



# Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Yemen

Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach,  
and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid

Humanitarian Outcomes



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### Humanitarian Outcomes

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## SCORE reports

Under the CORE research programme, supported by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA), Humanitarian Outcomes is studying how aid reaches people in hard-to-access emergency contexts. In partnership with GeoPoll, the project conducts remote telephone surveys of crisis-affected people on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the aid response and the access challenges in their areas. Combined with key informant interviews with humanitarian responders and other contextual research, the survey results help to identify the humanitarian providers and practices that have achieved the greatest presence and coverage in difficult environments.

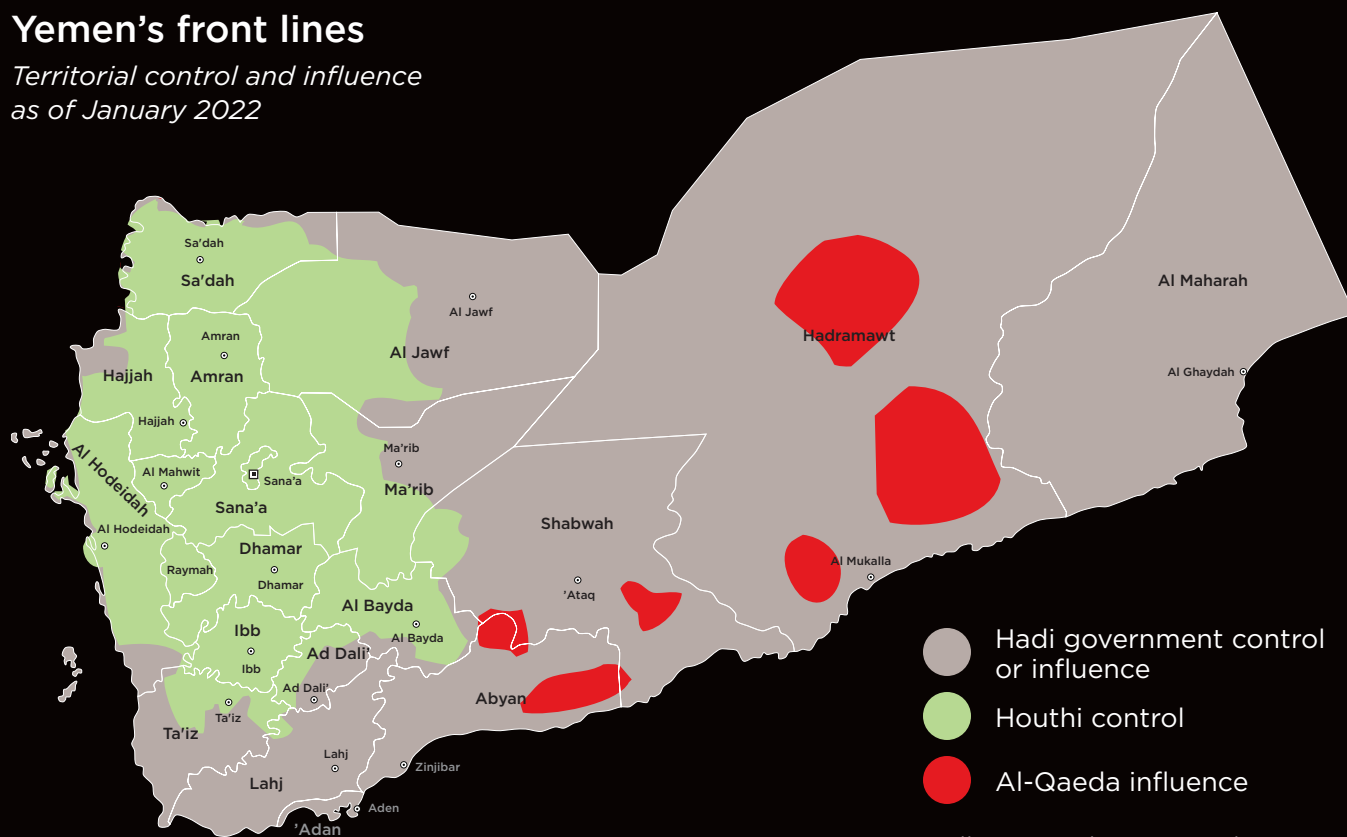
This SCORE report presents findings from a survey of 426 people across Yemen (for a 5% margin of error and 95% confidence interval). The SCORE questionnaire was translated into Arabic and GeoPoll's live operators conducted the mobile phone survey in December 2021. The respondent group was 48% men, 52% women, and the survey was geographically targeted so that 80% of respondents were based in northern governorates. Humanitarian Outcomes researchers also conducted interviews with 15 anonymous key informants among the humanitarian organisations working in Yemen, as well as donor government representatives.

Full survey results and additional information on the SCORE research methodology, including an interactive dashboard of response data, are available at [www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core](http://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core).



