



Barriers to women and youth in peacebuilding in Yemen: What are they and how can they be overcome?

Overview

An inclusive peacebuilding process in Yemen will have a greater chance of leading to sustainable peace. In support of this aim, this learning brief explores the barriers faced by women and youth peacebuilders in three governorates in Yemen. Drawing on qualitative evidence from interviews with women and youth peacebuilders, it proposes steps that donors can take to ensure that both groups play meaningful roles in shaping a peaceful future for Yemen.

This brief is based on 17 key informant interviews with members or leaders of women and youth-led civil society organisations in Ta'iz, Amran and Aden governorates, who were active in peacebuilding activities and benefitted from CARE's 'Women in Peacebuilding' project in 2018-19. Interviews were conducted in March-April 2020.

Key recommendations

Recommendation 1: Donors should consider funding more projects that reflect the *Triple Nexus* between development, humanitarian and peace programming in line with the UN's *New Way of Working (NWoW) and Yemeni perceptions of humanitarian and peacebuilding work.** Whilst maintaining the humanitarian space, donors should encourage more coordination and cooperation between these three fields by combining funding for peacebuilding with aid to address people's humanitarian and development needs. INGOs should also ensure that their humanitarian programming is conflict sensitive and that, at a minimum, it adheres to the principle of Do No Harm (DNH).

Recommendation 2: Donors should capitalise on the involvement of women and youth in humanitarian activities via INGOs and CSOs to mainstream capacity building for these groups beyond the focus on humanitarian work. INGOs should utilise their existing connections with women and youth organisations to enhance their capacities so that women and youth can employ these skills in future.

Recommendation 3: Donors and INGOs should be sensitive to local gender norms during the design of future peacebuilding programming in Yemen, noting that these may vary by location. This would reduce the risk of alienating beneficiaries or provoking resistance. This should include designing and funding project activities that promote the inclusion of women and girls in peacebuilding, for example via outreach to mahrams/male relatives/guardians as well as to girls' mothers.

Recommendation 4: Donors should use opportunities in national and international fora, such as discussions with the Office of the UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY), to highlight the importance of youth activities within peacebuilding in Yemen. Youth should be treated as primary targets for peacebuilding work as this can be a catalyst for preventing their recruitment into armed groups.

Recommendation 5: Donors – with their INGO implementing partners – should continue to provide flexible funding to local level peacebuilding organisations that are run by and for women and youth in Yemen. This should include provisions for transportation costs. As the conflict continues to exacerbate humanitarian need, funding should be increased accordingly so that local organisations can serve their communities effectively, noting that humanitarian and peacebuilding roles are often conducted concurrently by the same actors.

Recommendation 6: Donors should ensure that their INGO implementing partners are objective, transparent and fair when selecting local partners. INGOs should have clear and accessible selection criteria for local CSOs so that prospective partners understand why they were or were not selected for funding. In addition, INGOs should ensure that small CSOs can access small funds with low administrative barriers.

Recommendation 7: Donors should continue to work with international actors to encourage authorities in Yemen to allow space for civil society to operate safely, particularly for women's organisations.

This brief starts by exploring the overlap between peacebuilding, humanitarian aid and development activity in Yemen. It then identifies the programme activities that beneficiaries found most and least valuable to their peacebuilding work. It proceeds to analyse whether informants found CARE programme activities helpful in removing barriers to peacebuilding. It finally examines the barriers to peacebuilding that beneficiaries are still experiencing. Throughout, we suggest various ways that donors can help reduce and remove barriers to peacebuilding as part of their support to Yemeni civil society during the ongoing conflict.

The overlap between peacebuilding and humanitarian activities in Yemen

Over 75% of respondents in this study consider peacebuilding and humanitarian activities to be one and the same thing – or at least to be very closely linked. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, the livelihoods security of the population – both immediate and longer-term – is critical for stability. One respondent plainly stated that “*If we want to settle the conflict in a region, political pressure and stopping violence are not possible in a society that does not know what to eat*” (Ta’iz, male, 31, Consultant). Another commented that “*If the community is productive and economically able, that will reduce conflict, but unemployment will be a reason for conflict*” (Ta’iz, female, 30, unemployed). Secondly, peacebuilding activities contribute to the protection of beneficiaries, which make humanitarian activities such as food distribution possible on the ground.

