and host communities, as well as concerned government entities. IDP representatives and the Executive Unit for IDPs in Aden agreed to reactivate existing community committees at the 27 IDP camps in Aden governorate. The committees will hold regular meetings with the Executive Unit to surface issues that IDPs face in camps before they cause further conflict.

### Muhamasheen

As previously mentioned, the *Muhamasheen*, meaning literally “marginal ones,” is a visible minority in Yemen whose members suffer from caste-based discrimination. Due to discrimination and oppression, many Muhamasheen live in informal settlements on the outskirts of cities. There, they lack access to clean water and sanitation facilities, and often work informal jobs as street cleaners, trash collectors, and farm laborers.

<sup>14</sup> “Reporting: Yemen,” UNHCR, accessed February 2021, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/yemen>.

In Zanzibar, **Abyan** governorate, tensions related to the historical oppression of Muhamasheen were exacerbated when a group of Muhamasheen families from other governorates were displaced to an existing Muhamasheen neighborhood in Zanzibar. The arrival of these newcomers created increased competition for limited resources, including jobs and clean water. The Executive Unit for IDPs and humanitarian aid organizations in the governorate exacerbated these tensions, providing food baskets and other relief to IDP families, even though the original inhabitants of the area also required aid. Indeed, many Muhamasheen families in Yemen have alleged that the government denies them access to social services because of their identity. To address these issues, Abyan Youth Foundation (AYF), after extensive dialogues with both host and IDP Muhamasheen communities, reached an agreement with the Executive Unit for IDPs in Abyan to extend further aid to host community members. AYF formed a Reconciliation Committee, with members from the government, as well as IDP and host community members. The Committee continues to monitor the situation in Zanzibar to flag potential conflict drivers to the local government and improve conditions for all Muhamasheen in the area.

## Women and Girls

This report has already highlighted the many challenges that women in Yemen face as a result of the conflict. Women's representation in government at all levels has all but evaporated. In the North, Ansar Allah has all but prohibited women's participation in public life and has recently implemented new restrictions on travel and education. Throughout the country, many women are now heads of household, having lost fathers and husbands to the war or migration. Violence against women is pervasive, though underreported, and takes many forms including domestic violence, street harassment, forced marriage, and sexual violence as a weapon of war. The **Partners** team employed best practices for women's participation in both dialogues and initiatives, enabling communities to recognize and address some of these challenges.



A poster of RAFD's "My ID Is on My Card" initiative.

In one community in **Lahj**, dialogue participants agreed to implement an initiative to address some of the myriad and intersecting issues facing women in the community. Since 2014, the Civil Status Department (CSD) in Radfan district had conflicted with a radical religious group that alleged that the department mishandled women's ID photos. Unfortunately, the group violently attacked the CSD several times, leaving it closed for extended periods. As a result of the ongoing violence, community members did not trust the CSD with women's IDs and many women in the district went without IDs, crucial for everything from receiving humanitarian aid for their families to enrolling in school. To address the issue, RAFD formed a Reconciliation Committee, which liaised with key stakeholders to co-create solutions and ultimately sign an agreement to end the dispute, re-open the CSD, and re-build public confidence in the CSD. RAFD also provided funds to establish a separate, private area for women to take their photos and trained female civil

servants to work at the CSD. An awareness campaign stressed the importance of women obtaining IDs. Since the initiative was completed, the CSD has remained open, and women in Lahj have been able to obtain their ID cards without hassle.



## Conclusions and Lessons Learned

**Communities experiencing conflict face complex and intersecting challenges that may affect their lives in unexpected ways.** A hyper-local approach may therefore be more effective than scaled or standard active-conflict or post-conflict approaches. An important example of the complexity facing communities in Yemen is the case of Ibb, where an influx of IDPs stressed an already deteriorating water system, ultimately leading parents to pull their daughters out of school to collect water and help ensure the family's survival. Small projects to rehabilitate the water systems in two communities ultimately reduced conflict stressors and enabled girls to access education and become future agents for peace.



Water network collection point in Manwar village

**Skilled facilitators play a key role in maximizing participation and successful outcomes.** The **Partners** team and its network of LCSOs in Yemen prioritized the role of skilled facilitators to guide community conversations and ensure active and meaningful participation from all relevant stakeholders. Facilitators helped community members to differentiate immediate perceived problems and needs from more systemic issues. They also ensured that local initiatives addressed the root causes of a particular conflict to prevent its recurrence, raising local communities' awareness in the process and building a sense of collective shared ownership. This approach helped create sustainable solutions that have endured since the intervention.

**Partner with local civil society organizations based at the community level.** Local civil society organizations who have a history of operations in communities are often trusted by stakeholders at the community and government levels. These organizations can operate where larger, national-level organizations may fail. In Yemen and around the world, the civic space for civil society organizations to operate is shrinking and government officials often consider CSOs to be “foreign agents.” Local connections are critical in these cases and can lead to more effective and sustainable programming.

