



Yemen in Perspective

Applying a Conflict-Sensitive Approach to Development Interventions

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About PDCI

Partners for Democratic Change International is an international non-governmental association, based in Belgium. It is a global partnership of nineteen independent, local organisations in Europe, the Americas, Africa and the Middle East that work to advance civil society, good governance and a culture of change and conflict management worldwide. PDCI implements various projects that encourage conflict sensitive and cooperative approaches to development. PDCI provides research and policy analysis on issues related to good governance and environmental sustainability, state – society relations and peacebuilding.

About Partners Yemen

Partners-Yemen is currently mid-way to completing a project in Yemen, with funding from the Dutch Foreign Ministry, which supports the role of local civil society in enhancing community-based development process in Mareb, Ibb, Al-Baidha and Shabwa. Partners Yemen is also implementing a program in Mareb, Al-Jawf, Shabwa to incorporate the role of community leaders and women leaders in identifying the root causes of instability and design and implement local initiatives to address them.

About the Tribal Mediation and Conflict Resolution Program (Y-TMC)

This program assists the Yemeni government, local authorities and councils, tribal and community leaders, as well as community-based organizations, to establish sustainable systems and structures for short-term and long-term interventions that address various conflicts regarding land related issues, natural resources, educational services, health facilities. Special attention will be given to conflict between corporations and local communities in Mareb, Al-Jawf, Shabwa and Al-Baidha.

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1

Building a culture of conflict management in Yemen

For peace-building practitioners, Yemen is a country rife with challenges and abundant with opportunities. Officially a democracy, Yemen is made up of hundreds of tribes and clans historically intertwined through successive allegiances and protracted quarrels. At the state level, the government is often criticized for its centralized authoritarian approach, and yet the state wields little sway in Yemen's remote rural areas.

Over the centuries, and in the critical absence of effective state control, local communities came to rely on tribal mediation and arbitration systems to address grievances and resolve conflicts. But in recent times, some tribal sheikhs have found greener pastures in urban centers, where they aspire to lucrative positions based on patronage. As these leaders lose touch with the rural backlands and are distanced from local communities, their role in conflict resolution is undermined. At the same time, the tribal system itself is under pressure, competing over services and resources, and unable to cope as a young disenfranchised generation comes of age. As a result, unbridled minor disputes are too often left to simmer into full-blown and sometimes violent conflicts.

It is within this context and with the aim to develop local capacity to manage conflict and lead sustainable change that Partners Yemen established its center in Sana'a in January of 2009. In line with the 'keep it local' philosophy of its founder Partners for Democratic Change (PDC), the staff of Partners Yemen is exclusively Yemeni. By tapping into Yemen's vital traditions of conflict resolution through village arbitration and reconciliation, and coupling these models with international best practices in conflict prevention and alleviation, Partners Yemen works in specific regions, emphasizing projects that positively impact women and youth. Using local practitioners and working with and through local communities, Partners Yemen helps build sustainable networks that can intervene to reduce both immediate and long

¹ Partners for Democratic Change (PDC) is a USA based International NGO. Since its founding in 1989, PDC has recruited leading social entrepreneurs to establish independent Centers for Conflict Resolution and Change Management around the world. In 2006 the existing locally registered independent organizations, which share similar mission and the same logo, incorporated in Belgium an international association named Partners for Democratic Change International (PDCI). Now PDCI is a global partnership of nineteen independent, local organizations in Europe, the Americas and the Middle East that work to advance civil society, good governance and a culture of change and conflict management worldwide. Partners Yemen formally joined PDCI in 2010. In this document the word "Partners" refers to the network with its shared values, approaches and programs.



-term conflicts and address the root causes of tension and discord between sectors and among government, tribal, political, civil society and individual actors. As founder and Director Nadwa Al-Dawsari notes, “We all come from different parts of Yemen, so we know what the various social dynamics are like”.

Applying the ‘conflict-sensitive’ approach to the Yemeni situation

Across a spectrum of programs, Partners works to empower local leaders and bring people together across traditional divides, pinpointing the interface between business, civil society and government, and combining the best of international experience with local traditions, knowledge and leadership. It does this using a conflict-sensitive approach, which is a methodology that continuously examines the interaction between local context (including local actors) and program interventions at every stage of project development and implementation, and then acts upon this understanding to avoid negative consequences while maximizing positive impacts. Partner programs include up-front gender analyses to investigate the potential impact of program activities on men and women, their roles and relationships. This allows program teams to develop appropriate strategies to overcome barriers to women’s participation, engage men and women as allies in a project, and create new opportunities for women in their communities without exposing them to unintended backlash.