## Yemen's front lines

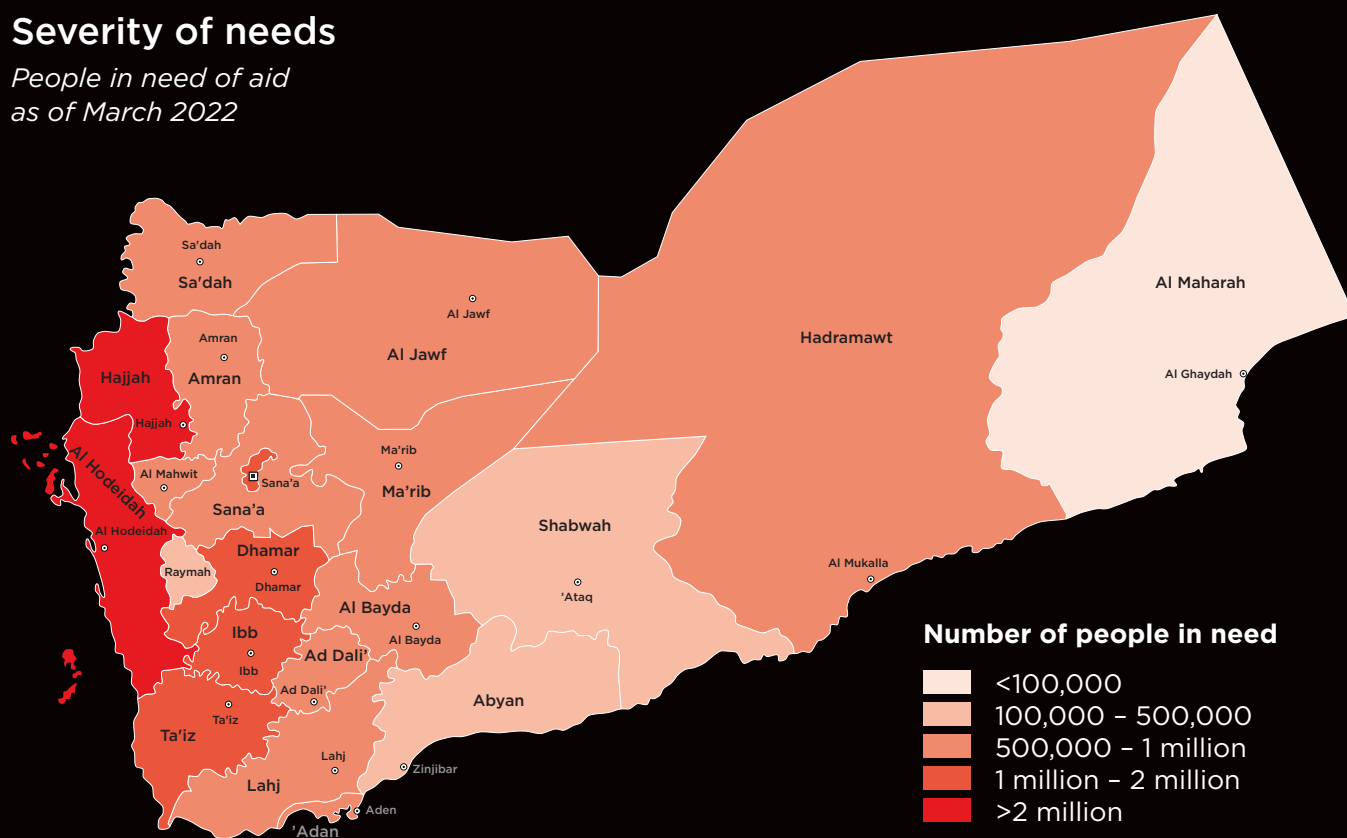
*Territorial control and influence  
as of January 2022*



Source: Council on Foreign Relations. 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/background/yemen-crisis>

## Severity of needs

*People in need of aid  
as of March 2022*



Source: OCHA, Humanitarian Needs Overview: Yemen. 2021

## Summary

An internationalised civil war has raged in one of the world's poorest countries for over seven years, triggering economic collapse, widespread population displacement, and famine. All parties to the conflict in Yemen have violated international humanitarian law and the human rights of civilians, an estimated 20.7 million of whom (67% of the population) are in need of aid.<sup>1</sup> Yemen is the world's largest coordinated humanitarian response to date, but aid actors' operations are hamstrung by political restrictions on their movements and in their ability to gather necessary information on which to base an effective aid response. Especially in the north, where authorities have blocked needs assessments and surveys and limited the ability of aid agencies to travel, the humanitarian sector is in the dark about whether aid is being provided effectively, if it is reaching the people who most need it, and the extent of diversion and manipulation that is taking place.