This finding is supported by previous research¹ into women’s role in peacebuilding in Ma’rib, Ta’iz and Lahij governorates. This research found that ‘security’ was interpreted broadly by research participants, who viewed humanitarian and service delivery work as contributions to security and stabilisation at the local level. The UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2022 adopts a similarly broad understanding of conflict prevention, peace and stability to include humanitarian assistance and service delivery.²

It is important to note that a small number of beneficiaries see peacebuilding and humanitarian work as distinct activities, existing in parallel rather than overlapping. One person commented that these activities are “*certainly distinct and not the same. Humanitarian action is relief, actions, and emergency responses, while peacebuilding work is...a long process of preparation and work in order to stop the conflict, remove its causes, establish peace and reach sustainable peace*” (Amran, female, 34, Consultant). Another respondent stated that “*Relief projects should be combined with peacebuilding activities that will continue post-war or even during the war provided that early recovery work is carried out to resume the development process*”, but went on to observe that humanitarian work “*should not interfere with peacebuilding activities as is currently happening in some organisations*” (Ta’iz, male, 35, Consultant/Trainer).

Based on these beneficiaries’ occupations, they appear to have worked closely with INGOs and thus are likely to have been exposed to a more Western/international differentiation between humanitarian and peacebuilding work than is usually common across the Yemeni population. In general, many Yemenis consider humanitarian work to be part of peacebuilding because it contributes to stability on the ground.

Recommendation 1: Donors should consider funding more projects that reflect the *Triple Nexus* between development, humanitarian and peace programming in line with the UN’s *New Way of Working (NWoW) and Yemeni perceptions of humanitarian and peacebuilding work.** Whilst maintaining the humanitarian space, donors should encourage more coordination and cooperation between these three fields by combining funding for peacebuilding with aid to address people’s humanitarian and development needs. A practical example of this would be to fund programmes that include peacebuilding training in existing education and vocational training programmes for women and youth. INGOs should also ensure that their humanitarian programming is conflict sensitive and that, at a minimum, it adheres to the principle of Do No Harm (DNH). This should include training humanitarian workers on DNH and developing conflict sensitivity guidelines for humanitarian programmes.

*The UN *New Way of Working (NWoW)* calls on humanitarian and development actors to work collaboratively together, based on their comparative advantages, towards ‘collective outcomes’ that reduce need, risk and vulnerability over multiple years. See <https://www.un.org/jsc/content/new-way-working>

¹ Heinze, M. and Stevens, S. (2018), *Women as Peacebuilders in Yemen*, Social Development Direct and Yemen Polling Center

² UK National Action Plan on Women, Peace & Security 2018-2022, January 2018

Recommendation 2: Donors should capitalise on the involvement of women and youth in humanitarian activities via INGOs and CSOs to mainstream capacity building for these groups beyond the focus on humanitarian work. INGOs should utilise their existing connections with women and youth organisations to enhance their capacities so that women and youth can employ these skills in future. Examples could include training in livelihoods skills or financial literacy.

CARE's programme activities³: Which were most and least useful to beneficiaries?

Ta'iz

Project beneficiaries in Ta'iz (n=6)⁴ reported overwhelmingly positive experiences of CARE's programme activities.

Skills training in advocacy, evidence and coalition-building, active non-violence, planning and monitoring, economic empowerment and conflict sensitivity (#4) was the most highly rated activity. This was credited with changing "*many thoughts, including my thoughts about the conflict. I began to resolve conflicts and basically moved away from increasing conflict*" (Ta'iz, female, 30, unemployed). A further respondent commented that "*It changed the way many youth think; for example, the discussions in the WhatsApp group changed and turned from violent confrontations to less violent because each person reminded the other of non-violence, and the discussions became more sophisticated and got rid of the violence-related language*" (Ta'iz, male, 31, Consultant).

