



HPG Commissioned Report

# Accountability dilemmas and collective approaches to communication and community engagement in Yemen

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# Acronyms

<b>AAP</b>	accountability to affected populations
<b>C4D</b>	communication for development
<b>CCE</b>	communication and community engagement
<b>CCEI</b>	Communication and Community Engagement Initiative
<b>CDAC</b>	Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (Network)
<b>CEA</b>	community engagement and accountability
<b>CEWG</b>	Community Engagement Working Group
<b>CHS</b>	Core Humanitarian Standard
<b>CwC</b>	communicating with communities
<b>FGD</b>	focus group discussion
<b>HC</b>	Humanitarian Coordinator
<b>HCT</b>	Humanitarian Country Team
<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>ICCG</b>	Inter-Cluster Coordination Group
<b>IDP</b>	internally displaced person
<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>INGO</b>	international non-governmental organisation
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>OCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>RC</b>	Resident Coordinator
<b>SCHR</b>	Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response

<b>SCMIE</b>	Social Centre Against Illicit Gain
<b>SFD</b>	Social Fund for Development
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNHCR</b>	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	UN Children's Fund
<b>WASH</b>	water, sanitation and hygiene
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

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# 1 Introduction

The conflict in Yemen began in 2015 and shows no sign of easing. Compounded with other crises, such as a cholera epidemic, famine and now Covid-19, it has been one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world for years. More than 24 million people – about 80% of the population – are in need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 2019). With \$4.2 billion needed in 2019, Yemen became the largest humanitarian operation in history (IRC, 2019). However, despite its scale, a perception survey conducted by UNICEF highlighted dissatisfaction of the surveyed population with the response. Approximately half the surveyed population (49.9%) indicated that their priority needs were not being met and only 2% said that they were mostly satisfied with what they were receiving (CEPS, 2019).

This study explores how and to what extent collective approaches to communication and community engagement (CCE)<sup>1</sup> have – or have not – been implemented in Yemen, and the degree to which they have been effective in ensuring that the humanitarian operations are people-centred and responsive to the needs of affected communities. It examines these issues from the perspectives of international humanitarian actors – multilaterals, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), donor governments – and local non-governmental organisation (NGOs), local humanitarian actors and Yemenis.

This report takes a strong political economy approach, as it is necessary to understand how a collective approach to CCE should be implemented in a highly politicised conflict context such as Yemen. As in other conflict

zones, the humanitarian response in Yemen is deeply intertwined with the politics of the ongoing conflict (Schimmel, 2006; Peters and El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, 2020). Aid agencies are often restricted from distributing aid directly – a role that is taken on by local authorities who are often party to the conflict (Dehghan and McVeigh, 2017). Communication between international humanitarian actors and Yemeni people is often constrained by the difficulties and ambiguities inherent in navigating the complex political landscape of a war, where each side is backed by geopolitical powers outside of the country. Like all resources in conflict, communication is controlled, politicised and intimately bound up in conflict dynamics. Other aspects of community engagement, including participation and the ability to provide feedback, are instruments of power that play a role in determining which aid resources are distributed and to whom. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to depoliticise the humanitarian response in Yemen, a conflict-sensitive approach needs to be taken to improve the whole response, especially with regards to CCE.

## 1.1 Definitions, methodology and limitations

This report is part of a larger study commissioned by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on behalf of the Communication and Community Engagement Initiative

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1 CDAC Network’s definition of CCE will be used to frame the analysis: ‘Communication and community engagement is an area of humanitarian action based on the principle communication is aid. It gives priority to sharing lifesaving, actionable information with people affected by disaster using two-way communication channels so aid providers listen to and act on people’s needs, suggested solutions, feedback and complaints, and people receiving assistance have a say in and lead decisions that affect them. It also prioritises keeping people in crisis connected with each other and the outside world’ (CDAC Network, 2019: 10).

(CCEI)<sup>2</sup> to identify solutions to address current bottlenecks and challenges, as well as develop evidence of the added value and limitations of collective approaches. Along with case studies in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia and Mozambique, the study aims to draw lessons and identify good practices that could be replicated in other contexts, taking into account the implications of different contexts and types of crises. The Yemen study presented here examines whether, how and to what extent collective approaches to CCE can be implemented in a highly political and conflict-affected context where there is limited humanitarian access and high levels of distrust between the international humanitarian community and local populations.

### 1.1.1 Definitions

Accountability to affected populations (AAP) came to the fore of the international humanitarian system several years ago, with its inclusion in the 2014 Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), the 2016 Grand Bargain ‘participation revolution’ workstream’ and the 2017 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Commitments on Accountability to Affected People. Yet, since then, there has been much definitional confusion within the sector over it and its related approaches, including communicating with communities (CwC), community engagement and accountability (CEA), communication for development (C4D) and CCE. This confusion becomes even more pronounced when multiple terms and acronyms are used in conversation with local organisations and affected people.

While recognising this definitional confusion, for the purpose of this report, the research team designed the following wide-ranging definition:

A collective approach to CCE is a multi-actor initiative that encompasses the humanitarian response as a whole, rather than a single individual agency

or programme, and focuses on two-way communication, providing information about the situation and services to affected communities; gathers information from these communities via feedback, perspectives and inputs; and closes the feedback loop by informing the communities of how their input has been taken into account. The goal of a collective approach to CCE is the increased accountability to and participation of affected communities in their own response.

Thus, a collective approach to CCE refers to the overall approach taken in a crisis, while collective or common mechanisms for CCE refer to the distinct activities/methods implemented (e.g. perception surveys, feedback mechanisms and listening groups). These mechanisms are deemed collective when they serve the humanitarian response and/or its coordination as a whole, rather than a single agency, by feeding into collective listening, collective analysis and collective action for reaching improved collective outcomes. Here the collective approach does not mean the aggregation of data from different players using individual mechanisms; instead, it brings together tools for collecting feedback and perceptions, communicating and engaging with communities as well as collating the collected information. CCE mechanisms can be common to and/or coordinated among multiple actors, but there is no evidence that they automatically lead to collective action or contribute to collective outcomes in the absence of a commitment to a collective approach.

It is critical to note here, however, that without the existence of effective CCE activities and mechanisms, it is difficult to envisage effective collective approaches to CCE. The key to both collective and non-collective approaches, then, is the capacity to connect meaningfully to the affected population. As this paper demonstrates, existing CCE activities in Yemen are not effective

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2 The CCEI was set up as a collaboration between the CDAC Network, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) and UNICEF. It has since been integrated under the IASC Results Group 2 on Accountability and Inclusion.



– despite notable efforts to develop and facilitate the development of a collective approach, as in the case of the Community Engagement Working Group (CEWG) – due to impediments to CCE activities that prevent a sustained flow of information from the population to international actors and vice versa.

### 1.1.2 Methods

Due to the nature of the conflict and the limitations on access, data collection took place between July 2019 and April 2020. The initial months focused on an in-depth desk review of existing literature on accountability, communication and community engagement, including a review of reports from a number of international organisations such as Oxfam, Saferworld, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), among others. Remote interviews with key informants were completed by the end of 2019, and in-country focus group discussions (FGDs) with members of the affected population were conducted between November 2019 and January 2020. Follow-up interviews were added in April 2020 to address the fast-changing context and potential emergence of Covid-19 in Yemen.

Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted, mainly via Skype or phone calls, with respondents in Aden, Hodeida, Sanaa, Taizz and Sa'dah. Respondents were focal point actors for community engagement (mainly Yemeni) who were affiliated with international multilaterals and NGOs, and senior international humanitarian actors based in Yemen, Yemeni entrepreneurs and Yemeni social media activists,<sup>3</sup> leaders

of local organisations and Yemeni recipients of humanitarian assistance. In addition, eight FGDs with members of the population were conducted in Aden, comprising around 10 participants each. An effort was made to interview those marginalised within the humanitarian response, such as the extremely poor and the *Muhamasheen*.<sup>4</sup> The FGDs included young Yemeni men and women (in separate groups), middle-aged men and women (in separate groups), local Yemeni humanitarians working for local NGOs, young people in internally displaced person (IDP) camps, local authorities and *oqqal al hara* (transliterated as the 'wise men of the area').<sup>5</sup>

In terms of geography, the study focused on Yemen's northern highlands, and the capital city, Sanaa, which remain under the control of the Houthis and their allies (henceforth: de facto authorities), as well as the southern region under the authority of the internationally recognised government led by the prime minister, Ma'in Abdulmalek. This two-pronged approach allowed for analysis of the impact that local communities' different experiences of conflict has on collective approaches to CCE, including the impact on different instruments of community engagement and the overall capacity to communicate between affected people and international and local humanitarian actors across different political fault lines.

### 1.1.3 Limitations and challenges

There were a number of limitations and challenges to this study. First, despite efforts to implement collective approaches to CCE in Yemen, they remain limited and ineffective for reasons both internal and external to the humanitarian system in

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3 Yemeni entrepreneurs in Yemen, Yemeni social media activities and Yemeni diaspora were interviewed to explore the extent to which they have developed their own CCE tools.

4 The *Muhamasheen* (translated as the 'marginalised ones') is a term adopted by members of the community itself to escape a derogatory term used to refer to them: *al-Akhdam* (translated as 'the servants'). Some believe that this group is descended from African slaves or Ethiopian soldiers from as far back as the sixth century while others think that they are of Yemeni origin.

5 It is worth noting here that *oqqal al hara* are a group of local leaders who, historically, used to be appointed on the basis of their influence in a particular area. Under Ali Abdullah Salih, who was Yemen's first president from unification in 1990 until his resignation in 2012, their role became more politicised, and they were appointed on the basis of their loyalty to the regime. They are a hybrid in the sense that they affiliated with the local authority as well as the Yemeni tribal administration. Following the Yemen crisis in 2015, they have played a key role as mediators between international actors and beneficiaries in distributing and facilitating humanitarian assistance. The benefits of this role to the community, however, as this paper demonstrates, are heavily contested.

Yemen. One challenge to implementing collective approaches to CCE in Yemen is the lack of a wider conversation on communication constraints and accountability in general, which is needed for successful operationalisation. As a result, this report will examine collective approaches to CCE as well as the issue of CCE more generally.

Second, security concerns for respondents, international organisations operating in Yemen and the lead researcher in Yemen were a serious and continuous hindrance to the data collection process. FGDs could not be conducted in the northern region (under the control of the de facto authorities of the Houthis and their allies) because of limitations on public gatherings and discussions, and even in the southern region, conducting FGDs was problematic due to security threats. These security challenges also led to logistical difficulties, which prolonged the data collection period beyond what had originally been planned. Access to areas in Aden for the FGDs was only recommended in the morning, as in the evening and nighttime frequent fierce clashes between the police forces and local groups were known to take place. For security, FGDs were held in safe spaces – the offices of NGOs from which respondents received humanitarian assistance – but even this posed a challenge as the lead researcher in Yemen had to ensure that NGO staff were not present during the FGDs so that respondents could speak freely.

Finally, a number of respondents from international organisations asked for particular parts of their interviews not to be used in the study because they feared that publishing information about their experiences in Yemen, especially those related to engaging local authorities in the humanitarian response, would compromise their work there. For this reason, all information in this report has been anonymised. Relatedly, although both lead researchers are Arabic speakers, their affiliation with a Western think tank led to some concerns on the part of respondents regarding the independence of the report emerging from this study.

## 1.2 Outline of the study

Chapter 2 provides an overview of different approaches to CCE used in Yemen and the state of the collective approach to CCE. Chapter 3 analyses the challenges to CCE and a collective approach in Yemen and argues that these challenges are the reason a collective approach to CCE is needed. Chapter 4 delves into the political economy of the conflict in Yemen and how that affects CCE. Finally, chapter 5 offers recommendations for improving CCE and implementing a more systematic and collective approach to CCE in Yemen.

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## 2 The state of a collective approach to communication and community engagement in Yemen

There are a variety of non-collective CCE channels and tools used by international humanitarian actors to engage with the affected population, including hotlines, WhatsApp groups and face-to-face engagement (usually conducted through intermediary local NGOs), as well as activities such as training frontline humanitarians on community engagement and raising awareness on issues like hygiene and the cholera outbreak. The purpose of these tools ranges from collecting feedback that will inform the response to facilitating access and helping international humanitarian organisations be better coordinated and connected with local actors.

### 2.1 Different approaches to communication and community engagement

Currently, CCE is done in three different ways: face to face, via technology/social media and through the humanitarian leadership. These three methods are not mutually exclusive; they can and should interact and complement one another to create a more holistic and collective approach to CCE in a challenging conflict-affected context.

#### 2.1.1 Approach 1: face-to-face engagement (social capital-driven)

A face-to-face approach involves international humanitarian actors engaging with local

communities through leveraging their access to personal and/or community networks in person or through face-to-face engagement with the affected population. It is based on developing contacts, building rapport and expanding social capital in areas where the humanitarian response takes place over an extended period of time.

Discussions with focal points responsible for the coordination of volunteer efforts showed that much of the access they have to communities is cumulative and facilitated through local volunteers over time. While this approach ensures sustained community engagement in the long term, because people start developing a familiarity with organisations and their staff, it was described as possessing the highest political risk for those involved, particularly the local population (see sub-section 3.1.1).

In Yemen, face-to-face engagement is usually done by intermediary local NGOs as well as frontline Yemeni humanitarians who directly engage with communities to collect data and feedback that is then shared with international humanitarian organisations. Some interviewees mentioned examples of international actors engaging directly in face-to-face discussions with the affected community to collect feedback, but they were generally very limited. The majority of Yemeni respondents highlighted the invisibility of international humanitarian actors in the public space, which affects communities' ability to offer feedback and complaints as they do not know where to go. Instead, on a day-to-day basis, they

see and engage with local actors either acting in their capacity as Yemeni humanitarians or acting on behalf of international organisations that they work for or have been commissioned by to engage local communities.

An example of a social capital-driven approach is UNICEF's C4D programme, which is defined as 'an evidence-based and participatory process that facilitates the engagement of children, families, communities, the public and decision makers for positive social and behavioural change in both development and humanitarian contexts through a mix of available communication platforms and tools' and relies on the use of volunteers to communicate with and empower local communities (UNICEF, 2019: 6–7). In 2017, Yemen experienced one of the world's largest acute watery diarrhoea/cholera outbreaks, and UNICEF used C4D to coordinate activities between the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health, nutrition and education clusters via an integrated prevention and response plan (UNICEF, 2019). Key messages on the prevention and treatment of cholera were distributed door-to-door by community volunteers. According to UNICEF, 'programmatic monitoring indicated marked improvements in the knowledge and adoption of key practices. This helped contribute to a reduction in the case fatality rate to 0.2% lower than in December 2017' (ibid: 15).

### **2.1.2 Approach 2: technological engagement (social media-driven)**

The second approach to CCE involves using technology and communication mechanisms such as social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, phone applications like WhatsApp, hotlines, newspapers and other print media, radio and boxes for complaints. They do not involve face-to-face engagement and are seen as popular, most convenient and least politically threatening by local organisations and Yemenis interviewed for this study.