The SCORE survey of affected people in Yemen, conducted in December 2021, suggests that humanitarians' worries are justified. Respondents painted a picture of political interference and sparse coverage of needs:

- 84% of respondents needed assistance in the past year while only 26% had received any
- a third of respondents blamed diversion by local authorities as the principal obstacle to aid reaching them, with the second largest portion (18%) reporting that aid was distributed too far away
- most respondents reported no change in the reach of humanitarian aid over the past year
- most who received aid said it was in the form of food, and a much smaller number received cash assistance—other sectors of assistance were far less in evidence
- UN agencies were the most visible aid actors, specifically World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF
- national NGOs cited as being the most present and effective were the Social Fund for Development (SFD), followed by Benevolence Coalition for Humanitarian Relief (BCHR) and the Yemeni Red Crescent. The most cited international NGO was CARE International.

Aid agencies in Yemen face the classic humanitarian conundrum: whether to forcefully advocate for humanitarian principles against political interference, thereby risking further reprisals or expulsion, or to put up with whatever is necessary to maintain some level of access to people in need. The creeping rise of political interference over time seems to have prevented humanitarians from effectively coordinating to establish and adhere to common red lines. Aid agencies (UN agencies in particular) have also undermined their own access and negotiation ability with an extremely restrictive approach to security management, resulting in staff being confined to compounds and unable see the aid response on the ground.

Recently there has been more concerted action on access between agencies and donor governments, and efforts to adjust security management systems to enable staff to move out from compounds. Stronger and better coordinated negotiation with authorities is still urgently required to achieve greater operational independence.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2021a). *Yemen humanitarian response plan 2021* [March]. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-2021-march-2021-enar>; OCHA. (2021b). *Yemen: Population estimates*. Humanitarian Data Exchange. Retrieved 15 March 2022 from <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/population-estimates-in-yemen-for-2019>

## Civil war in Yemen

Though lately less in the headlines, Yemen's civil war ranks among the world's most intense ongoing armed conflicts, with total war deaths exceeding 32,000.<sup>2</sup> Hostilities escalated in 2015, when Houthi rebels seized control of the capital Sana'a from the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Since then, the conflict has pitted the Shiite Houthis, backed by Iran and Hezbollah, against a Saudi-led foreign coalition intervening on behalf of the Hadi forces, and numerous allied militias. The Houthis now control much of north(west) Yemen with the Hadi government relegated to the south(east).

In addition to the Houthi and Hadi forces, other armed actors in Yemen include Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which maintains a presence of approximately 7,000 fighters and operates in 7 of Yemen's 21 governorates, funding itself through kidnap-for-ransom and arms sales.<sup>3</sup> The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has a diminished presence, operating in Al Bayda and Ad Dali' governorates, and is reportedly struggling to obtain resources to pay its fighters, who are estimated to number only in the hundreds.<sup>4</sup> A multitude of other armed actors in Yemen, whose alliances and impacts change with the shifting security situation, include Aden Security, the Amajid Brigade, the Asifah Brigade, the Facilities Protection Force, the Hazm Brigades, the 30th Armored Brigade, and the Support & Reinforcement Brigades.<sup>5</sup> Interests among the array of different armed actors do not neatly line up on one or the other side of Houthi-Hadi conflict, and the Hadi government faces serious challenges from secessionist movements in the south of Yemen.

Active conflict, including airstrikes, continues in some parts of the country and presents security and access challenges particularly around frontlines, where moving staff and goods is more challenging, and pockets of people can be cut off from any aid access.

<sup>2</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). (2022). *Yemen (North Yemen)*. Retrieved 17 March 2022 from <https://ucdp.uu.se/country/678>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Security Council. (2020). *Letter dated 16 July 2020 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council*. S/2020/717, p.8. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3872989?ln=en>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Security Council. (2019). *Letter dated 15 July 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council*, p.13. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3813209?ln=en>

<sup>5</sup> ACLED. (n.d.). Mapping territorial control in Yemen. Retrieved 15 February 2022 from <https://acleddata.com/mapping-territorial-control-in-yemen/>

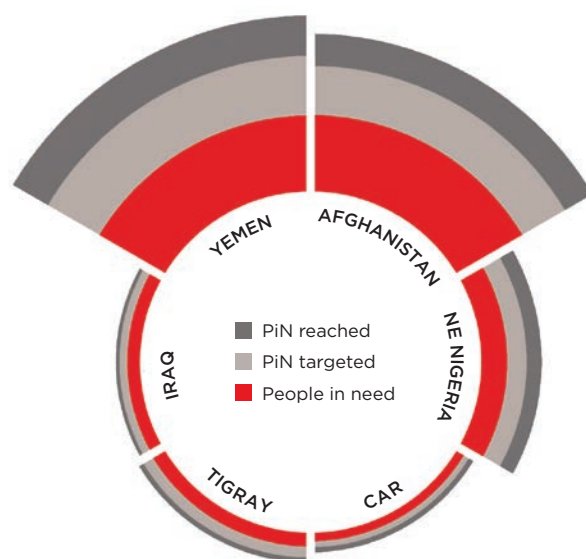
## Humanitarian needs and response efforts