Despite these positive comments, one beneficiary rated this activity as the least valuable "*because all exercises are only temporary to raise awareness. It highlights issues without real action on them in society*" (Ta'iz, male, 23, CSO employee). **Given the largely positive feedback on this activity and its clear role in reducing violent behaviour, donors should continue funding this kind of skills training in future programming. However, project implementers should consider ways to ensure that clear links are made between skills training and follow-up action in all beneficiaries' lives.**

Facilitating joint women and youth action planning for targeted advocacy and partnership building (#7) was also rated highly. One respondent reported that "*We trained YouTubers on conflict sensitivity, and they uploaded six YouTube videos that broadcasted awareness messages to society and advocated for various social issues, such as the importance of involving women and youth in decision making*" (Ta'iz, male, 31, Consultant). **This use of social media for communications is an important tool for donors and project implementers to engage wider society in peacebuilding activities. It can also serve as a potential example to international and national stakeholders at Tracks 1 and 2 of how to engage effectively with Track 3 actors on peacebuilding matters.**

³ Beneficiaries across all three locations were asked about the following project activities. The activity numbers (#) are referred to in the discussion:

- (1) Creation of safe spaces for women and girls through training halls and resource venues;
- (2) Supporting joint advocacy between women and youth;
- (3) Supporting community committees to engage in joint advocacy, and promoting inclusivity within these committees;
- (4) Providing skills training in: advocacy, evidence, coalition building, active non-violence, planning and monitoring, economic empowerment and conflict sensitivity;
- (5) Awarding seed grants to women- and youth-led CSOs;
- (6) Conducting capacity building for women- and youth-led CSOs;
- (7) Facilitating joint women and youth action planning for targeted advocacy and partnership building;
- (8) Capacity building and strengthening for networks and coalitions;
- (9) Facilitating networks among women and youth activists of differing levels of experience.

⁴ Note that one respondent in Ta'iz did not take part in any of the core programme activities but instead participated in a CARE training on inclusive governance, co-existence and peacebuilding. She commented that this was highly valuable, especially because it clarified for her the concept of co-existence with other social groups (Ta'iz, female, 24, unemployed).

Aden

Beneficiary (n=6) opinions of programme activities in Aden were more varied.

Supporting community committees to engage in joint advocacy, and promoting inclusivity within these committees (#3) received positive feedback, with one beneficiary commenting that this *“helped create an excellent space for me to support issues that were neglected by the local community”* (Aden, female, 25, unemployed). This activity was also appreciated in Ta’iz and Amran. **In future programming donors should continue this support to community committees as a way of maintaining a space for activists to engage with their communities and to address issues jointly.**

Supporting joint advocacy between women and youth (#2) was rated by the same beneficiary as the least valuable activity because of *“non-acceptance of the idea by the local community”*. This is likely due to social norms that discourage mixing between the sexes. Opposition to such mixing was also encountered in Amran. This is discussed in more detail below.

Amran

No single programme activity in Amran was rated as more valuable than others by beneficiaries (n=5).

Awarding seed grants to women- and youth-led CSOs (#5) was highlighted by one respondent as the most valuable activity *“because it helped to change gender-based patterns in work and motivated women and youth to continue”* (Amran, female, 34, Consultant/Trainer). **This is important feedback for both donors and project implementers that direct funding to women-led CSOs can lead to positive changes to gender norms within civil society itself.**

Facilitating networks among women and youth activists of differing levels of experience (#9) was noted by one beneficiary as the least valuable programme activity *“because some people are conservative and have fears and a conservative social status”* (Amran, male, 40, School Principal). This suggests that certain members of women and youth organisations struggle to work together across the gender divide. Conservative attitudes towards men and women mixing may be due to Amran’s rural/tribal society. However, this issue was also raised in the urban setting of Aden so it is important to note that conservative gender norms can occur in various locations across Yemen.

Recommendation 3: Donors and INGOs should be sensitive to local gender norms during the design of future peacebuilding programming in Yemen, noting that these may vary by location. Networks between women and youth should be encouraged and supported since these groups can benefit from learning about each other’s experiences in peacebuilding. However, sensitivity to local gender norms is important in order not to alienate beneficiaries or provoke resistance. Given the increasing use of online communications, it may be possible to explore building online networks between women and youth activists rather than expecting them to work together in person.

How did CARE’s activities contribute to removing barriers to peacebuilding?