At the outset and during the early phases of its programming, Partners Yemen engages in brainstorming activities to identify the underlying causes of conflict and to identify ‘dividers’, defined as those elements that separate and can lead to divisive action or conflict. Partners also looks for ‘connectors’, the elements that bring people together even in the midst of conflicts. This exercise allows groups to identify the root causes of local grievances and to understand where and how the potential for violent conflict can be diffused. As Director Nadwa Al-Dawsari asserts, “Thanks to our reflections, we were able to scratch the surface, have a better understanding of what was going on in our society and plan our interventions accordingly”.

As any intervention is implemented, the activity itself can alter the existing dynamics of the specific context. In this sense, programmatic intervention and context are mutually intertwined and can reciprocally influence, undermine, and/or support each other. An understanding of local context does not automatically lead to sustainable conflict-sensitive development; rather, fastidious attention to an evolving dynamic using a conflict-aware and conflict-sensitive lens can lead to immediate correction and realignment in order to optimize positive and sustainable outcomes and mitigate potential harm. It is this vigilant ongoing review and realignment that differentiates the work of Partners Yemen.

At present, Partners Yemen has four main projects targeting the root causes of conflicts and engaging local groups and pivotal actors in order to achieve social change. The following section will examine in detail one such project and how a conflict-sensitive approach was engineered and sustained through conscious planning and flexible problem solving.



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Renovating a traditional model: Yemen Community-Based Conflict Mitigation Program

In the semi-remote tribal areas north and northeast of Sana'a, ancestral customs are deteriorating while emerging state institutions are ineffective and new alternatives have yet to be invented or acknowledged. The Yemen Community-Based Conflict Mitigation Program (Y-CCM) works within this void to empower local authorities and NGOs to establish sustainable new systems and structures to resolve conflict, thereby facilitating a locally inspired, community-driven approach to conflict resolution. With support from the United States Agency for International Development, the British Embassy and the Delegation of the European Union in the Republic of Yemen, the Y-CCM aims to increase in-country capacity to manage conflicts over natural and development resources as well as conflicts between corporations and communities. As part of its underlying theory of change, the Y-CCM program selects, trains and enables a cadre of citizen leaders to establish local commissions that can mediate village disputes and be a resource for the community to prevent and resolve ongoing conflict.

Root causes and types of conflict in Mareb, Al-Jawf, Shabwah and Al-Bayda

Combining the local capacities of Partners Yemen with the expertise of the international network, Partners designed and conducted a baseline assessment with 187 interviewees to better understand the current context, actors, and underlying factors that reinforce conflict and stymie development in four governorates classified by the Yemeni government as having complex conflicts: Mareb, Al-Jawf, Shabwah and Al-Bayda. These areas are characterized by high poverty and illiteracy rates, poor access to health and education services, and weak presence of state and law enforcement institutions. Further, the deterioration of traditional tribal conflict mitigation systems – including tribal customary law – has created a gap in conflict mitigation that the government is unable to fill because of the weak and ineffective presence of state institutions in those areas.

Though each region has its own uniquely nuanced issues, the most common causes of conflict between tribes in these governorates include border disputes, where two tribes disagree on the borders of their



land; disputes over the use of land, including grazing land and water distribution; and disputes over water management and access, usually over wells or other water sources such as wadis (the dry riverbeds that are important during flood season). In the Walad Rabei and Al-Arsh districts of **Al-Bayda**, many conflicts occur over water scarcity. In **Al-Jawf** poverty, unemployment, a lack of resources for education and a shortage of teachers were named as some of the root causes of conflict in the community. In **Mareb**, resource shortages, especially of water and

grazing lands lead to disputes. In Mareb's Harib and Sarwah districts, youth unemployment was described as the greatest problem facing residents, as it leads to roadblocks, sectarianism, revenge killings, excessive use of qat², general violence and vandalism, as well as gang membership. Corruption was repeatedly mentioned as a cause of conflict, as was a lack of confidence in government officials. Disputes over development projects have also caused conflict in all four governorates, as has the presence of oil and gas companies, especially when access to the benefits of development projects or jobs is perceived to be rigged or unfair.

'Revenge killing' is a feature of some conflicts in tribal areas and is the most likely outcome when a conflict becomes violent. In many cases it is considered a 'shame' not to seek blood revenge, which makes resolving these conflicts extremely complicated. 'Value killings' are a new kind of revenge killing where a person of equal value (teacher for teacher, brother for brother) is targeted regardless of his connection to the conflict. Sometimes people go after the most educated and distinct members of the other tribe in order to achieve better revenge. Some conflicts continue for decades, punctuated by temporary arranged ceasefires.

