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Yemen, Conflict

### **Conflict and Food Insecurity in Yemen**

Today, food insecurity ranks among the most pressing global challenges. Vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected by food insecurity due to the compounding effects of conflicts, climatic changes, and economic instability. In Yemen, a nation long ravaged by conflict, the spillover effects have plunged the country into dire humanitarian crises culminating in severe food insecurity. Presently, over 17 million people face food insecurity, with 3.5 million experiencing severe malnutrition. Simultaneously, approximately 18 million Yemenis lack access to safe drinking water and dependable sanitation facilities.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, this paper aims to establish the roots and implications of the crisis, offer comprehensive solutions to handle the unique challenges that Yemenis face and enhance the resilience of the population in Yemen. To effectively combat food insecurity in Yemen, it is crucial to address the root causes and implement targeted strategies that improve food access, availability, and affordability for Yemeni families.

### **Country and Family**

A number of challenges have impacted Yemen and the surrounding South Arabian populations, with the ongoing conflict in the region exacerbating the struggles of the people living there.

Dramatic demographic changes, such as rapid urbanization, have recently occurred in Yemen, with the population reaching an estimated 40.5 million.<sup>2</sup> While much of this population growth has been centered around urban areas, a significant percentage of the population continues to reside in rural areas where minimal or no basic amenities or services are available. Compared to the rest of the world, the average Yemeni family is much larger, with five to six children being common, as well as multigenerational homes in which extended family members all live together.<sup>3</sup> The typical daily experience for a Yemeni family depends greatly on whether they live in an urban or rural area; however, in both cases, children are expected to go to school (if available), men to work, and women stay at home preparing food, with elders and cousins providing supplemental supporting roles.

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank, "The World Bank In Yemen," January 25, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/yemen/overview>.

<sup>2</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, "Yemen: Plight of Population Is Growing as World Attention Wanes," OCHA, March 10, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-plight-population-growing-world-attention-wanes-enar>.

<sup>3</sup> AFS-USA, "Yemen at a Glance," n.d., <https://www.afsusa.org/countries/yemen/>.

Different types of homes and buildings are scattered throughout the country, with traditional rural areas having mudbrick houses and the cities having modern dwellings.<sup>4</sup> However, in Yemen, housing often suffers from inadequate infrastructure, particularly concerning sanitation facilities and access to clean water, which has posed significant challenges to health and hygiene. A report by The World Bank suggests that over 17 million people face food insecurity, with 3.5 million experiencing severe malnutrition.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, approximately 18 million Yemenis lack access to safe drinking water and dependable sanitation facilities.<sup>6</sup>

Due to the economic burden imposed by the conflict, most Yemeni families cannot afford even some of the most basic food items, which results in a decrease in dietary diversity and an increase in dependence on cheaper, less nutritive alternatives. Also, job opportunities in Yemen are already low, especially in the countryside, where agriculture remains the population's primary livelihood source. Meanwhile, the outbreak of conflict has disrupted agricultural activities, worsening food insecurity.<sup>7</sup> In addition, most wages are very low, and even the national average cannot meet the basic needs of families; hence, many people engage in petty trading for meager income or other more desperate mechanisms of livelihood support.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, there is a shortage of employment opportunities in Yemen, as most of the population is involved in subsistence agriculture, fishing, or small-scale trade. Further, the destruction of livelihoods caused by the conflict has triggered acute unemployment and underemployment, and the slashing of average wages has meant that many families sink deeper into poverty and food insecurity.

### **Challenges and Impact**

Deep-seated causes and devastating effects have driven Yemen's multi-layered crisis. The conflict arose from the complex interaction of political, social, economic, and regional factors, with a prime cause being the overthrowing of President Ali Abdullah Saleh during the Arab Spring protests of 2011.<sup>9</sup> Since his overthrow, a multidimensional conflict from the subsequent power vacuum has arisen, which includes the internationally recognized government and its army, Houthi rebels, separatist groups, and jihadist organizations—among which are Al-Qaeda and ISIS. To further complicate the issue, the regional powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran have intervened on opposing sides.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the conflict amplifies food insecurity in Yemen through multiple mechanisms, specifically in disrupting the production, distribution, and access to food.

The disruption of food systems stems from the conflict, causing agriculture to be abandoned, the devastation of infrastructure, and the blockading of roads, all of which have led to food shortages and

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<sup>4</sup> Safa Qureshi, "Yemen's UNESCO-Listed Old Sanaa Architecture," Arab America, June 29, 2021, <https://www.arabamerica.com/yemens-unesco-listed-old-sanaa-architecture/>.

<sup>5</sup> The World Bank, "The World Bank In Yemen."