Ta’iz

All beneficiaries in Ta’iz found that CARE’s programme activities helped remove barriers to peacebuilding. The most profound comments emphasised that the **activities triggered a crucial mindset shift towards peacebuilding** in themselves or members of their organisations.

- ***“I had no idea that I did not know what peacebuilding is. Through my training with CARE, which implemented several trainings, I moved to the stage of awareness”*** (Ta’iz, male, 31, Consultant).

- ***“It changed the way youth think socially, politically and economically, with a steady and clear step”*** (Ta’iz, female, 30, unemployed).
- ***“I could not accept nor deal with people with special needs and the marginalised because I saw them as inferior to me. Now I accept to deal with them and I can deal with them in a correct way, and I have started to advise members of the community around me to deal with them and how to do so”*** (Anon.).

The last comment above highlights the value of the CARE trainings in terms of social inclusion, helping beneficiaries reassess engagement with people with disabilities and other marginalised identities (who may not be considered as equal in Yemeni society) to ensure that peacebuilding is understood widely and to give marginalised people space to share their own thoughts on what peacebuilding should entail. This will help build broader support for peacebuilding work. **Donors should therefore ensure that project implementers build the inclusion of people with disabilities and other marginalised identities into projects at the bidding stage of any peacebuilding programming in Yemen.**

One beneficiary further commented that, thanks to CARE’s programme activities, *“The government side became more aware of the peace process”* (Ta’iz, male, 35, Consultant/Trainer). This is a significant achievement given the insecurity and disputed political governance experienced in Ta’iz in recent years.

Aden

Beneficiaries in Aden overwhelmingly reported that CARE’s programme activities helped reduce barriers to peacebuilding. Important themes that emerged related to the training they received on the meaning and importance of gender in peacebuilding as well as to the critical transformation of youth from potential sources of violence to peacebuilders.

- ***“I previously believed that gender-based means roles given to women and men”*** (Aden, female, 27, CSO employee).
- ***“[After the training] I encouraged people of both genders in the community to advocate for issues, and I raised awareness among those who refuse to engage with women”*** (Aden, female, 27, unemployed)
- ***“CARE helped in reducing the barriers that youth faced in community peacebuilding by making them peacebuilders rather than time bombs that could be used for destruction. That has been reflected on the ground, for we see that the youth are promoting these concepts in their community, and we see new ideas that everyone likes”*** (Aden, male, government employee).

These comments highlight **the importance of designing peacebuilding training that specifically addresses gender**. Furthermore, the feedback that the training was able to reduce the risk of youth becoming involved in violent conflict by transforming them into community peacebuilders, is highly valuable. It demonstrates that working with youth on peacebuilding is important in at least two ways – both in terms of reducing the risk of them turning to violence and in transforming their youthful energy for change (of any kind) into a positive force for peace. In addition, this comment suggests that peacebuilding activities with youth might also help reduce the stigma that they experience from older people in the community due to the perception that youth are a source of violence. This reduced stigma may in turn help reduce the likelihood that youth will follow the common pathway into violence in which many young people find themselves. **Donors should therefore ensure that youth engagement continues to be a core part of their peacebuilding activities in its future programming in Yemen.**

Despite the largely positive feedback, one respondent commented that although CARE’s activities did help reduce barriers to peacebuilding, they were not sufficient as they “didn’t include all parties of the conflict” (Aden, male, 29, Social Activist). This person had taken part in CARE’s capacity building for women- and youth-led CSOs. Whilst it is understandable that CARE, as an apolitical organisation, could not be expected to engage conflict parties in its work, it would be useful for donors to consider how they can better support the engagement of grassroots activists with

government and other stakeholders who are directly involved in negotiating peace at a higher level, or with spoilers at more local levels.⁵

Amran

Beneficiaries in Amran gave a range of positive feedback with regards to how CARE's programme activities removed barriers to peacebuilding. **The core themes that emerged concern self-confidence and capacity building – particularly for women – as well as access to grants**

- ***“It removed the barrier of fear while dealing with people and the community to spread awareness. It also removed the worry of spreading the initiative and applying it on the ground”*** (Amran, male, 28).
- ***“The first barrier was male dominance in gaining access to grants, and CARE helped to reduce this problem by supporting women, building their capabilities and empowering them economically as well as contributing to legal support and raising awareness of some rights”*** (Amran, female, 34, Consultant)
- ***“Many of the participants in this initiative had a weakness in capacity building; for example, there was a female participant who came to me and said that she had benefitted from me, so I asked her why. She said because you have self-confidence, are not afraid to talk, and have a strong personality. These courses and initiatives created confidence in peacebuilders, removed fear from them, and encouraged them to show their abilities and skills”*** (Amran, female, 25, social media worker).