Facebook, in particular, was described as a convenient way for Yemenis to access international and local humanitarian actors directly. Further investment in using social-media platforms to understand not only where needs are but also to monitor and receive feedback

from communities on the assistance that they are receiving could be a key aspect of successful CCE. This feedback could also help ensure that local authorities do not misuse the powers given to them by international actors to distribute the assistance. Using social media might have its limitations – older Yemenis are unlikely to be tech-savvy and able to use such platforms – but Yemeni communities are strong and well connected to one another. News spreads easily and young Yemenis are becoming increasingly vocal about their needs and rights, so social media is an opportunity for stronger engagement with them and to align assistance more closely with their needs and priorities.

Hotlines, on the other hand, were described as having been less successful in ensuring safe and transparent communication between Yemenis and humanitarians (international and local) for several reasons. First, there is a security concern around their confidentiality. Even if Yemenis do not provide information about their names and location, there was still a worry that somehow political authorities (the Houthis in particular) would be able to trace those calls and locate the callers. Second, there is a perception that hotlines raise people's expectations regarding a quick response to the complaint, and when those expectations are not met, because the feedback either does not lead to a modified response or the feedback loop is not closed, people are more frustrated with the response overall.

The experience of Tawasul, a humanitarian call centre established by UNHCR and AMIDEAST in Yemen in late 2015, is a case in point. Tawasul was the first of its kind in Yemen and shared humanitarian information through a toll-free number five days a week. It was an 'avenue for complaints, criticism and feedback and a mechanism to strengthen accountability across the humanitarian community' (Drew, 2016: n.p.). While the call centre was popular and received more than 1,000 calls per month on questions concerning medical issues, food distributions and requests for individual protection, a few months later it was forced by the authorities to suspend activities, and it closed completely in June 2016.

### 2.1.3 Approach 3: humanitarian leadership (management-driven)

Compared to the first two approaches, this is a significantly more top-down approach where CCE strategies and overall direction are injected into the humanitarian architecture by the senior humanitarian leadership in the country. This approach is critical in building trust with the local community. It involves speaking up against potential violations of the humanitarian principles and communicating priority areas of international humanitarian actors to the affected population for feedback. This involves work done through inter-cluster coordination and by working groups like the CEWG, as well as negotiations by the senior humanitarian leadership, senior members of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and donors to ensure access to humanitarian assistance and acting on the needs and complaints of the affected population. The role played by the UN Resident Coordinator (RC) in Yemen is also critical.

A main obstacle to this approach has been the politicised nature of the Yemeni context. Yemen remains a hostile environment where the role of the RC (who also doubles as the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC)) has to balance political as well as humanitarian concerns. Engaging local political actors may result in estranging others and, unfortunately, all respondents agreed that it is Yemeni civilians who suffer as a result. A number of respondents criticised UN operations in Sanaa for engaging Houthi NGOs and local authorities in the distribution of assistance without adequately monitoring how and whether the distribution is carried out in an impartial way. Accounts of favouritism by Houthis towards those allied with them were related by several local community respondents who were not affiliated directly with local NGOs or local authorities.

Moreover, Lise Grande, the current RC/HC, continues to play a leading role in constant discussions with senior Houthi officials as well as the internationally recognised government in the south in order to protect a humanitarian response that reaches more than 14 million people. Her role – as well as the entirety of UN operations in Yemen – has come under attack by Yemenis because of her seeming reluctance to criticise Houthis for their violations against the Yemeni people. In 2019, the internationally recognised government criticised

Lise Grande for not condemning a Houthi shell attack on an IDP camp in the Hajia Governorate, which killed eight people and wounded 30 others. There were calls for the UN to hold the Houthis fully accountable for the crimes they commit against civilians (Debiefer, 2019).

An example of the management-driven approach is the establishment of the CEWG and the HCT's endorsement of an AAP framework, which demonstrates its commitment to AAP via a collective approach to CCE, described in the following section.

## 2.2 The Community Engagement Working Group

Attempts to coordinate international humanitarian organisations' efforts to communicate with and engage affected populations have been largely limited in scope. The main achievement of the collective approach to CCE in Yemen was the quick set-up of the CEWG in late 2015. The CEWG was established with UNICEF as chair, OCHA providing overall coordination and playing the secretariat role and a further 25 participating agencies comprising more than 100 staff members. According to the February 2020 status update on common services for CCE, the only donor supporting the CEWG in Yemen is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Sattler et al., 2020).

The aim of the CEWG is 'to establish common, shared mechanisms to ensure that affected people have accurate, relevant and timely information to make informed decisions to protect themselves and their families and to ensure that the overall humanitarian response is systematically informed by the views of affected communities' (Olielo and Hoffman, 2019: 14–15). Its three main activities, as envisaged in 2017, are:

1. providing trainings on conflict sensitivity and how to appropriately respond to feedback and complaints;
2. monitoring community perceptions of the response, identifying preferred communication channels and feeding back key messages to communities; and

3. supporting feedback/complaints mechanisms and PSEA complaint mechanisms (CEWG, 2017).

Although there have been multiple attempts to establish a common complaints and feedback mechanism, such as an inter-agency humanitarian call centre, this has yet to be realised.

The CEWG was instrumental in developing an accountability framework for AAP (CEWG, 2017; see Annex 1), which was endorsed by the HCT in May 2016 and included in the 2017 and subsequent Yemen Humanitarian Response Plans (Olielo and Hoffman, 2019). The framework is ambitious and addresses six core components of AAP:

1. Providing information to the public.
2. Involving the community in decision-making.
3. Learning from feedback and complaints.
4. Staff attitudes and behaviours.
5. Using information from project learning.
6. Assessments.

For each component, the framework established four indicators, ranging from Level 0 to Level 3, to measure the effectiveness of AAP within the Yemen response (CEWG, 2017).

### **2.2.1 Limited local ownership means that the Community Engagement Working Group has not been effective**

The CEWG is an attempt at a collective approach to CCE but, according to the interviews conducted for this study, it has limited local ownership. Hardly any local organisations or INGOs operating in Yemen had heard of it, and the few that had said its work has been limited. While the framework is ambitious, its operationalisation remains unfulfilled, due to the internal and external factors discussed below (see section 3.2).

According to an unpublished assessment of collective accountability in Yemen, the CEWG was ‘not fit-for-purpose’ and lacked adequate capacity to support the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG). While, in principle, its tools are appropriate, in practice they are poorly executed, without timeliness and relevance. Though the accountability framework was used in 2017 and 2018, it was largely

abandoned in 2019 due to a lack of cluster and partner capacity. Similarly, the common messages created in 2017 were rarely updated or actioned, making them irrelevant and leading to their disuse. This assessment agrees with that of the February 2020 status update on common services for CCE, which states that ‘in a recent analysis, it was commonly reported by stakeholders that data from the national planning level has not made a significant impact at the operational level’ (Sattler et al., 2020: 28).

If the response is assessed via the CEWG’s accountability framework (CEWG, 2017; see Annex 1) the lack of success is apparent. For almost all components, the response in Yemen has not even met the requirements for Level 0. For example, to reach Level 0 for the second component (‘involve the community in decision making’), the framework states that ‘affected communities are informed of the planning process’, which was rarely, if ever, achieved. Similarly, Level 0 of the fourth component states that ‘staff is aware of community engagement and accountability’. According to interviews undertaken for this study, however, there is limited awareness of CCE efforts underway in Yemen. While the creation and adoption of the accountability framework is to be applauded, the inability to move into or beyond Level 0 is a harsh assessment of the failure of CCE in Yemen.