The years of armed conflict have created massive humanitarian needs throughout the country, made worse by economic warfare measures. Fuel shipments were prohibited from entering the port of Houthi-controlled Al Hodeidah (a major humanitarian access pipeline), and the depreciation of the rial's value in areas where government control is weak has made goods and services unaffordable, especially in Sana'a and Aden, where the central bank split and is controlled by rival authorities.<sup>6</sup>

The conflict has led to widespread displacement, economic collapse and growing poverty and food insecurity. The 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview estimated that 20.7 million people need humanitarian assistance, 12.1 million of whom are estimated to be in acute need. Four million people are displaced.<sup>7</sup> The latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) snapshot from March 2022 found 17.4 million people in IPC phase 3 or above, 151 of 333 districts classified in IPC phase 4 (emergency) and 31,000 people estimated as currently facing extreme hunger levels (IPC phase 5—catastrophe).<sup>8</sup> In Yemen, 55% of the total population is under the age of 18 and an estimated 4.6 million people live with disabilities.<sup>9</sup>

People's access to aid and services is constrained partly by insecurity and difficulties to travel near to and across frontlines. *Maharam* requirements in some areas (that women must travel with a male family member) makes it harder for women and girls to travel to access aid and services. People trying to reach health centres and hospitals consistently cite the costs of

**Figure 1: Case comparison**



Source: People in need (PiN) and targeted figures from Global Humanitarian Overview 2022 (OCHA 2021d); PiN reached figures (approximate) from Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2021 (OCHA 2021a)

<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group. (2022, 20 January). *Brokering a ceasefire in Yemen's economic conflict*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/231-brokering-ceasefire-yemens-economic-conflict>

<sup>7</sup> OCHA. (2021c). *Yemen humanitarian needs overview 2021* [February]. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-needs-overview-2021-february-2021-enar>

<sup>8</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). (2022). *Yemen: Food security & nutrition snapshot*, March 2022. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IPC\\_Yemen\\_Food\\_Security\\_Nutrition\\_2022March\\_Snapshot\\_English.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IPC_Yemen_Food_Security_Nutrition_2022March_Snapshot_English.pdf)

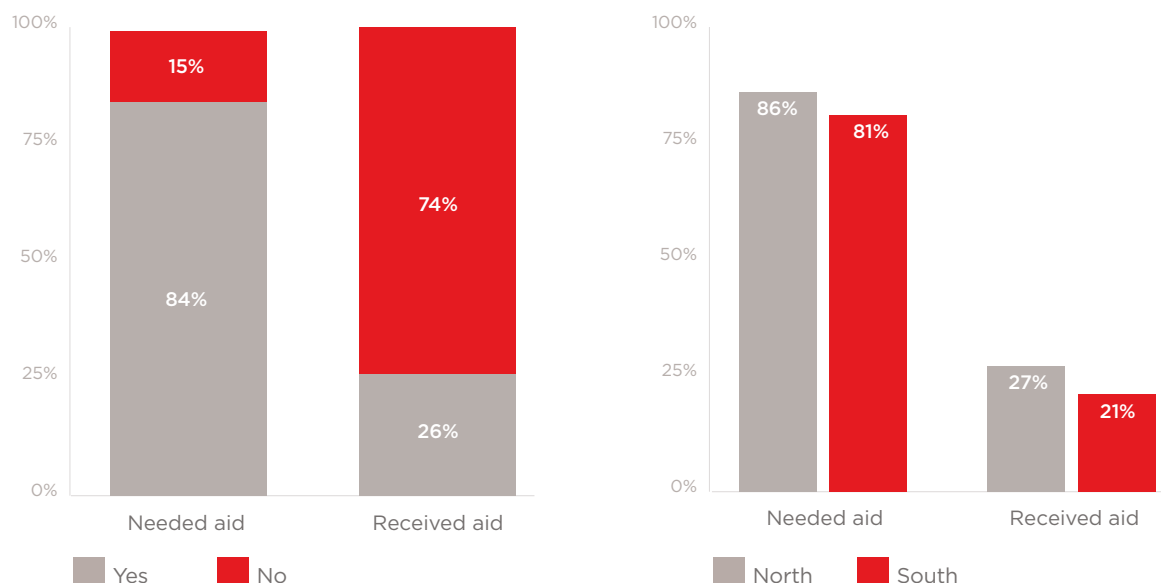
<sup>9</sup> OCHA. (2021b).

transport as a major impediment, particularly in the current context of rising prices and currency devaluation. Further barriers centre around the quality and reliability of services and aid. For example, interviewees described health centres that are theoretically being supported through supplies and support to staff but that in practice are shut, have very limited supplies, where staff haven't been paid or where patients are being charged for care.

In addition to being one of the most intense ongoing conflicts, the number of people in need estimated in Yemen (20.7 million) and the proportion of the population this represents (67%) also makes Yemen the largest humanitarian crisis in the world (Figure 1, above).

The widespread nature of need was evident in our survey, where over 80% of Yemenis reported needing humanitarian assistance. The extent of access challenges also came through clearly in responses, since only 26% said they had received any aid over the past year. There was little difference regarding the level of need and receipt of aid between respondents in the north and the south. People in the north reported both needing and receiving slightly more than those in the south.