Within this intricate landscape, Partners Yemen is able to overcome security concerns, engage community leaders, circumvent and absorb pressure from corrupt officials, and build a framework of inclusion despite narrow and fragile cultural traditions that tend to limit and restrict participation (particularly of women). Partners is able to fastidiously maintain a positive and productive work space by using a conflict-sensitive approach that recognizes the sanctity of tribal relations and jealousies, understands the motivations behind government postures, and can honor gender dynamics while also expanding the accepted role of women.

Setting the stage to ease local conflict

When entering a new area, Partners Yemen begins by analyzing the delicate power relations in each district and the potential impact their community mediation work may have on these sometimes-fragile relations. Partners' team is prepared to monitor, adjust, and nuance their programs based on fluctuations and need. At the same time, Partners helps local communities embrace change based on an un-

² Qat or khat contains the alkaloid called cathinone, an amphetamine-like stimulant which is said to cause excitement, loss of appetite, and euphoria. In 1980, the World Health Organization classified khat as a drug of abuse that can produce mild to moderate psychological dependence.



Understanding of the cyclical connections between violence and a lack of development – so long as conflict is commonplace or imminent, development will be hindered and the benefits of development will be lost.

The Y-CCM project outline involves several steps. It commences with selection and training of 20 community facilitators; each facilitator then trains 20 community leaders, building a pool of over 700 community leaders knowledgeable in conflict resolution techniques. These community leaders cluster formed 20 local conflict resolution and prevention commissions to serve as mediating bodies in their communities. The commission then convenes community forums to set priorities for projects that can help eliminate the underlying causes of specific conflicts in the community, such as water scarcity or land use. Working together as a professional group, the commission gives greater legitimacy to conflict resolution work because the commission represents various perspectives, which is more potent than an individual opinion. As one male participant from Shabwa noted, “Individually they resolve conflicts in an ad hoc manner. But sometimes people who go with the intention to solve problems actually increase the problem. The commission will have real awareness, knowledge and methodology in resolving or preventing conflict. A trained commission will have different ways to solve problems.”

Initial work begins by identifying the main actors through a transparent and inclusive process. Such actors include:

- tribal leaders or sheikhs, some of whom are still widely respected as interpreters of customary law, and some of whom are perceived to be corrupt and self-serving;
- political parties, who sometimes run conflict resolution committees, but as often are the cause of conflict by interfering in local elections or using land conflicts for political gain;
- government officials, who may intervene in conflicts to protect citizens or infrastructure, but are also known for corruption and inefficiency;
- international and local non-government organizations (NGOs), who bring vital development programs to local villages, but in doing so can disrupt the balance of power or create tension due to rivalry and jealousy over project benefits;
- youth, who are the majority of the population, but who may be disillusioned and disengaged or prone to violence; and
- women, whose households and children are deeply affected by conflict, and who exercise strong influence in provoking or resolving conflict within the family unit and the community in general.

Individual facilitators and community leaders are selected from the above actor groups based on willingness and interest, position and capability to address conflict and influence change, and ability to commit to the term of the project and beyond. Selection of participants is carefully orchestrated to bring together people with varying perspectives from all tribes and from different social strata, including opposing sides of vying factions. This confidence-building approach mitigates perceptions of bias, reduces suspicion, and helps prevent ‘blockers’ and ‘spoilers’ from finding fault. Similarly, when recruiting and assigning project staff, close attention is paid to hire someone who will be perceived to be unbiased. Partners also works in close collaboration with national and local government institutions and includes government officials in trainings and events to mitigate government sensitivity about NGOs working in rural areas, and to bring broader support to each program.

Training materials and manuals are also developed through participation and consensus to ensure that examples are relevant and unbiased. For example, the series of conflict resolution manuals used for local training take into account the existing traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution in tribal areas and, as much as possible, make links to the Yemeni context.