## **2.3 A status update on the collective approach to communication and community engagement**

It was difficult to determine through this study how effective the collective approach to CCE has been in Yemen in terms of facilitating a more satisfactory humanitarian response on the ground or ensuring a sustained flow of communication between international humanitarian actors and the Yemeni population.

Perhaps the most striking evidence that the collective approach to CCE has not had an impact in Yemen is the limited engagement of communities and local organisations in shaping the assistance they receive. In an FGD with

local organisations, respondents described a community engagement initiative by the Social Fund for Development (SFD) where communities are trained to identify and prioritise their needs. According to the respondents, communities often do not know how to prioritise their needs because, when assistance arrives, they feel they should take anything they can get even if they do not have a critical need for it. This stems from a sense of insecurity about the arrival of assistance and when it will be delivered

again. Respondents in an FGD in Aden called for better communication of information from international and local NGOs to build confidence in the capacity to access assistance. While the ability to provide assistance, like the ability to do good CCE, is hindered by the challenges mentioned in the following chapter, providing information about the flow of assistance should be prioritised so that affected communities in Yemen can have better access to the aid they need.

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# 3 Challenges to – and the need for – a collective approach to communication and community engagement in Yemen

Despite the existence of multiple tools and an early start to a collective approach to CCE as outlined in the previous chapter, Yemeni respondents in the FGDs undertaken for this study generally saw them as ineffective. Similarly, all but a few respondents from international organisations generally regarded these measures as unsatisfactory. There is, then, a disconnect between what the CCE tools and approaches aspire to achieve and their impact on the ground, due to a number of contextual and systematic challenges. This section looks at the challenges to CCE in Yemen and why a collective approach is critical to the response.

## 3.1 Challenges to communication and community engagement and a collective approach in Yemen

Conversations with international humanitarian actors highlighted a strong interest in facilitating better CCE in Yemen but that, for most of them, their hands are tied because of political instabilities (local, regional and global) and organisational problems. These include the failure to operationalise a framework for CCE due to a general lack of definitional coherence, a lack of capacity and, more specifically to the collective approach, limited coordination.

### 3.1.1 Political and security risks and their impact on neutrality

The most significant limiting factors in Yemen, like many conflict contexts, are the political and security risks, which hinder humanitarian access and engagement in many parts of the country. In some areas there is no direct delivery of aid; instead aid is distributed through local authorities, which has inevitably led to a politicisation of aid. Due to limited monitoring by international actors of how assistance is delivered (El Taraboulsi, 2015; Salisbury, 2017a), face-to-face engagement meant that any criticism of the response could be used by local political authorities to their advantage and to manipulate communities into obedience. Some respondents feared that if they spoke up they would be identified by local authorities as rebels or as aligned with an opposing political group and that they would be denied humanitarian assistance, as distributions are usually overseen by those local authorities.

In terms of CCE, there are varied appetites and levels of risk associated with face-to-face engagement from the perspective of Yemeni respondents and international actors who have operations there. Respondents in both Houthi-held areas and government-run areas pointed out that communicating in groups as opposed to more confidential or anonymised forms of communication are considered threatening –



‘big meetings in groups are a threat to our safety’, said a Yemeni humanitarian from Sanaa. This was a concern regarding communication with both international organisations (for fear of Houthi informants being present in a big meeting) and local organisations or authorities (such as *oqqal al hara* – the wise men of the area). If the local power dynamic is in favour of local leaders rather than beneficiaries and affected people, it can lead to self-censorship as people will not feel comfortable sharing their true opinions with those who have power over their daily lives. This problematises earlier findings stating that Yemeni communities find face-to-face consultations to be a good way to disseminate information (CEPS, 2019).

This unwillingness to complain or provide feedback, to local authorities who are distributing aid or to organisations who are not always seen as neutral due to their partnerships on the ground, hinders the ability to communicate and engage with communities and thus impedes the collective approach to CCE. This is exacerbated by further unwillingness to communicate needs freely with international and local organisations due to security concerns involved with face-to-face engagement and FGDs. A respondent from an international NGO operating in Yemen described the situation as follows:

You must understand how difficult operations are in Yemen. The Houthis clamped down and getting information from our offices in Yemen has become difficult. People report on humanitarian organisations to Houthis. We try to ask them if they’ve got enough food and so on. We also get a lot of reports on sexual violence. But they’ll report you back to Houthis. We are not able to extract information from the ground and this has constrained our work.

Another respondent who leads an international organisation in Yemen confirmed this difficulty in operations. One of the main problems she faces is the difficulty of extracting information from the ground:

Yemen is even more difficult than Afghanistan. There, we could go and have focus group discussions. Here it is unique. There are layers of approvals that you need to secure from authorities. We need those approvals and then even if we get them, they can get cancelled at any point. We can’t pick up notebooks and go to the field and find out what is needed.

Although humanitarian actors struggle to access affected communities due to security risks, by contrast, the ‘presence of the humanitarian community within the affected population and the engagement with communities’ has been shown ‘to ensure the safety and protection of the population and increase humanitarian access through better community acceptance’ (CEWG, 2016: 7). According to the 2016 study by Oxfam, ‘a staggering 84% of the affected population reported that the presence of humanitarian agencies has increased their perceived safety. This number increases to 85% amongst IDPs and reaches 82% amongst Host community members’ (cited in CEWG, 2016: 7).

### 3.1.2 Lack of definitional coherence for communication and community engagement

When CCE was possible in Yemen, the lack of definitional coherence – alluded to in the introduction to this study – resulted in different organisations viewing CCE differently and with varying objectives, both in terms of their role in engaging the affected community (to what level and how the community should be engaged) and what that meant for international actors in Yemen, especially concerning discussions around accountability. The CEWG’s definition was not widely known and, therefore, none of the respondents except those from UNICEF and OCHA could refer to it. This confusion in Yemen mirrors confusion that exists at the global level. Definitions by international humanitarian actors reveal different priorities, motivations and ambitions (Jacobs, 2015), though recent analysis has shown more convergence than divergence conceptually, even when organisations use different terminology (Iacucci, 2019).

In the interviews undertaken for this study, several terms were used interchangeably when discussing CCE and a collective approach, including participation, communication, accountability, coordination, collaboration, community engagement and transparency. While these terms are interconnected and represent different facets of communicating and engaging with the affected population in a humanitarian response as well as between humanitarian actors, they differ in terms of the tools used and expectations attached to each one of them. This confusion often manifested itself in a set of contestations that included a discrepancy between theory (usually aspirational) and practice.

This discrepancy revealed itself in the research. While interviews showed agreement on the need for community feedback to inform the work of humanitarian organisations and to create a ‘common situation of awareness’ of a crisis and how to access assistance, there was also a consensus by international humanitarian actors that this has been difficult to implement in practice, in large part due to the lack of definitional coherence (along with the other challenges mentioned in this section). This meant that benchmarking and definitions for exactly what CCE tools can and should do have remained ambiguous: ‘It is important to have the aspirational framework, but the actual delivery of this is rarely seen because it is difficult’, said an international humanitarian actor, before adding, ‘Giving account, being transparent, sharing information, particularly organisational information about things like how long and why you are providing assistance, don’t really happen. We don’t meet a high benchmark where we are delivering on this accountability effectively’.

### 3.1.3 Capacity limitations

The lack of human resources and funding capacity to respond to the needs of more than 20 million people in Yemen has contributed to a lack of CCE, particularly in responding to complaints and closing the feedback loop. This has created frustrations among people affected by the crisis and undermined trust in the CCE mechanisms already in place. Closing

the feedback loop was cited as the main source of discontent by most international and Yemeni respondents for this study.