**Women are especially effective in promoting conflict transformation in their communities.** **Partners** and LCSO staff frequently observed that women were highly influential in both community dialogues and initiatives and often played a key role in helping participants reach solutions. Unfortunately, Yemen is ranked among the worst countries in the world for women's participation in government,<sup>15</sup> with women virtually absent from Track I dialogues seeking to resolve the conflict. The proactive inclusion of women throughout the dialogues and initiatives reflected positively on their outcomes, demonstrating the significance of replicating these local success stories on the larger Track I scale. Thus, it is urgent to invest in the capacity of women in Yemen who can work to improve their communities, and equally if not more urgent to work to address opposition to women's participation in politics.

<sup>15</sup> “Women Power Index,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Marc 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/article/womens-power-index>



**Tangible impacts at the community level create buy-in and can be an important way to tackle sensitive issues.** In many cases, communities opted to pair infrastructure and humanitarian support interventions with activities designed to address more sensitive issues such as human rights and inclusion of marginalized groups. In fraught contexts where activists are under threat, these “soft” approaches allow communities to make progress on seemingly insurmountable challenges.

**The role of community committees.**

As part of each intervention, local actors formed Reconciliation Committees that included local government officials, activists and community leaders, tribal leaders and sheikhs, and community representatives, including women and youth. These committees were tasked with overseeing implementation of each initiative to ensure that they 1) responded to community priorities as discussed in community dialogues, 2) were connected to existing resources

and other initiatives within the community to promote sustainability, 3) proceeded smoothly, coordinating with relevant institutions to address any gridlocks. Many of these committees are still active and continue to work on finding solutions for community issues. In this way, committees can promote good governance and a culture of participation in the absence of well-functioning governance structures. By including local government actors, community committees also build their capacity, thereby strengthening formal government.



*A community facilitator in Ibb working with some of the participants.*



**Explore trust-based and locally led approaches to development in communities affected by conflict.** The AFP project demonstrated that issues prioritized by communities may not always be clear-cut or fit into a category pre-defined by a donor or international organization. International stakeholders should thus explore approaches to development based on trust, local leadership, flexibility, and adaptability. Providing communities with the freedom to prioritize the issues that are most important to them and describe the issues in the way that feels right to them can help create sustainable initiatives that lay the groundwork for durable solutions to conflict, especially when local communities see their needs addressed firsthand.


**Draw on resources that already exist in communities.** AFP's initiatives aimed to draw on communities' existing strengths, rather than over-emphasizing weaknesses or challenges. Most communities participated directly in construction projects and community outreach activities; many raised additional funds from community contributions or remittances to expand projects. This approach encourages creative problem-solving, collaboration, solidarity, and community cohesion.

**Provide participatory decision-making spaces to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian and development projects.** The Partners team used the unique approach of holding facilitated community dialogues to allow stakeholders to jointly prioritize issues and build creative solutions. In the absence of a functioning government in many communities in Yemen, these spaces increase community members' agency and lay the groundwork for sustainable peace in the future.

**Link Tracks I, II, and III to increase impact.** Despite the frustrating failure of Track I efforts to end the conflict in Yemen, local communities are resilient and have demonstrated the ability to promote reconciliation and human rights where national leaders have failed. Unfortunately, these "Track III" efforts have not influenced Track I and Track II processes, which are dominated by elites, many of whom live outside Yemen. It is imperative to create spaces to connect these efforts and build on the positive momentum at the community level.

**Invest consistently in the meaningful participation of marginalized groups.** In every case, the meaningful participation of marginalized or oppressed groups in community decision-making influenced the broader community to address issues that may not have been prioritized otherwise. It is critical to invest in the meaningful participation of these groups in community decision making. The role of champions who can convince others of the importance of these groups' participation is also important.

**Cultivate leadership opportunities for women at the community level.** Women and girls face a myriad of challenges in Yemen, from lack of access to education to gender-based violence and harassment. Unfortunately, many initiatives to empower Yemeni women have focused on women's participation in internationally sponsored efforts to resolve the conflict at the Track I and Track II levels, neglecting women who live in the country and could most benefit from additional



leadership opportunities. Women's disempowerment at the community level has made it difficult to collect information about the needs and priorities of everyday Yemeni women, thus threatening a future transition. Future programming in Yemen should focus on building a new generation of women leaders at the community level.

**Use trauma-informed, survivor-centered communication and support strategies.** In a conflict context, it is probable that most participants will have experienced at least one life-altering event. Discussing incidents of assault, abuse, or other injury, without appropriate and intentional preparation, can often re-traumatize these participants. It is thus critical to ensure that facilitators are trained in Do No Harm and trauma-informed approaches. Providing psychosocial and other supports to participating survivors is also important.