These comments demonstrate the importance of building the confidence and capacity of individual peacebuilders – particularly in the case of women who may be disadvantaged by gender norms where males are dominant. In future programming, **donors should ensure that women peacebuilders continue to be targeted as a group, including via specific training to raise women's awareness of their rights.**

Donors should also pay attention to particularly marginalised subgroups of women such as widows or displaced women, who may need greater support. One beneficiary reported that such support was lacking in this project.

- ***“I benefited from what I learned in training theoretically but not practically. For example, projects to build widows' capacities to support themselves with small empowerment projects were never supported, nor were projects to build the capacity of displaced women to participate in work within the community by raising their awareness and rehabilitating them for their own projects”*** (Amran, male, 43, Educator & Social Worker).

This comment further highlights that trainings must be implementable in practice as well as in theory. **Project implementers should plan how to do this effectively at project design stage. Consulting local implementing partners and incorporating them thoroughly into the bidding stage is one way to address this issue.**

Finally, one respondent welcomed the unconditional cash grants that CARE provided as part of a concurrent project.

- ***“There was a reduction in the proportion of humanitarian aid for some districts; however, CARE covered that shortage and supported 1,200 families through the unconditional cash project”*** (Amran, male, 40, School Principal).

This echoes our earlier discussion concerning the majority perception in Yemen that humanitarian and peacebuilding work are mutually reinforcing aspects of an overall effort. Humanitarian relief must be incorporated into peacebuilding work to increase stability. **Given the suggested benefits of unconditional cash transfers and their associated role in broader peacebuilding, it would be worthwhile for donors to further explore the effectiveness (and potential**

⁵ See SDDirect and CARE's learning brief on *Overcoming the barriers to an interlinked three-track peace process in Yemen* for more discussion of this topic.

drawbacks) of this aid modality in order to inform the design of future cash transfer systems that complement peacebuilding aims.

The comment further suggests that organisations with humanitarian mandates may have an advantage when doing peacebuilding work thanks both to their dual identities in communities and with local authorities as well as to the respect and access gained in relation to the relief they provide. **Donors should therefore consider how they can do more to intentionally synchronise humanitarian and peacebuilding projects across geographies in order to reap this benefit, whilst also ensuring that the humanitarian space is maintained.**

What ongoing barriers to peacebuilding do CARE beneficiaries still face?

Ta'iz

Beneficiaries in Ta'iz identified four ongoing barriers to their peacebuilding work. Firstly, **the political situation in Ta'iz – specifically political opposition to peacebuilding – is noted as a serious barrier** whereby: “*An accusation [can be] directed at anyone who talks about peace, whether from society or the authorities*” (Anon.). This is similar to safety concerns raised in Amran and is discussed in more detail below.

Secondly, one person felt that **youth are not necessarily treated as primary targets for peacebuilding by donors** – instead they may be considered a means through which donors can achieve other aims.⁶ Thirdly, a respondent noted that it can be challenging to do peacebuilding work because the wider community “*sees peace as surrender*” (Ta'iz, female, 24, unemployed). A possible solution to this is to use social media to spread positive messages about peace more widely.

Finally, one beneficiary working with girls found that girls' *mahrams* (male family members/guardians) sometimes prevented them from participating in peacebuilding work. She called for funding for project activities to specifically target *mahrams* to raise their awareness about the importance of girls' participation in peacebuilding and to address their concerns. Given that various male relatives may be a *mahram* to a girl at different times – and in recognition of the influential role that mothers can play in negotiating their daughters' access to external activities – **donors should separately target both male family members in general as well as mothers to raise awareness about why it is important for girls to take part in peacebuilding work.** Reaching out to mothers is critical since they often play an important role in household decision making and can also have a positive impact on male decision making with regard to their daughters' lives, as long as they understand the nature of the peacebuilding work in which their daughters could engage. This understanding will also help them report on this work within their female circles so that their daughters' reputations are protected. This should help spread further the idea of the importance of girls' participation in peacebuilding activities.