While the Yemen response is comparatively well-funded, there is a capacity problem related to staffing and operations. According to one international humanitarian actor, the response – worth \$2 billion – is managed by a team of 200 people in the field, which hinders the ability to mobilise resources. In his words, ‘It can take weeks and months to mobilise effectively on the ground. Our HR systems just don’t work. For example, we lost two or three of our key coordinators in Yemen. In order to replace them, it will take us one to three months where we would have a gap of personnel’. These issues are compounded by the fast-moving nature of the conflict. The same interviewee noted:

The frontline can move around very fast. Even hourly. There is also mass displacement across the desert. To move an operation into a new area takes time to get access and move operations. When we are not able to provide assistance to recently displaced people, it is not because we are not accountable. We just can’t. We don’t have the capacity; we are understaffed.

The combination of capacity limitations due to gaps in employment and the political and security dimensions, according to another interviewee, means that humanitarian organisations are unable to expand the area they cover and become more inclusive of Yemen’s geography in terms of both the north and south as well as urban and rural.

Capacity gaps also affect local organisations’ ability to consistently and fully engage with communities. Humanitarian actors for local organisations saw themselves ‘cornered’ into situations where information was extracted from them to feed into reports for international organisations or where they were asked to perform tasks with little guidance and a very limited amount of time allocated. One respondent in an FGD in Aden described how ‘donor organisations suddenly communicate with us and ask us to submit

a project proposal with complex details, but they want us to make it available within days'. She also added that limited capacity-building for local organisations is carried out and, as a result, they are always in 'catch-up' mode.

When it comes to CCE, limited capacity inevitably results in not all complaints and feedback being answered by international organisations. This can lead to a sense of 'fatigue' for those running complex operations in Yemen due to the level of commitment needed to engage communities. One international humanitarian worker said:

Community feedback is a lot of work. Collect, register, coordinate, keep track and report to donors and then reshape the project according to feedback. It's a lot work and we don't have enough human resources for this. You can plan all you want but who will do it?

Limited capacity and this feeling of fatigue also hinder any attempts to create a collective approach to CCE. While collective approaches can often lead to long-term efficiency gains and can save resources by pooling them and avoiding duplication, they require capacity to get them up and running. An attempt to coordinate NGOs and foster engagement with local organisations and communities was shut down due to a lack of capacity to run the group.

Finally, though the Yemen response is comparatively well-funded, more support is needed from donors towards better coordination or cooperation on CCE. Respondents described how coordination has become a requirement by some donors; yet, this does not translate to allocating money in the budget for better coordination or integration of approaches, including coordination activities or regional projects, much less a collective approach.

### 3.1.4 Limited coordination towards a collective approach

All of these challenges have culminated in limited coordination among international organisations on using common mechanisms, unifying their

messages and acting on feedback collectively. According to an unpublished assessment of collective accountability in Yemen, the lack of dedicated capacity for cluster coordination outside of national clusters and a lack of dedicated cluster information management capacity creates a system of 'double hatting', where people are asked to perform more than one duty or job. This negatively impacts sectoral coordination and cross-cutting issues such as CCE as workers are already stretched thin in the response. Inadequate links between national and subnational coordination mechanisms hinder the analysis of feedback data and the ability to elevate key concerns from field to headquarters level. It is generally felt that various coordination structures are underutilised, such as those among local civil society organisations, lack visibility in the cluster system and ICCG and have not added value to operations on the ground.

Coordination is necessary to make sure that feedback collected via face-to-face engagement or technology is analysed and fed back in a way that allows it to reach headquarters where it can influence decision making. According to one respondent:

In Yemen, we rely a lot more heavily on informal channels of communication and engagement. You can't just walk around with an iPad entering data, but humanitarian staff are taking on board what people are saying. There's a need for what happens at the subnational level to feed into the national level. We need more intersectoral analysis so that the information we collect feeds into cluster coordination and then they should work. The overall structure needs to morph through different phases, improving the make-up of the system. How should the ICCG do things? There is also lack of accountability between agencies themselves.

Information, argued respondents, does not only fail to be communicated vertically to their headquarters but also horizontally, i.e. when collaborating with other organisations. There was unanimous uncertainty in the

interviews about the collective nature of CCE mechanisms and projects from the perspective of international actors.

Moreover, actors from local Yemeni organisations were often not included in any attempt at a collective approach to CCE. A Yemeni humanitarian who works with international and local organisations expressed his frustration in the following terms:

For international organisations you have the HCT, but when you go to local organisations, there is no coordination really. Coordination is with governments and ministry at the district and governorate levels. With a health project, for example, you coordinate with health ministry and health offices at the governorate level and then at district level. Those offices don't always talk to one another. There are all of those different tiers of coordination. And if you are running projects in two different governorates, you need to coordinate with Houthis and internationally recognised government. This means that you are coordinating with the Hadi's internationally recognised government, the Houthis, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the Islah party and many others. For a multi-location project, you need to coordinate with all those political actors, it is difficult to find space to coordinate with the affected community itself!

In Yemen, then, as in many other conflict-affected contexts, there are two parallel systems of coordination: one involving international actors, often coordinated by OCHA into a cluster system, and one involving local actors and the government or de facto government in charge. Respondents for this study saw OCHA or UNICEF as potential vehicles for better coordination on CCE in Yemen, but cautioned against the emergence of new structures or coordinating mechanisms beyond the CEWG, as duplicate efforts would

burden an already stretched bureaucracy and staff in the country. Rather, the CEWG should be used to its maximum potential and, in order to create a truly collective approach, the OCHA-led system should incorporate local actors as much as possible.

### **3.2 The need for a collective approach to communication and community engagement in Yemen**

A collective approach has the potential to overcome several of the challenges noted above that currently limit the effectiveness of CCE in the Yemen response. Local and international humanitarian actors repeatedly pointed out in interviews that tools and channels used for CCE in Yemen need to be part of a more holistic approach to community engagement rather than being an add-on to an already stretched response. This is similar to Sattler et al.'s (2020: 28) suggestion that the various stakeholders in Yemen require 'a more deliberate approach to both informal and formal mechanisms to gathering, analysing, sharing and acting on community feedback through existing and new monitoring processes'. Implementing a collective approach is challenging, but crucial in order to improve the response and ensure affected communities have accurate information and opportunities for feedback and complaints.

To return to the case of Tawasul, the UNHCR hotline mentioned in sub-section 2.1.2, one lesson learned was 'the importance of integrating the call centre within the existing humanitarian architecture' (Drew, 2016: n.p.). In its short lifespan, the call centre had begun to forge partnerships between working groups focused on themes such as nutrition, food and shelter, and 'it was felt that this collective sharing of common challenges was more effective than addressing concerns bilaterally with specific agencies. Discussing issues openly reinforced the transparency of the mechanism, and reinforced accountability with communities and between humanitarian actors' (ibid.). Yet, the call centre was not

allowed to fulfil its potential. Not all working groups and clusters had bought into the idea of a common call centre, and the lack of coordination between different stakeholders was an obstacle to its operationalisation. According to Drew (ibid.), ‘some partners were less engaged than others, in some instances

cooperation broke down and referral pathways were not maintained’. Yet, had the call centre remained in operation, this buy-in would have likely grown, and it would have continued to demonstrate an effective response with increased accountability and transparency for affected populations.

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# 4 The political economy of community engagement and collective approaches

Because Yemen is a conflict-affected country, the humanitarian response must be conflict-sensitive to ensure it does not replicate or enhance existing power dynamics. Thus, this section analyses the political economy of CCE in Yemen and highlights how it affects the collective approach.