**Figures 2 and 3: Need vs. receipt of aid**



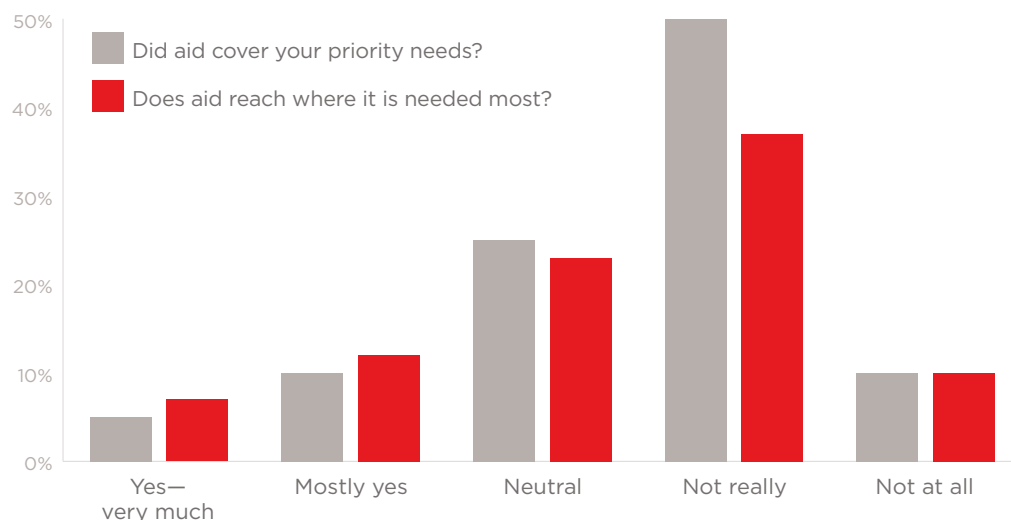
Source: Yemen—Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach and Effectiveness (Humanitarian Outcomes 2022a)

According to the latest operational data (December 2021), 132 organisations implemented humanitarian activities in all of Yemen's 333 districts. Eight UN agencies were active in all districts, 45 international NGOs were active in 252 districts, and 79 national NGOs were active in 318 districts.<sup>10</sup> Going by these numbers alone, Yemen would appear to be a relatively well-covered humanitarian response context—but the operational (3W) data includes as 'programming presence' a wide range of activities, from one-off deliveries of food or supplies to larger-scale aid operations, so it is not always reflective of 'boots' (or even eyes) on the ground.

The majority of those who received aid said it mostly failed to cover their priority needs, and in general, respondents believed that the aid provided was not getting to where it is most needed (Figure 4).

<sup>10</sup> OCHA. (2021e). *Yemen: Monthly organizations presence who, what, and where (3Ws)* [December]. Retrieved 16 March 2022 from <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/operations/yemen>

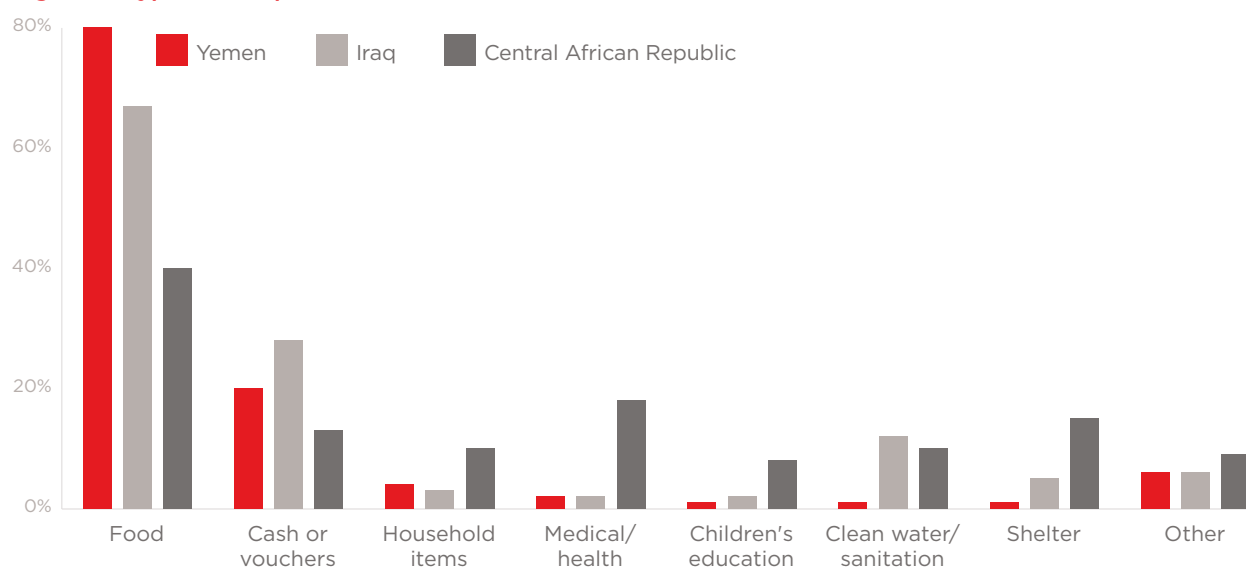
**Figure 4: Reach and relevance of aid**