Aden

Only one beneficiary in Aden is currently involved in peacebuilding work now that CARE's activities have ended (one person commented that peacebuilding work is not possible at present in Aden due to the ongoing conflict). The beneficiary that is currently active highlighted a **lack of recognition of youth activities in peacebuilding as an ongoing barrier to his work**, and suggested that a way to overcome this barrier would be for his **initiative to be issued with a license to become a foundation.**

Amran

Beneficiaries in Amran identified a range of ongoing barriers to their peacebuilding activities. There is a general **lack of funding available for their work (including for transportation costs)** combined with an increase in humanitarian need arising from the conflict. **Favouritism from donors, INGOs and local authorities when selecting implementing partners** was highlighted as a barrier by two respondents. Similarly to the situation in Aden, the difficulty of obtaining a license to operate was also noted.

⁶ This was understood as a general point rather than in relation to CARE's programming.

Worryingly, beneficiaries expressed concerns that their work might jeopardise their safety and that of their families: *“Every word and every situation will be on you, and I fear that my family and I will not be safe because of this; there is no safety”* (Anon.). The recommendation to donors here is to *“activate the rights of human rights defenders and contribute to their protection, and provide a safe environment for work”*. A further recommendation to donors is to *“unify their orientations and opinions regarding the authorities; if there is collective pressure from all donors at the same time on the authorities, they will respond and give active organisations and peacebuilders more space to work freely and safely”* (Anon.). In addition, there is a call for donors *“to continue to support women-led organisations, in particular the organisations that have survived to date since 2015”* (Anon.).

Recommendation 4: Donors should use opportunities in national and international fora, such as discussions with the Office of the UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OESGY), to highlight the importance of youth activities within peacebuilding in Yemen. Youth should be treated as primary targets for peacebuilding work as this can be a catalyst for preventing their recruitment into armed groups.

Recommendation 5: Donors – with their INGO implementing partners – should continue to provide flexible funding to local level peacebuilding organisations that are run by and for women and youth in Yemen. This should include provisions for transportation costs. As the conflict continues to exacerbate humanitarian need, funding should be increased accordingly so that local organisations can serve their communities effectively, noting that humanitarian and peacebuilding roles are often conducted concurrently by the same actors.

Recommendation 6: Donors should ensure that their INGO implementing partners are objective, transparent and fair when selecting local partners. INGOs should have clear and accessible selection criteria for local CSOs so that prospective partners understand why they were or were not selected for funding. In addition, INGOs should ensure that small CSOs can access small funds with low administrative barriers. This should be combined with the offer of continuous project administration training to new organisations and individual activists so that they can apply for larger funds as their organisations mature.

Recommendation 7: Donors should continue to work with international actors to encourage authorities in Yemen to allow space for civil society to operate safely – particularly for women’s organisations – noting that this is extremely challenging.

References

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Social Development Direct

Social Development Direct (SDDirect) is a leading provider of high-quality, innovative and expert social development assistance and research services. Our work in Security, Justice and Peacebuilding recognises that ‘peace’ is more than the absence of fighting by armed groups. Sustainable and equitable peace must be inclusive and benefit all members of society, including marginalised groups. Our experts have experience of conducting research, designing and implementing peacebuilding programmes, and implementing UN Security Council 1325 across conflict and post-conflict countries. We are committed to working in close partnership with local peacebuilders in all our programmes.

CARE International

Founded in 1945, CARE International works around the world to save lives, defeat poverty and achieve social justice. We focus our efforts on girls and women because they are hardest hit by poverty, discrimination, crises and inequality. To empower women and girls, we must therefore address their needs and enable their agency and leadership, which is why we also address food and nutrition security, climate change, and humanitarian crises – including conflict, disasters and situations of chronic insecurity — all major challenges for the world’s poor, regardless of gender.

This learning brief was written by Kavita Kalsi ([SDDirect](#)) and Marie-Christine Heinze ([CARPO](#)).

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