Navigating unique challenges

“When it comes to implementing a conflict resolution project, or an intervention to empower women, Yemen is a country where two steps forward are followed by one step backwards. Every day we are confronted with a new challenge. For example, some people try to block our activities because we refuse to pay a bribe, or because we do not succumb to their unlawful will. Then we address our complaints to stakeholders involved in the process – groups of women, tribal leaders, local authorities, even our donors – and most of the time we manage to resume activities and continue our work.”³



Tribal leaders sharing conflict resolution techniques

“When working with tribes, inclusiveness is the keyword. You don’t want to be perceived to be marginalizing anyone.”⁵

Tribalism can complicate decisions that might otherwise seem easy to outsiders. There are both inter-tribal

conflicts and intra-tribal conflicts⁴, mostly centered around border disputes; disagreements over the use of land; quarrels over water management and access; and conflicts over allocation of benefits from development and oil and gas company projects. In conflicts between two tribes, additional tribes may be brought in to encourage arbitration proceedings. *“When working with tribes, inclusiveness is the keyword. You don’t want to be perceived to be marginalizing anyone.”⁵*

In order to mitigate the challenges of tribal rivalries while respecting tribal traditions, Partners Yemen maintains good relations with several highly significant customary and legal figures in Yemen, for example, Judge Yahya Maori, a member of the Supreme Court and a prominent tribal arbitrator, who has vast experience in the field of custom and law. Cooperation is ongoing with other esteemed figures, such as Sheikh Mohammed bin Ali Sayyad, a prominent leader who owns a treasured document, over 200 years old, containing pre-Islamic tribal traditions (some of which are still in practice). The relic is signed by tribal leaders of all prominent tribes in Yemen and was shared during Partners’ training program for community facilitators.

Although there are revenge problems between many of the tribes in the governorates of Mareb, Al-Jawf, Shabwah and Al-Bayda, Partners often brings together members of tribes currently in conflict, including Muhammed Zaidi, a selected community facilitator from Jaham Tribe in Marib governorate. His tribe has a major revenge killing conflict with other tribes from the same governorate, namely the tribes

^{3 & 5} Interview with Nadwa Al-Dawsari, founder and Director of Partners Yemen.

⁴ An inter-tribal conflict occurs between tribes, while an intra-tribal conflict occurs within a tribe.

of Al-Ashraf, Abeidah, and Al-Jad'an. Despite the ongoing conflict between these tribes, Mohammed and Abdulla Abu Nab from the opposing tribe of Al-Ashraf came together as community facilitators and were able to create a safe environment in which to discuss issues of revenge and how these can be resolved peacefully.

Beginning to imagine success



Tribal leaders sharing conflict resolution techniques

Measuring the impact of any specific intervention is always a tricky business, especially in the early stages. And behavioral change in particular is an evolving process. Nevertheless several converging indications are starting to accumulate and point toward success as perceptions change, perspectives widen, and behaviors surrounding conflict become more strategic and rational. Women program participants claim to feel **energized by being engaged** in conflict resolution for the first time in memory. Other participants say they have **become more strategic** to focus on conflicts they can effectively solve. A participant from Al-Bayda tells the story of a conflict between tribes arising over the theft of a car; while the dispute was being mediated, a group from Al-Bayda loaned the complaining tribe a car, which kept the issue from escalating. A woman participant from Al Jawf intervened to solve a problem between a betrothed couple and their families; using a kind of shuttle diplomacy, she helped each side see another point of view, and the problem was solved. In Al Jawf, an oil company agreed to hire 24 workers from Al-Fugman tribe; the tribe began to quarrel over who would be chosen until one tribal member trained by Partners, Hamad Jumail, divided the tribe of 360 potential workers into 24 units based on family affiliations; the name of one worker was drawn from each of the 24 units and the quarrel was abated.

As the Y-CCM progresses, a total of 20 local commissions have taken shape. These are comprised of many of the over 700 community facilitators, secondary trainees and indirect trainees schooled in conflict prevention techniques under the Y-CCM. Conceived as a permanent reservoir of conflict resolution knowledge and practice, these commissions are active in community affairs, flexibly and dynamically intervening to promote fairness and inclusion, build consensus, and solve disputes. Commission leaders trained and assisted by Partners were able to lead community forums, bringing together a mixture of over 2,300 stakeholders to brainstorm, prioritize, discuss and plan small infrastructure projects that can directly address the causes of distinct local conflicts around such issues as water scarcity, sanitation, or land use. By engaging a diverse cross-section of citizens, local authorities and tribal leaders, community needs are identified through a sensitive and organic process, and emerging project ideas are relevant and can best serve the people of the region. Projects developed through this holistic and conflict-sensitive approach have greater legitimacy and a joint sense of ownership, which helps guarantee a more smooth and successful implementation and better long-term sustainability. Moreover, local commissions can shepherd development projects through each essential phase, anticipating obstacles and clearing a path for more robust implementation, and working to nurture more productive relationships between partners. They can also ensure that implemented development projects are sustained - that infrastructure and hardware projects are maintained and not cannibalized or sabotaged, and that social

projects continue to place the interests of those in need above the self-serving interests of the implementing organization or staff.