Source: Yemen—Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach and Effectiveness (Humanitarian Outcomes 2022a)

While food aid is typically the largest sector of humanitarian assistance, it tends to predominate even more in hard-to-access contexts, since it can be provided via mobile and one-off deliveries and through remote implementing arrangements, without requiring a sustained programmatic presence, like medical care, education, and other sectors. In the case of Yemen, the predominance of food over other types of aid is even more evident than in access-constrained cases covered by this research such as Iraq and Central African Republic (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Types of aid provided**



Source: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach and Effectiveness (Humanitarian Outcomes 2020; 2021; 2022a)

The survey data suggests a humanitarian response struggling to meet at least the most urgent needs of a famine-affected population and falling short.



## Obstacles to access

The operational environment in Yemen, especially in the north, is described as: highly securitised, with international agencies largely unable to move; highly politicised, with authorities manipulating aid flows to support their wider objectives and benefit their supporters; and highly corrupt, with frequent shakedowns by officials for access and permissions. In interviews practitioners involved in the Yemen response are fairly scathing in their assessments of the situation, pointing to 'large-scale diversion', a 'fundamental lack of data', and an environment where 'humanitarian principles barely exist'.

### Political impediments

The primary constraints to humanitarian access in Yemen are bureaucratic, with aid groups required to obtain a complex set of permissions from multiple authorities for movements of staff and goods. The restrictions are driven by the competition between parties to the conflict to control and influence aid operations for political gain. The situation is especially problematic in the north, where the humanitarian community was likened by an aid official to the proverbial frog in hot water—aid groups accepted Houthi terms in exchange for access, and the restrictions on their operations grew gradually, until they found themselves seriously impeded and lacking leverage to effectively push back. As a result, by 2021, 'there was little chance to shift things as multiple red lines had already been crossed. There was insufficient analysis [by humanitarians] of how institutional systems and politics were changing'.

A constant stream of government directives relating to aid operations influences who receives aid and where and how programmes are run. Human Rights Watch reported the Houthis had issued 383 directives regulating aid groups between January 2019 and August 2020, many either demanding the sharing of protected information or imposing restrictions on movement of staff, supply, on coordination meetings, on needs assessments and on tendering and procurement processes.<sup>11</sup> The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has noted that where aid organisations had not complied with directives, they met with 'arrests, intimidation, movement denials, suspension of deliveries of aid and services and occupation of humanitarian premises'.<sup>12</sup> The 2020 Panel of Experts on Yemen Report to the Security Council likewise noted, 'arrests and intimidation of humanitarian workers; illegal seizures of the personal property of humanitarian works and property belonging to humanitarian organisations; non-respect for the independence of humanitarian organisations and numerous administrative and bureaucratic impediments'.<sup>13</sup> Such actions caused major delays in aid projects that would have targeted five million people.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2020, 14 September). *Deadly consequences: Obstruction of aid in Yemen during Covid-19*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/09/14/deadly-consequences/obstruction-aid-yemen-during-covid-19>

<sup>12</sup> OCHA. (2020). *Yemen humanitarian response plan extension, June-December 2020*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-extension-june-december-2020-enar>

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Security Council. (2021). *Final report of the panel of experts on Yemen*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/final-report-panel-experts-yemen-s202179-enar>

<sup>14</sup> OCHA. (2021f). *Yemen: Humanitarian access snapshot* (March-April 2021). <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-access-snapshot-march-april-2021>

In Houthi controlled areas, moreover, the restrictions on humanitarian aid have become more centralised and militarised. Authorities have transferred the power from line ministries and provincial authorities to security-oriented institutions reflecting a ‘deliberate intention to extract resources from humanitarian organisations, play a more robust role in controlling and directing humanitarian programs in line with their internally developed strategies and place these organisations under tight security constraints’.<sup>15</sup>