## 4.1 Conflict and power dynamics are often ignored

CCE in Yemen continues to ignore conflict and power dynamics. According to the February 2020 status update on common services for CCE, ‘communities, authorities and implementing partners are not homogenous stakeholders across Yemen and as a consequence, the operation lacks specific, tailored approaches to inclusive, gender sensitive participatory approaches, including how information is shared and feedback gathered with different population groups’ (Sattler et al., 2020: 28). Moreover, the current approach to CCE in Yemen does not account for power dynamics between international and local actors, or, more importantly, among local actors who are tasked with engaging communities. The interviews and FGDs stressed that understanding the parameters of local power dynamics is central to an analysis of CCE among Yemenis, and between Yemenis and international actors.

### 4.1.1 There is limited direct communication between Yemenis and international organisations

The importance of power dynamics is particularly apparent when examining

methods of communication. According to most Yemeni respondents for this study, direct communication between Yemenis and international organisations was largely limited except through social media. Instead, communication typically happens through local NGOs and local leaders such as *oqqal al hara* (the wise men of the area) or through local municipalities. Yemeni respondents did not regard this favourably, with many stating that communicating through a third party continued to be an obstacle to being heard.

Local organisations were criticised because of regulations or restrictions imposed on them by international organisations or donors that they failed to communicate to aid recipients. Those restrictions, according to some respondents, tend to be ad hoc, especially where the delivery of assistance is concerned. For example, one respondent in an FGD in Aden described how she struggled to register for humanitarian assistance because every time she went to the local organisation, she would be told to come back later. Then she found out this was because the local organisation had not received regulations from the international organisation providing the assistance regarding targeting and the amount of assistance allocated to each person. She also said that there were always more people there than assistance and so, no matter how good or kind the local humanitarians were, there was very little they could do. In interviews with leaders of local organisations, a power gap between local and international organisations was reiterated. One Yemeni humanitarian said: ‘Personally, I

believe local actors don't have much authority. Meetings happen when there are bottlenecks, but we are otherwise not consulted'.

#### 4.1.2 If communities are not consulted directly it can lead to a 'false localisation'

Limited direct communication between Yemenis and internationals, save for community leaders, confirms one of the key findings of the Community Engagement Perception Survey of Yemen's Humanitarian Response. This report concluded that Yemenis did not always consider local authorities to be their representatives and that it was not enough that local authorities are consulted before beneficiary selection. Communities must be consulted directly regarding the selection of beneficiaries (CEPS, 2019). Local leaders in an FGD in Aden, for example, have been described as possessing personal agendas and being 'biased towards their own people [tribes]' or their friends and family, and one respondent described it as a 'betrayal from within'. Local municipalities could not perform that mediating role either because, according to one respondent, they 'don't have much credibility'. Respondents also described a sense of confusion regarding who to go to: '*ashtekki lemeen?* [Who do I complain to?]'<sup>6</sup>

The result, as described by respondents, has been an aggravation of power inequalities among local actors (often in favour of one political side over another) and in turn, what the authors of this report can describe as a 'false localisation', whereby lip service is paid to engaging local communities and Yemeni humanitarian actors, but without meaningfully engaging them in the response. An unintended consequence of this has been to compound the fragmentation of state institutions, thereby weakening their capacity to serve people. In an FGD in Aden, one of the respondents described this fragmentation as follows:

I have a completely different view of what was mentioned about the involvement of societies and local leaders. Because of this process, we

have witnessed an increase in the number of decision makers, and this leads to fragmentation and confusion. For example, if we take this district as an example, each street now has a leader. Our district has become more like a conglomeration of small states within a single geographical area and the reason is the large number of leaders, and because of this, I think humanitarian organisations should focus on providing support to government bodies. There should be more pressure from the international community to support government bodies so that they continue to provide their services.

When local leaders are engaged, international actors must think more holistically of the existing power calculus and how to bolster state capacity. Where possible, local and state actors should be included in collective approaches to CCE.

## 4.2 Lack of inclusion of marginalised groups

By not considering existing conflict and power dynamics, humanitarian organisations have unintentionally fed into them. In their CCE strategies, they often try to use existing community structures, based on a flawed logic that they should use what is already there and that these structures represent and are able to communicate with communities effectively. Instead, these community structures often ignore some of the most marginalised groups and those most in need of assistance; many respondents noted that they felt 'ignored' by humanitarian actors when they tried to communicate their need for more assistance. In reply, they were told there was not enough assistance for everyone.

<sup>6</sup> This analysis is aligned with Salisbury's description of Yemen as a 'chaos state' where, alongside the breakdown of the state, a political economy has emerged in which groups with varying degrees of legitimacy cooperate and compete with one another, and that, despite the chaotic exterior, exchanges between various local nodes of power possess their own internal logic, economies and political ecosystems which should be taken into account when seeking to engage the local population (Salisbury, 2017b).

#### 4.2.1 Marginalised voices struggle to be heard

Within the entire humanitarian response in Yemen, particular groups, such as *Muhamasheen*, women (especially widows), the disabled and the extremely poor, are marginalised and struggle more than others to get their voices heard. ‘Some Yemenis are a lot weaker than others and need help,’ said one of the respondents; thus, some Yemenis are more affected by limited CCE than others.

By contrast, members of the elite, the educated and those who are leaders within their communities tend to have better access to humanitarian organisations than others, and thus their voices are heard more clearly. Strong CCE is therefore critical, as it seeks to engage with and gather feedback from all affected communities.

#### 4.2.2 To avoid marginalisation, context-sensitive engagement is needed across the community

Respondents for this study agreed that, to avoid marginalising particular groups, the response needed to be closer to the local population and their needs through further engagement of local communities (not only local community leaders) during the various stages of planning and deployment of humanitarian response. One respondent in an FGD in Aden saw limitations in communication with humanitarian actors as symptomatic of a humanitarian response that is disconnected from ‘the lives of the people themselves’. He said:

Assistance needs to safeguard our dignity; it needs to be meaningful to the lives of the people. I have an example for you from my own life. My son needs toys, he needs places to play, not just food and shelter. He is very young and there are no spaces for him to play.

In another example, organisations often try to avoid marginalisation by ensuring they speak with as many women as men; yet they do not always understand local gender norms. Another FGD participant in Aden described how she found requirements from international

organisations for gender sensitivity complicated to uphold on the ground:

Some donor organisations require us to ensure that the proportion of women to be targeted is at 50%. However, our society may not accept this, and it may cause problems for you on the ground. I remember how when we went to register a family in the Modia District [in Abyen] and when we spoke to the man as the head of the family, we asked him if it was possible for one of our team members (a girl) to talk to his wife. He refused and denounced our request.

### 4.3 The importance of trust

#### 4.3.1 Ignoring power and conflict dynamics can result in appearing biased and erode trust

Ignoring power and conflict dynamics and excluding marginalised groups often results in inadvertently appearing to be biased, even as organisations are striving to remain apolitical to maintain their neutrality. In Yemen, the inability to deliver aid directly has often come at a cost of upholding neutrality, which has direct implications for CCE.