Case 1: Building trust creates a vision for the Abeed in Al-Jawf

The Abeed (‘slaves’) in Al-Jawf are historically marginalized and unable to enjoy social status or achieve human rights. They live in slums and are deprived of basic services. Ahmed Rashed works as a volunteer with a local NGO that represents his fellow Abeed, and took part in training organized for local leaders by Partners Yemen. He learned about community visioning, participatory development and conflict management techniques. Shortly thereafter, the NGO received a big shipment of winter blankets and mattresses designated for the Abeed by the donating charity organization, and Ahmed was asked to distribute the goods. When the President of the NGO learned of this assignment, he was leery that Ahmed was trying to step on his authority. Ahmed was able to ease concerns by applying basic conflict management techniques, learned through the Y-CCM, thus addressing the fears of the President.

More importantly, because of his ability to build trust, Ahmed was also able to share his new knowledge about community visioning with the President and senior members of the NGO. Together they envisioned a plan for the NGO to create a “city of free people” – a three-year initiative to provide accommodation to the Abeed. “I left this training a different person with big dreams and big plans. With the help of my colleagues at the NGO, we’ll work to improve the situation of our community and we’ll no longer settle for less”, said Ahmed.



Ahmed Rashed, left, talking with community facilitator Ali Saleh

Case 2: Divisive local council members negotiate a joint process

In an election in May 2010, a coalition of the opposition party won the General Secretary seat and other important seats on local council commissions. The ruling party local council members, especially former incumbents to these seats, were not pleased and stopped coming to meetings. Partners Yemen invited local council members from both sides to its community leaders training in November 2010 and both sides attended worked together during the sessions. This was the first time Ataq local council members had united in one place since the May 2010 elections. At the culmination of the training, local council participants from both sides expressed their appreciation and said the training helped them realize that boycotting council meetings is



Newly elected General Secretary of the local council of Ataq at Partners' training



not a good way to resolve conflict. They agreed to resume council meeting and signed a negotiated agreement to delineate the division of responsibilities as the meetings move forward.

Case 3: Applying conflict analysis to business disputes in Ataq

Ali Balkheir is a notable businessman, prominent social figure and traditional mediator in local conflicts. After participating in Partners' training for community leaders, Balkheir was asked to resolve a conflict that started between a business owner and a local representative. The conflict involved alleged violation of the terms and conditions of a contract. Partners Yemen staff attended the mediation session and observed Balkheir as he was able to successfully intercede in the conflict. After the session, Partners asked Balkheir, an experienced mediator, whether Partners' training had helped him and in what ways. Balkheir noted that the conflict analysis tool is not used in traditional conflict resolution sessions, but that it helped him resolve the dispute in a much more effective way. "I asked the parties in conflict a lot of questions to try to understand the root cause of the conflict and the major and secondary factors. Conflict analysis is a very useful tool that I know will be very helpful when I mediate conflicts in the future", he said.

Case 4: Negotiating solutions to roadblocks in Al-Khalaq

A clash between the Aal Alajji and Aal Atiq tribes from Al-Khalaq district of Al-Jawf began when the Aal Atiq a share of the bounty given by the government to the Aal Alajji. When they refused to pay, Aal Atiq created a tribal checkpoint to block government vehicles from entering the Al-Khalaq area. The conflict escalated and led to a land dispute. Arfaj Atiq from the Aal Atiq tribal area attended a Partners' training that helped him understand the cycle of conflict and realize that the argument should be contained before it intensified or became violent. Along with training participant Hamad Shutaif and another member of his tribe, Arfaj successfully convinced the Aal Atiq to lift the checkpoint and jointly agree on an arbitrator to permanently resolve the dispute. Arfaj Atif said that the training gave him both enthusiasm and skills to initiate efforts to bring the conflict to an end.

Case 5: Overcoming politics to shape community priorities

About 50 years ago, the local communities of the Al-Mathnab built a water reservoir, followed by another one some 20 years later. These reservoirs served the Al-Thaba'an and Al-Rowais families from the Al-Suliman tribe communities of the Attaq district. Since then, the local population has increased and expanded and the water system does not reach some of the newly settled families, particularly those from the Al-Alaznam and Al-Ali families of the Al-Sulaiman tribe. This causes sporadic ongoing conflict between the communities of the Al-Mathnab area.