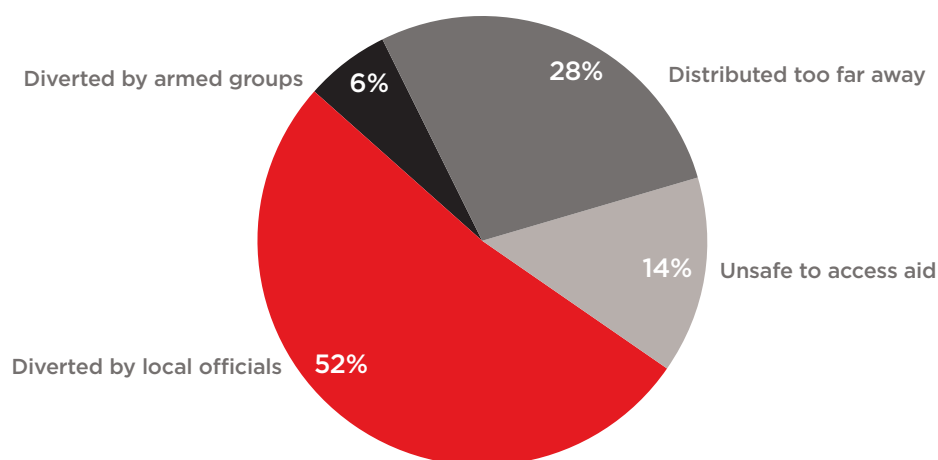
In addition to operations, humanitarians are constrained in their ability to obtain critical information such as in needs assessments, monitoring, and surveying, severely limiting the quality of data that is available to inform programme planning and design. Agencies have invested in third-party monitoring and verification processes, but these are also subject to efforts at control by authorities. Interviewees described third-party monitors being arrested and threatened by authorities seeking to control their reporting. Targeting of beneficiaries is also particularly sensitive and prone to interference. Particularly in the north, authorities have insisted on providing agencies with beneficiary lists and refused to allow them to do their targeting independently. A HERE study found, ‘interference with beneficiary lists’ as the single most mentioned example of challenges to the principle of independence.<sup>16</sup>

Political directives over women’s freedom of movement make it difficult for female aid workers to work and for women in need to get help. The requirement for Yemeni women to travel with a *maharam* (a male family member) has particularly disrupted access to aid and services for women and girls in Al Hodeidah, Hajjah and Sa’dah and there are concerns that this restriction is spreading to further governorates.

In the south (internationally recognised government and southern transitional council controlled areas), bureaucratic constraints are still a challenge but are less severe. The fragmentation and contestation of authority presents particular problems with the need to negotiate permissions and agreements at local levels and respond to shifts in authority.

Responses from Yemenis surveyed indicate they also see interference by authorities as the biggest obstacle to effective humanitarian reach and response, with majorities in both north and south citing diversion as the main reason people in their area were not able to access aid (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: What are the reasons why people in your area are unable to access assistance?**



Source: Yemen—Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach and Effectiveness (Humanitarian Outcomes 2022a)

<sup>15</sup> Yemen Analysis Team. (2021). *The politics of humanitarian access in Yemen*. (Unpublished)

<sup>16</sup> Montermuro, M. and Wendt, K. (2021). *Principled humanitarian programming in Yemen: A ‘prisoner’s dilemma’?* HERE-Geneva. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/principled-humanitarian-programming-yemen-prisoner-s-dilemma-december-2021>

## Information scarcity and challenges to humanitarian coordination and advocacy

The severe constraints on gathering information in the form of assessments and surveys has meant that much of the data underpinning the coordinated Humanitarian Needs Overview, used for planning the coordinated aid response, is out of date. So, while huge sums are being contributed to what is the world's largest aid operation, good information about what aid is needed, where, who is getting it (and who is not) is in short supply. A HERE study for ECHO noted the 'fragmented view of existing needs' and the lack of reliable data.<sup>17</sup> The forthcoming Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) finds significant gaps in knowledge, which means that statements about need are quite approximate and calls for a thorough re-think to enable better, more transparent, and more rounded analysis.<sup>18</sup> A recent Sana'a Centre review finds that 'challenges to collecting independent, reliable, unbiased data appear to have worsened.'<sup>19</sup>

Given the size of the humanitarian aid effort in Yemen, it is remarkably blind—both in terms of the ability to staff to get out and see what is happening and the quality of the data underpinning decision making. Without better access to information, not enough is known about whether aid is being provided effectively, is decent quality and is reaching those who need it and the extent of diversion and manipulation that is taking place and contributing to the war economy on all sides. The lack of transparency on needs data, including famine analysis, where 'many pieces of information remain missing from the analysis and some existing data present analytical conundrums that no-one can adequately explain'.<sup>20</sup>

First-hand accounts, when available, suggest that humanitarian response quality has suffered due to lack of information and access for monitoring. As one interviewee said, 'No one is effectively in the field, so there is huge manipulation of where aid is going and large exclusion of women and minority groups'. Another described the situation in the south, where they had assumed that because there are fewer restrictions, would be better, but reported being 'shocked' by the state of aid programming there, where better access does not seem to be leading to better outcomes. 'I was crying. [They're] just doing bad work.' The IAHE finds that the quality of aid in Yemen is poor in many critical areas, with IDP camps failing to meet minimum standards in any sectors, shoddy work, poor implementation and inappropriate schemes widespread.<sup>21</sup>

In response to escalating restrictions and interference a group of donors and aid agencies started a senior officials meeting (SOM) and a technical monitoring group (TMG), which agreed seven benchmark areas against which they would try to make progress in negotiation with authorities. These included pushing back against a proposed 2% tax on aid projects and various forms of interference with targeting and obstruction of travel and information gathering. There has been progress on some of these areas, notably an agreement to drop the proposed tax, and more limited progress in others.<sup>22</sup> The forming of the SOM and the TMG were mostly seen as having enabled a greater degree of coordination on access issues and as having catalysed more effective negotiations with authorities.