<sup>6</sup> The World Bank.

<sup>7</sup> The World Bank.

<sup>8</sup> The World Bank, "World Bank Open Data: Yemen," accessed July 22, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org>.

<sup>9</sup> Ashiya Parveen, "The Yemen Conflict: Domestic and Regional Dynamics," in *West Asia in Transition*, vol. II, 2019, 131.

<sup>10</sup> Parveen, "The Yemen Conflict."

increased prices. The World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that more than half of the population in Yemen lacks adequate food, and millions more are on the brink of famine.<sup>11</sup> The conflict disrupts aid, blocking the way for food supplies and other basic help to reach people in need.<sup>12</sup> Although continual humanitarian operations are in place, the warring parties have placed heavy restrictions on aid coming in, which has hampered the delivery process.

The severity of the impact of food insecurity in Yemen is significant across both rural and urban areas, especially women, children, and marginalized groups who have been hit worst by the crisis. Moreover, acute malnutrition affects over 2.2 million children under five—a total that seems to be increasing.<sup>13</sup>

Further, as a result of the conflict, internally displaced persons (IDPs) can no longer enjoy the provision of essential services and means of livelihood.<sup>14</sup> Food inadequacy is experienced more across urban centers, including in the capital city of Sana'a, due to the damaged infrastructure making food delivery from the countryside extremely difficult. This food inadequacy has thus propagated more poverty and strife among the communities living in and around these urban centers. The issue of food insecurity also has dire environmental effects on Yemen, as the overexploitation of natural resources, including water and arable land, exacerbates environmental degradation and resource depletion.

### **Solutions and Recommendations**

As Yemen has been facing food insecurity resulting from protracted conflict, humanitarian organizations have attempted to intervene with aid from their respective governments. The World Food Programme, for example, has given food assistance to millions of Yemenis. Non-governmental organizations like Oxfam and Save the Children have also played a big part in giving aid and implementing food security programs.<sup>15</sup> However, these interventions are faced with the colossal impediments of persistent conflict, inaccessibility to affected regions, and limited funds fall in this category. However, in recent years, food insecurity has been addressed successfully in a variety of countries amid conflict in other regions of the world, and the strategies learned from those experiences have helped relieve efforts in Yemen. For instance, farmers and cooperatives in South Sudan have collaborated in community-based activities to

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<sup>11</sup> Annabel Symington, “Families on the Brink of Famine in Yemen Cannot Wait,” World Food Programme, June 14, 2021, <https://www.wfp.org/stories/comment-families-brink-famine-yemen-cannot-wait>.

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Yemen: Events of 2023,” in *World Report 2024*, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/yemen>.

<sup>13</sup> UNICEF, “The Crisis of Children’s Diets in Early Life,” 2021, 7, [data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Fed-to-Fail-FULL-REPORT-Child-Nutrition-Report-2021-FINAL.pdf](https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Fed-to-Fail-FULL-REPORT-Child-Nutrition-Report-2021-FINAL.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> IDMC, “Country Profile: Yemen,” June 6, 2024, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/undefined>.

<sup>15</sup> Preeti Patel et al., “‘Having More Women Humanitarian Leaders Will Help Transform the Humanitarian System’: Challenges and Opportunities for Women Leaders in Conflict and Humanitarian Health,” *Conflict and Health* 14, no. 1 (December 2020): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00330-9>.

promote food production, which helped aid their distribution efforts—the key issue plaguing Yemen today.<sup>16</sup>

### **Potential Solutions to Alleviate Food Insecurity in Yemen**

There are numerous strategies Yemen could employ to mitigate food shortage. First, they must strengthen humanitarian aid and food assistance programs. In this particular case, it would be wise to provide more financial support and resources to already existing humanitarian aid organizations in Yemen, like WFP and non-government organizations, to widen the scope of and increase the effectiveness of food assistance programs.<sup>17</sup> This can be achieved by cooperating with local partners to guarantee that humanitarian aid gets to the people affected and by investing in novel delivery methods such as cash transfers and vouchers. Also, Yemen could promote peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts. To effectively secure long-term food security for the people of Yemen, addressing the root causes of conflict is paramount. Diplomatic efforts that would support peace talks, disarmament, and reconciliation between the conflicting parties are of utmost importance. Community dialogue and mediation can keep violence at tolerable levels and conditions safe so that farmers can continue to grow food. Along with these efforts, Yemen could develop agriculture programs and commitments to livelihood diversification. Investment in the Yemeni agricultural sector is necessary to bring food security to a sustainable level and support farmers in accumulating seeds, tools, and skills to raise crop production and diversify their sources of livelihood.<sup>18</sup> Such investment into irrigation systems, sustainable agriculture, and market integration enhancement are the keys to mitigating shocks and promoting food production and resilience.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of the Proposed Solutions**