To facilitate the distribution of assistance, humanitarian actors and organisations find themselves working with various actors who are affiliated with one political group or another. This has led to difficulties: ‘the perception of being aligned with one or another faction of government can stoke fear among affected populations, preventing their willingness to participate and creating more constrained operating environments’ (Chait et al., 2019: 25). A Yemeni humanitarian actor pointed out that ‘neutrality is very elastic on the ground’, as a result of those agreements. He warned of negative repercussions for the reputations of international organisations operating in Yemen: ‘If a local NGO is not neutral, it does not only



affect that NGO but the whole network of NGOs and international NGOs get implicated'.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Unprofessional behaviour can erode trust

Lack of trust can also be the result of unprofessional behaviour by humanitarian actors (local and international) in Yemen: instances of nepotism and favouritism were described by respondents. In an FGD with displaced Yemenis, a woman gave an account of a negative experience she had with a Yemeni who was distributing assistance:

One time, I took my husband's card to register with a representative of an organisation who was visiting the region and was talking to people. Their voices were loud, and I was silent and calm until he called on my husband's name and so, I took the card and went to him, but he insulted me and described me as 'ignorant and stupid'. Because I was a woman and there on behalf of my husband, he didn't want me to register for him. After this incident, I could not bring myself to go to get assistance again, I'm hurt, I cry and I stay at home. There was a woman after me who raised her voice and told the employee off. She received aid, I didn't.

Respondents described several similar incidents where unprofessional or insulting behaviour was used against beneficiaries and where favouritism to particular groups was in evidence. Closer monitoring by international organisations of how assistance is delivered is needed, though this could be offset by stronger CCE mechanisms in which recipients of aid feel comfortable sharing their experiences, feedback and complaints.

#### 4.3.3 Effective communication and community engagement can help to build trust

Compromises made by international actors who have sacrificed neutrality to gain humanitarian

access have resulted in a crisis of trust between them and local communities. Still, there are positive examples of trust restored when CCE works – highlighting the importance of effective CCE in a conflict-affected context.

Yemenis interviewed for this study showed a desire not only to be heard but to also listen to international humanitarians' difficulties in providing assistance. In one example, a woman respondent in an FGD in Aden described her disapproval of how international organisations target groups for assistance. However, after hearing an explanation by an international humanitarian of how they structure targeting in their response, she was mollified. Limited communication had led to misconceptions and misunderstandings, but the interviews showed that this could be turned around.

#### 4.3.4 Contextual understanding is key

Trust has also been eroded when organisations do not always take the time to understand the culture in which they are working – partly as a result of dysfunctional communication and engagement – especially where gender sensitivity is concerned. One respondent gave an example of an international organisation releasing pamphlets encouraging women to be empowered in their communities. This was perceived negatively by the largely conservative community, who saw those pamphlets as confirmation that the organisation was there to change their culture and traditions. The organisations' gender requirements were described as a form of Western encroachment on a Muslim country.

Another respondent described the transactional nature of trying to fulfil the requirements of donor organisations (usually the international humanitarian organisation for whom they are distributing assistance). For example, one respondent in an FGD in Aden mentioned how, in rural areas, access to women beneficiaries is tied to direct gains to the male members of the family or the area. This lack of awareness of the local context results in the spread of conspiracy

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7 This does not only apply to the humanitarian response but also to other sectors. A Yemeni respondent said that the Houthis are preventing peacebuilding activities because they regard them as 'pro-Saudi'. He described how in 2018 an international peacebuilding organisation had its operations suspended for two weeks because they were working on a proposal to a donor on peacebuilding (personal interview with Yemeni humanitarian actor in Arabic via Skype, 14 November 2019, researcher's translation).

theories, negative perceptions of international humanitarian action and an undermining of CCE efforts, both individual and collective, due to a breakdown of trust.

#### 4.3.5 Transparency is vital to enable trust

Without bolstering trust, a collective approach to CCE will have little success. Yemeni respondents agreed that at the heart of difficulties in CCE lay a crisis of trust between Yemenis and the humanitarian sector, at both the local and international levels. This is part of a vicious cycle where distrust has made communication more challenging. For Yemenis, distrust results in a scepticism about the value of communicating with humanitarian actors in the first place due to limited or inconsistent communication from them.

Respondents for this study claimed there was a lack of transparency within humanitarian operations in Yemen, corroborated by several reports on corruption within the response. In 2019, a number of UN aid workers were accused of joining with parties to the conflict in Yemen in order to enrich themselves from the billions of dollars in donated aid flowing into the country (Associated Press, 2019). Another report by the Social Centre Against Illicit Gain (SCMIE), a Yemeni organisation that releases reports on transparency within the non-profit sector operating in the country, condemned the humanitarian response as lacking in transparency:

The results revealed the very low transparency in most of the organisations working in providing humanitarian aid, by refusing to disclose the required information about its projects, especially in the financial aspect, where the centre's team had difficulties in obtaining figures related to the details of the financial costs of the projects, not to mention their plans and mechanisms of work (SCMIE, 2019).

A Twitter campaign that translates to #YemenNGOBlackHole was launched by a number of Yemeni activists calling

for transparency and accountability for humanitarian operations in Yemen. When one leader of the campaign was interviewed for this study, he expressed his frustration with the lack of responsiveness of international humanitarian organisations to his demands for more transparency in the use of humanitarian aid in Yemen. He questioned the role played by humanitarian diplomacy and negotiation to facilitate access in various areas of the country and saw international humanitarian actors as complicit in the current political conflict through their collaboration with political forces from both sides (see also Lackner, 2020). He also questioned the degree to which this report would be outspoken about the shortcomings of humanitarian operations in Yemen and whether his voice would be heard in it.

Interviewees also pointed out that their distrust was due to a lack of efficiency in operations, spurred in part by the lack of transparency and the fast-changing nature of the conflict. In an FGD in Aden with local organisations, one respondent described it as follows:

We define the needs of the communities and the beneficiaries through Humanitarian Overview that is developed via the work of clusters and through indicators. However, we face problems with accuracy of information given to us. For example, we were asked to immediately get deployed in an area as it was announced that it was about to collapse and that people were on the verge of starvation, but when we went down to the field, we discovered that the evaluation was not correct. Then, we face a lot bureaucracy, and we are not in a position to allow us to contradict the views of UN employees and UN bodies, so we do what we are asked to do. In another case, we went out to distribute food on the basis that the area was on the verge of collapse, but we discovered that people had left the area and gone somewhere else.

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# 5 Collective approaches and pathways towards better communication and community engagement in Yemen

## 5.1 Effective communication and community engagement saves lives

In a BBC (2020) interview, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first elected female president who led Liberia for 12 years, including during the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak, highlighted that effectively 'getting the message out' to communities about how to protect themselves from the virus had turned the tide around controlling it. Similarly, respondents from Yemeni civil society organisations and communities saw the value of communicating and engaging with international humanitarian actors as a pathway towards more meaningful humanitarian assistance. The need for effective CCE is even more critical now as the Covid-19 pandemic threatens to claim more lives and overwhelm an already fragile healthcare system.

International humanitarian actors need to invest more in their operational and institutional capacities to improve CCE in Yemen at both the individual and collective levels. This could be done through expanding the role of the CEWG within the various clusters, more robust inclusion of local actors within the CEWG and a strengthening of OCHA's role in Yemen in engaging local actors. OCHA's role is critical as it supports the HCT and humanitarian partners in operational coordination, humanitarian financing, public information, humanitarian

analysis, advocacy and information management. Respondents from local and international humanitarian organisations both wanted stronger and more sustained engagement of local actors throughout the various stages of the humanitarian response. The outbreak of Covid-19 in April 2020 in Yemen has made the need for better communication between local and international humanitarian actors, as well as between these actors and affected communities, more urgent than ever.