Meanwhile, community leaders trained under the Y-CCM have formed a local commission to serve the Attaq district. This commission has been meeting regularly to develop a functional structure, including a

president, coordinator, secretary and active members, and to begin to examine and problem-solve community issues. After working with and engaging the broader community, the commission was able to identify several local projects that might be appropriate for the Y-CCM small grants program. More impressively, it was then able to hone and prioritize a single project and achieve agreement despite diverse and competing interests. Working through the local commission, the community agreed to request small project grant funds to help extend the water network of the Al-Mathnab area to bring sufficient water to all families in need. By installing distribution switches, replacing plastic water pipes, and extending pipelines, all families can share the local water supplies, thus restoring a sense of harmony to the region. This simple solution was the result of a sequence of deliberate steps set in motion by dedicated members of the commission and the community, and exemplifies what can be achieved when communities work in unison.

Case 6: Stilling the need for serial revenge tragedy

Women can play an integral role in both perpetuating and ending conflict by directly influencing male relatives to either take revenge or seek reconciliation. Wardah Mujawwar, 26, was trained as a community facilitator under the Y-CCM program. Soon after, a man from a neighboring tribe stabbed her brother, and the brother was anxious to seek his entitled revenge.



Wardah Mujawwar, 26

Wardah and her sister, also trained in conflict resolution techniques through the Y-CCM program, struggled to devise a way to stop their brother from sparking an inter-tribal conflict. They considered others who had more influence over him and might intervene on their behalf. Together, they approached their mother and influential figures from both tribes, hoping they might pressure their brother to call off his revenge plan. Initially the mother had encouraged her son to seek revenge, but Wardah and her sister helped her see the negative and dangerous implications of revenge - on their brother and on the entire family.

Wardah and her sister were determined and decisive, and they succeeded in convincing representatives from their tribe to meet with the perpetrator and a representative from his tribe. An agreement was signed in which the brother forgave the perpetrator in exchange for monetary compensation, thus resolving the conflict without violence. As a confident Wardah noted, “Eventually we solved the problem ourselves. We did a better job than the men in our family.”

Case 7: False claims turn into tangible promises

The local council of the Alqurashiya district wanted to build a health center in the Aal Najd area. They visited the area and discussed the project with a group of locals; a few showed great interest and agreed to donate a piece of land on which to construct the center. But when the local council sent a contractor to begin work, he was prevented from starting by locals from a nearby village who claimed that the land belonged to them and not to the Aal Najd people.

At the request of the council, the local commission, headed by community mediator Saleh Al-Hutam, went to investigate the matter and try to resolve the issue peacefully. After meeting people from both villages and reviewing ownership documents, it turned out that the land did not belong to the Aal Najd, but to the people from the other village. In addition, the commission determined that the location would not be easily accessible to people from both villages.



Saleh Al-Hutam at a Y-CCM training

The commission gathered people together from both villages and chastised the Aal Najd villagers for lying about owning the land. They also worked to secure a new piece of land that was selected cooperatively and is readily accessible to both villages. Thus, building of the center can proceed and an ensuing conflict was prevented.

3

Mainstreaming the conflict-sensitive approach

The conflict-sensitive approach understands that any development project becomes part of the local context in which it is implemented. This is true for development projects that directly address conflict as well as those that promote other goals, such as women’s leadership programs, local training and community planning initiatives, or rural development projects. The conflict-sensitive approach helps maximize impact without doing harm to existing social dynamics – but only if the approach is applied consistently and holistically throughout the life of a local project or initiative. The conflict-sensitive approach can be used to engage others in conflict prevention and positive social development, but it also applies to Partners’ own work, making sure activities are respectful of local customs and do not breach local norms. Partners is mindful of the need for a conflict-sensitive component in all of its programs, including in Partners’ own approach and as part of the transfer of knowledge and practice to local groups. A conflict-sensitive approach is the cornerstone of each of Partners’ current programs, and a critical element during every phase of every program.

Anticipating local reactions to circumvent barriers to women’s leadership

The Balqees Initiative is a leadership development and community-level awareness-raising program, supported by the U.S. Embassy and targeting women and youth from Mareb and Shabwa. An initial 75 women leaders - trained in community engagement, basic health, education, and economic development best practices –trained an additional 740 women from their local communities, who then hosted over 13700 community outreach events reaching over 127,000 women and youth in local communities.