In assessing the potential solutions to relieve food insecurity in Yemen, each option has its strengths and weaknesses, which should be considered. First, humanitarian aid and food assistance programs must be enhanced to reach the most affected people. Increasing funding and resource mobilization for the already existing organizations of the World Trade Organization on the ground in Yemen will strengthen their ability to provide food assistance.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, significant weaknesses include weak distribution logistics, security threats, and the risk of getting aid to unintended beneficiaries. Furthermore, peacebuilding and conflict resolution that aim to eradicate the causes of food insecurity in Yemen will provide an environment for agricultural production and easy access to food brought about by diplomatic

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<sup>16</sup> Abishkar Subedi, Gerrit-Jan Van Uffelen, and Tony Ngalamu, “Contextual Analysis of South Sudan’s Seed Sector and Pathways for Building to Seed Sector Resilience” (Baltimore, MD: Feed the Future Global Supporting Seed Systems for Development activity (S34D) and Food and Nutrition Security Resilience Program (FNS-REPRO), November 2022), 14, <https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/contextual-analysis-south-sudan%E2%80%99s-seed-sector>.

<sup>17</sup> Patel et al., ““Having More Women Humanitarian Leaders Will Help Transform the Humanitarian System,”” 4.

<sup>18</sup> Mirza Barjees Baig et al., “Realizing Food Security Through Sustainable Agriculture in the Republic of Yemen: Implications for Rural Extension,” in *Climate Change, Food Security and Natural Resource Management : Regional Case Studies from Three Continents*, ed. Mohamed Behnassi, Olaf Pollmann, and Himangana Gupta (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 41, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97091-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97091-2_2).

<sup>19</sup> Baig et al., 49.

initiatives in peacemaking forums, disarmament, and reintegration. However, the highly complicated nature of conflict dynamics in Yemen, coupled with the involvement of various regional and international actors, makes realizing sustainable peace all the more daunting. Third, efforts to promote livelihood diversification would be a step toward greater resilience of food systems in Yemen. Investing in irrigation infrastructure and sustainable farming practices linked to markets within the agricultural sector is likely to raise food production while reducing the impact of future disruptions. However, these initiatives have minimal prospects of achieving a significant beneficial effect due to the low level of access to resources and land degradation caused by the ongoing conflict.

### **Recommendation of the Most Viable Solution**

Among the suggested solutions, the one solution that seems most feasible is peacebuilding and conflict resolution to address the problem of food insecurity in Yemen. The implementation process must contain an action plan with sequential steps to follow. First, the responsibility for mediating the process of peace and involvement of the international community will mostly lie on the United Nations (UN), specifically the UN Special Envoy for Yemen and its agencies. Support for peacebuilding initiatives in Yemen would come from regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League.<sup>20</sup> Funding for peacebuilding initiatives in Yemen shall be mobilized from international donors, including governments, multilateral institutions, and philanthropic foundations who prefer long-term, sustainable investments in peacebuilding initiatives over short-term emergency aid. The participation and engagement of communities are crucial to the success of peacebuilding initiatives; this can be best facilitated by the engagement of local communities, civil society organizations, and religious leaders in fostering dialogue and reconciliation and in rebuilding trust.<sup>21</sup> What is required are the prerequisites of political will and commitment from the Yemen government, coupled with the presence of technical expertise and support from international stakeholders. Finally, policy reforms should address the underlying grievances and inequalities that fuel conflict in Yemen, which would require the decentralization of power, equitable distribution of resources, and all-inclusive governance structures. Only through cultural sensitivity and respect for local customs and traditions can a lasting trust and peace be founded.

### **Conclusion**

In total, this paper has explored the conditions of food insecurity that have stemmed from the war in Yemen. The families in the country are suffering from a shortage of food, and food security for the people in Yemen in conflict-affected areas is not just a humanitarian issue but a global emergency. Addressing this challenge would require stakeholders, governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to come together and create sustainable solutions. Focusing on humanitarian aid, supporting local agriculture, and facilitating peace talks is crucial for alleviating the ongoing suffering of families in Yemen. By doing so, we can ensure that the people of Yemen can not only have access to basic necessities but also a path forward toward stability and prosperity for the future.

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<sup>20</sup> Gertjan Hoetjes, "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Failure of Peacebuilding in Yemen," *The International Spectator* 56, no. 4 (October 2, 2021): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1987034>.

<sup>21</sup> Baig et al., "Realizing Food Security Through Sustainable Agriculture in the Republic of Yemen," 52.

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