

Developing Yemen, One Governorate at a Time

By Asil Sidahmed



Participants in a Partners workshop



War, terrorism, and depleting water resources dominate Yemen's political landscape. At least that's what the international press would have us believe. I spoke with Nadwa al-Dawasari, Director of Partners, a Washington-based NGO that works locally, to get a look at a different kind of politics: conflict management.

Partners Yemen has managed to set up 4 projects since February 2009 in 5 governorates: Marib, Al-Jawf, Shabwa, Albaida, and Ibb. What these governorates share is that they suffer long standing tribal conflicts and are currently undergoing rapid urban change, particularly in the case of Ibb. Partners works in communities which are underserved and in which a lack of security undermines development efforts. Partners philosophy and approach is to address the root causes of conflict and lack of development. Working with local NGOs, local authorities, tribal and religious leaders, as well as youth and women, Partners focuses on building capacities for peace and assisting with establishing structures and mechanisms to

tackle conflict. Partners works to empower local civil society organizations through training and mentoring. They use their grants to not only implement these projects but also to allow those actors to run their own projects.

Conflict Resolution

Three out of the four projects center on conflict management and adopt a capacity-building and facilitation approach. The aim is to leave the communities equipped with mechanisms for solving issues they have identified themselves. The issues are usually conflict over natural resources (water especially), development services (health, education etc.), and land. The groups involved are local authorities, tribal leaders, local NGO's, government officials, and companies.

These groups have undoubtedly developed different structures, formalities, and notions of hierarchy. So the obstacle is to create a space in which all parties feel that their needs can be addressed. Uniquely, this also includes corporations who often find themselves caught between tribal leaders, government officials, and land owners. As the presence of corporations is

often heralded with suspicion and sometimes resistance, their dialogue with local communities helps investment. The role of Partners is not to become part of the structures but rather to help civil society actors and other stakeholders create their own permanent structures and facilities through which they can negotiate their concerns.

"Awareness campaigns are not the solution," says Nadwa. Partners focuses on getting to the root causes of conflicts and working with the people involved to come up with solutions. Often times, lack of communication, mistrust, and competition for resources create hostile environments. "When you ask tribal leaders – why do you carry weapons? Their answer is we would like to drop down our weapons but it is not possible because we don't have other means of protecting ourselves and our interests." As Nadwa expands, the environment of insecurity which many people live in drive them to carry arms. This is why alternative forms of conflict prevention and resolution are so important. Speaking to Nadwa blurs the commonly held conception of tribes as resistant to change, and difficult to work with. "They want change," Nadwa asserts. "They are tired of mediating

conflicts." These days there are problems and concerns that the traditional tribal model is not equipped to deal with. But despite stereotypes, Nadwa maintains that the tribes they have worked with are fiercely (fairly) democratic.

That being said, negotiations with tribes are notoriously difficult, particularly for international organizations, so how has Partners managed to build a rapport in these areas? Firstly, it is easier because all of their staff are experienced Yemenis, creating a sense of common goals and ownership. Secondly, Partners works in areas that are ready for change and wish to see fresh skills. Thirdly, Partners tries to facilitate the wants of the local communities, rather than arriving with their own prescribed packages. Lastly, they operate with one central principle: transparency.

Women's Leadership

The Balqees Initiative (TBI) project, named after the Queen of Sheba, seeks to develop women's leadership through identifying professionals with leadership capacities and training them. After undergoing an intensive training and selection processes, 25 women are



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deployed to their districts creating a co-operative network. Although still in the embryonic stages this project holds a lot of promise. The women selected already execute leadership roles in their communities through professional roles such as female elders, teachers, nurses, and business women. Even though women are primarily selected based on their leadership potential, the trust and knowledge they have of their communities is what the project hinges on. The philosophy of the organization is predicated on a grassroots approach which seeks to evolve the skill sets and capacities already available. The primary objective of TBI is to train influential females in a range of skills to create a thriving network of key communicators that can disseminate messages pertaining to health, youth empowerment, education, conflict resolution, and other critical development subjects in Yemen. In participating in the

training workshops, the women not only develop their own skills, but they also find themselves as part of a wider network of professional women. The network better facilitates women's projects and also contributes to institutionalizing and legitimizing women's role in development.

Despite the doomed forecasts of the nation, Partners provides an optimistic outlook on developing Yemen from the bottom up focusing from the local level to the national one.

Partners Yemen was set up in February 2009 and is funded by USAID and Partners Global. They have a staff of 15 and are based in Sana'a.

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