## 5.2 In Yemen, communication and community engagement has so far been ineffective

For local organisations and humanitarians, CCE needs to shift from policy to practice. Respondents expressed an interest in being included in shaping the response and called for more robust transparency and accountability measures to rebuild trust between the affected population and the humanitarian sector as a whole. Limited CCE, however, has so far resulted in a response that unintentionally feeds existing power inequalities and does little to carve out a safe passage for Yemenis to be empowered to lead their own future. What the humanitarian response needs, as eloquently articulated by one respondent, is a conscience.

As evident in this study, existing CCE approaches (or lack thereof) are not only ineffective because of contextual and technical blockages; they can also be harmful when not informed by local realities. Interviews demonstrated how a response backed by a limited understanding of local power dynamics could further entrench negative local power inequalities and drive greater distance between local and international actors. That said, interviews with local and international actors also pointed out a strong interest in and commitment to restoring trust and the flow of communication between international actors, local organisations and the affected population. Ultimately, security challenges and instability may hinder the humanitarian response, but they are also a daily concern for the local population who are keen to see an end to the war and a transition to stability and growth.

If the humanitarian sector wants to hold itself accountable to the affected population, it needs to enhance the flow of communication between its operations and affected people and demonstrate its responsiveness to their needs swiftly and efficiently. To enhance trust, the sector needs to communicate more openly about its partnership and funding priorities and be more accountable to the local population. Accountability and CCE are inextricably tied in practice. However, as argued by a number of respondents, accountability is also linked to a return to security and stability. The situation in Yemen could be transformative for the humanitarian sector as the country continues to be a challenging testing ground for the sector's commitments to accountability. The sector has much to learn from its failures and successes in Yemen, and this study is an attempt to throw light on where the challenges have been as well as to identify potential opportunities.

## 5.3 Recommendations

In terms of more concrete recommendations for better and more systematic CCE by humanitarians in Yemen, the study suggests the following opportunities for international humanitarian multilaterals and NGOs.

**Approaches to CCE, both collective and individual, should invest further in ensuring that they are driven by local realities and priorities and take existing power dynamics into account:**

1. A collective approach to CCE may become a pathway through which collective CCE activities are made more robust and the response more holistic, but this will only happen when the political economy of Yemen is understood and incorporated into the collective approach. More investment in human resources and increasing capacity of workers on the ground is required to address the complexities of the conflict context.
2. The development of CCE channels, tools and mechanisms should be designed and driven by the perspectives of the affected population. While many political and security sensitivities persist, the tools and channels used should be more connected to and inclusive of national and local actors and more relevant to the communities they aim to impact, including those most marginalised. As the study also points out, some tools are more convenient and less politically risky than others. A collective approach to CCE should take such variations into account.

**Collective approaches to CCE need to be more inclusive of marginalised groups:**

1. CCE tools must be inclusive of marginalised groups, such as the disabled and the *Muhamasheen*. They also need to be gender-sensitive. Particular groups in Yemen are more in need than others, and difficulties in accessing assistance are mirrored in complications in communicating those needs to international and local organisations. Being aware of the needs of the most marginalised

will better inform and help target those groups in assistance delivery.

2. Inclusivity of marginalised groups should also inform discussions at the inter-cluster level and through the CEWG. UNICEF, through its focal points and C4D programme, may be well positioned to investigate the needs of marginalised groups in different regions of Yemen and use its existing channels for engagement to reach them.

**A collective approach to CCE should be supported by an honest conversation about the capacity to adhere to the humanitarian principles in practice:**

1. International humanitarian actors should do due diligence in selecting local partners and should diversify their partnerships. There was a consensus among all respondents that existing partnerships between international humanitarian actors and local organisations tend to be politically charged and that more transparency in developing those partnerships is needed.
2. A conflict-sensitive approach must be taken to ensure that neutrality is upheld as much as possible. Rather than ignoring politics to stay apolitical, the political affiliations of potential partners should be known and assessed so that when a decision is taken to create a partnership, the reasons for doing so can be provided to anyone expressing concern. Transparency bolsters trust in humanitarian organisations and in turn leads to more effective CCE.

**Local organisations should be empowered to play a bigger role in decision making, structuring and implementing the response by being brought into the collective approach to CCE.**

1. Local organisations interviewed for this report continue to feel disempowered and disengaged from decision-making. The CEWG is advised to expand its engagement of local civil society organisations and develop pathways for their input at different stages in the planning and structuring of the response.
2. The role of local organisations as implementers (while international organisations and agencies remain the gatekeeper of aid) leads to uneven power dynamics in which they are often asked to assume all political and security risks. By giving local organisations ownership of the response through a bigger role in decision-making, based on feedback collected by the CEWG, local actors can have more agency over their own involvement and activities.

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# Annex 1: Yemen 2017 accountability framework

Component	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<b>Provide information to the public</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project overview is available and provides basic information about the project, including objectives and target population.</li> <li>Project staff provides information on the project verbally and/or informally.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic project information is provided publicly.</li> <li>This includes objectives and planned activities, targeting criteria of beneficiaries in English and Arabic.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular project updates (progress monitoring) are provided publically, using the communities' preferred communication methods.</li> <li>Messages are tailored for people with specific needs.</li> <li>Messages include how to provide feedback/complaints.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular project updates are provided publicly and readily available to affected communities, ensuring that all have access to information.</li> <li>Messages include how projects have addressed feedback and complaints received, as well as monitoring results.</li> <li>The project checks whether the information provided is relevant and understood by local population.</li> </ul>
<b>Involve community in decision-making</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Affected communities are informed of the planning process.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project supports existing capacities of affected population and addresses identified gaps in capacities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project has been validated with community members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community members are involved in design and monitoring/evaluation mechanisms.</li> </ul>
<b>Learn from feedback and complaints</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project encourages feedback from affected people, informally.</li> <li>Project collects this information through informal exchanges during implementation.</li> <li>Project provides regular report to cluster coordinator(s).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project ensures that there are moments to hear feedback/complaints.</li> <li>All feedback/complaints receive a formal response.</li> <li>Compilation of feedback/complaints are shared with the CEWG using standard reporting format.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project actively seeks feedback and outlines a formal mechanism to hear and address feedback/complaints, including how the mechanism is safe, easy and accessible to affected people and how feedback/complaints are taken into account.</li> <li>All feedback/complaints are documented and regularly collated using most preferred communication mechanism.</li> <li>The degree of satisfaction of the population is taken into account.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal feedback mechanism is developed with local population.</li> <li>The degree of satisfaction of the population is taken into account using the official CE micro-survey questions.</li> </ul>



Component	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<b>Staff attitudes and behaviours</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff is aware of community engagement and accountability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All staff is formally trained on conflict sensitivity and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All project staff is formally trained on how to collect and report feedback/ complaints.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All staff actively promotes dialogue and relationships of mutual respect.</li> </ul>
<b>Use information for project learning*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reports are available upon request.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reports are publicly available.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Findings from reports are actively shared back to community in Arabic/English.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project includes formal learning sessions to review progress towards established results.</li> <li>Project designs/ implementation are revised to reflect changes in the context, risks and people's needs and capacities.</li> </ul>
<b>Assessments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Online assessment registry is consulted before any assessment is planned.</li> <li>Clusters and Assessment and Monitoring Working Group (AM WG) are informed of all planned assessments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessment includes clusters' needs indicators/ HNO severity indicators.</li> <li>Report is shared with the cluster and AM WG and includes indicators.</li> <li>Multi-cluster assessments are conducted six months apart (unless sudden change in the situation).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessment report documents how Yemen assessment standards were addressed in the implementation of the assessment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project includes formal learning sessions to review progress towards established results.</li> <li>Programme designs/ implementation are revised to reflect changes in the context, risks and people's needs and capacities.</li> </ul>

\* Includes monitoring, evaluations and reviews.

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