In implementing The Balqees Initiative project, Partners faced very specific challenges. Under local traditions, the rights of women are severely restricted; they have few interactions with men outside of the family or occasionally the tribe. Carrying out a project to empower women requires a strategy that maximizes the impact for women without antagonizing pre-existing social and cultural structures. For example, as Partners’ Director noted, “For TBI project, we couldn’t say that women were training to be leaders because this would have challenged the traditional perception of their role in society. So we said





that they were being trained as social facilitators”⁶. Similarly, not proactively involving men in TBI could strain relationships, lead to suspicion, and hinder project goals. By developing a shadow program to engage male escorts or muhrams to accompany women to training, the program did not offend local custom. These male escorts were also enrolled in short parallel training to better understand the value of women in community development and support the women leaders against any negative community perceptions. When developing the leadership manual, Partners worked with a local trainer to integrate religious concepts and quotes from the Koran and the Prophet Mohammed in order to strengthen arguments that support women’s leadership in society. In addition, Partners created a network of local religious and tribal leaders to further validate and support the women leaders and the TBI program.

As anticipated, local reactions to the project were conflicting. In the Mahliyah district of the Mareb governorate, activities under The Balquees Initiative became the object of an attack by radical religious leaders. They claimed the program’s only goal was to ‘westernize’ tribal women. Tellingly, it was a group of male guides enrolled in the shadow program who spontaneously helped clarify wrong assumptions about TBI and restore a productive environment. Similarly, the director of health in the district was starting to believe the negative campaign against TBI. He was invited to the orientation session for the TBI support group to learn about the program. At the end of the workshop he stood up and said that, in contradiction to the negative campaign led by mosque preachers, in fact TBI will actually help him and the Health Office do a better job in the district. For example, he often faces problems in convincing partners to vaccinate their children, and TBI helps women understand that children need the vaccinations. He also proposed joint activities with TBI facilitators and volunteers to help promote health awareness in the district.

Abdullah Ashadadi, a TBI participant and influential tribal leader, is the father of a social facilitator from Year I. Ashadadi shared with the group that his daughter benefited a lot from the program and was able to spread awareness among community women concerning important family health and other issues. He said his daughter traveled with a male escort and kept her veil and that TBI’s approach respects social and religious values, and that he is willing to challenge any person or religious leader who would claim otherwise.

Advancing multi-sector dialogue in Mareb and Shabwa

The Development Dialogue Forum (DDF), supported by the U.S. Embassy, is an initiative to create an open, safe, and neutral forum for influential tribal and civic leaders from Mareb and Shabwa governorates to discuss critical development issues with key government officials, donors, and the private sector. Through facilitated discussions and training sessions on participatory process and conflict reduction, tribal leaders acquire new techniques for resolving conflict and are thereby empowered to engage their communities and local councils in promoting the idea of community-driven development. Incorporating a conflict-sensitive approach in dealings with government, donors and investing companies can help ensure that government remains accountable and supportive, that donor projects are relevant and can be

⁶ Interview with Nadwa Al-Dawsari, founder and Director of Partners Yemen.

sustained, and that companies understand the needs and requirements of local citizens before embarking on business development.

Applying a conflict sensitive approach to the DDF started with changing its name. The original name was “Tribal Leaders Symposium”. But a name like that might provoke the government by giving the impression that the goal is to empower tribal leaders over government. So the name was changed to “Development Dialogue Forum”. The scope and essence of the program did not change but the new name was more neutral and less provocative to the government and other stakeholders. In addition, focusing the symposiums on development and other important issues such as tribal conflicts, better management of development projects, and improving participation of youth and community members in development helped prevent potential misconceptions about the program.

Yasmeen Al-Qadhi, from Al-Joubah District, is an active participant in the Development Dialogue Forum. Yasmeen said that prior to participating in DDF, “I was working as a teacher in Al-Joubah school. My life was limited to those around me. But, today I am the head of Mareb Girls Association.” She added, “I have benefited immensely from attending DDF symposia about education and youth capacity for development. I have learned skills related to education, which is connected to my career, and I also gained knowledge about health and its status in our governorate.”

Concerning her learning about conflict resolution, Yasmeen said, “My sister, Intesar, and I faced a small dispute when one of our neighbors blocked the road near our home. My sister and I dared to discuss this with him and we succeeded in convincing him to clear the road. This was my first experiment in conflict resolution.”



When asked how DDF changed her life, Yasmeen replied, “Frankly speaking, DDF left a very positive impact on my life. I became more aware of Mareb community issues than before; also through DDF, I received a scholarship to study English at the Yemeni American Language Institute (YALI), where I improved my English, with the cooperation of the U.S. Embassy.” She added, “I hope that Partners Yemen will organize more symposia in the near future related to the role of women in community development and the impact of conflicts on women”. She concluded that DDF positively impacted the Mareb community, and is helping her in currently implementing a literacy program in Al-Jouba district.

Boosting active engagement in Shabwa, Al-Baydha, Ibb, and Mareb

The Yemen Civil Society Strengthening and Participation (YCSP) Program aims to strengthen civil society actors and increase engagement between civil society and local councils in the four governorates of Shabwa, Al-Baydha, Ibb, and Mareb. With two-years of support from the Dutch Embassy in Sana’a, the



YCSP trained a core group of 20 'champion' facilitators from Yemeni civil society organizations. These champions then disseminated learning to a broad group of 390 women, civil society representatives, community leaders, tribal leaders, religious leaders, local councils, civic leaders and key local government officials in the four governorates. Participation builds relationships across sectors, employs a conflict-sensitive methodology, practices conflict resolution skills, and establishes innovative models for civic participation in Yemen.

In its second phase, YCSP competitively awarded 20 small grants to the 20 NGOs that took part in the program. Grants supported the implementation costs for local development projects deemed priority by the local communities during a series of forums organized by the local NGOs for this purpose. The program helped the NGOs establish relationship and work closely with local government authorities, local councils as well as the communities in which they are operating. The program's methodology did not rely only on training but also utilized intensive mentoring and support for the local NGOs for 28 months to help them establish internal management systems, reach out to their communities, write proposals based on needs identified by communities, and implement small grants. A final conference was conducted in which success stories, challenges, and lessons learned were shared by participants with government and donor representatives in Sanaa.

Implementing a conflict sensitive approach starts with making sure that selection of key NGO leaders respects tribal representation. Partners fastidiously encourages tribal representation during roll out training and in community meetings. Particularly in areas where there is strong tribal leadership, Partners works closely with local NGOs to guarantee that local leaders are involved in discussions about potential small grants projects, are supportive of ongoing project implementation, and are engaged to ensure that all projects are conflict sensitive. In addition, Partners conducted assessment for each proposed project for the small grants to make sure it is conflict-sensitive and supported by the community.



4

Aiming for the future

Yemen is a difficult environment. Low income, unemployment, large population with scarce resources, political divisiveness, emergence of sectarian divisions, tribal politics, the gender divide and respect for fundamental human rights are still colossal challenges that Yemeni society must face. These issues are also the primary causes of the recent turmoil that is crippling Yemen's prosperity and growth. Partners' conflict-sensitive approach to these concerns can bring viable responses and sustainable solutions.

Democratic and inclusive mechanisms – both espoused and practiced by Yemenis and by the non-profit programs and for-profit ventures that touch the Yemeni people – can bring accelerated and permanent social development to add to the rich cultural traditions and customs that have made Yemen unique over the centuries. Perhaps the greatest untapped resource for the future lies in Yemen's youth and women. "With the right skills and the appropriate sensitivity, they will be able to tackle Yemen's challenges, instill a culture of positive change and eventually build more open and inclusive societies".

Ultimately, bringing diverse, even factionalized, people together in a safe and positive environment to discuss and resolve a myriad of conflicts and to constructively plan development strategies and address development issues is key to sustainable peace and viable development. The twenty functional local conflict prevention and resolution commissions developed under the Y-CCM are enduring structures that can continue to serve citizens and steer communities through routine tribulations and perilous upheavals. By being wedged in the community and having a unique understanding of individual personalities and community needs, then coupling this knowledge with professional conflict prevention skills, local commissions can bridge and restore soured relationships or conscientiously build new partnerships. They can accelerate and improve anything that depends on partnership and cooperation – including service delivery, business development and construction, disaster preparedness and recovery, economic prosperity, social interaction, and family life. Though not effective in all situations and not a panacea for solving all societal ills, conflict sensitivity and conflict management are vital tools that, when deployed artfully, will create no harm and have the potential to do a world of good.

Throughout Yemen, in Sana'a and in all target governorates, there remains an urgent need for programs that introduce alternative forms of mediation, projects that emphasize and promote conflict prevention, and awareness campaigns that focus attention on the dangers of conflict and the cyclical havoc it can wreak on positive development. Because the conflict-sensitive approach enhances and benefits nearly any type of local intervention and is especially useful in navigating complex tribal, political or social relationships, its applicability, in Yemen and elsewhere, is virtually infinite.



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