<sup>17</sup> Montermurro and Wendt (2021).

<sup>18</sup> Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation. (Forthcoming, 2022). *Inter-agency humanitarian evaluation of the Yemen crisis*.

<sup>19</sup> Vuylsteke, S. (2022, 15 March). Flawed data continues to plague humanitarian response in Yemen. *The Yemen Review*, January-February 2022. Sana'a Center. <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/jan-feb-2022/17010>

<sup>20</sup> Maxwell, D. (2019). *Constraints and complexities of information and analysis in humanitarian emergencies: Evidence from Yemen*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/constraints-and-complexities-information-and-analysis-humanitarian-emergencies-evidence> See also: Vuylsteke, S. (2021). *When aid goes awry*. Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. <https://sanaacenter.org/reports/humanitarian-aid>

<sup>21</sup> Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (Forthcoming, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Yemen Analysis Team (2021).

There is also a Humanitarian Access Working Group (HAWG) in place, co-chaired by OCHA and the NGO Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). However, interviewees noted the lack of an overall access strategy and the fact that between 2015 and 2020, the HAWG had focused on documenting and reporting on obstructions, with little analysis or strategy on tackling the obstructions. The focus on noting access impediments rather than fixing them is a busywork trap that humanitarian coordination bodies can easily fall into, often at the behest of political actors, even donors, who insist on seeing ‘documented evidence’ of access constraints.

Also problematic is the restriction of the HAWG to international humanitarian organisations and staff for confidentiality/security concerns. The international organisations recognise that this excludes critical actors—Yemeni organisations and civil society—as well as national staff, and reportedly there are ongoing discussions about how to deal with this.

## Insecurity and risk management

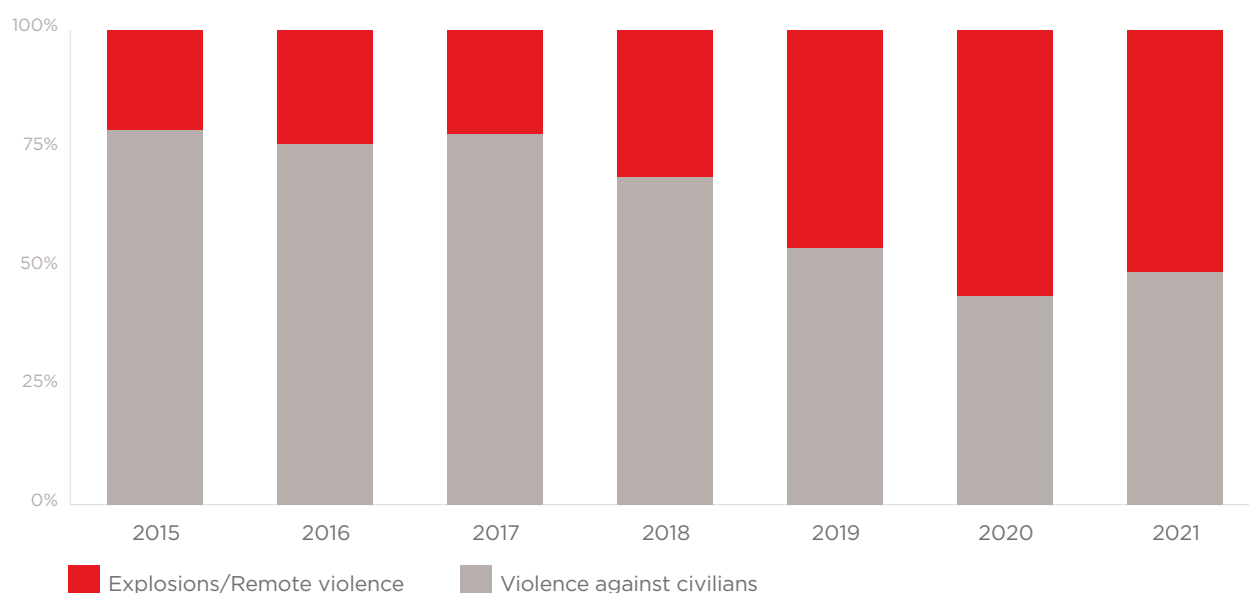
While there is no question that Yemen is an insecure context for humanitarians, the context includes some stark examples of how overly-restrictive security risk management measures can work to further impede humanitarian access rather than enabling it.

### Current security conditions

In the most recent escalation of hostilities, Houthi rebels attacked Ma’rib in February 2021 in a strategic bid to seize the stronghold of the Hadi government and launched missiles into Saudi Arabia, targeting oil and transportation infrastructure, which resulted in the Saudi-led coalition bombing of Sana’a.

Deliberate attacks on civilians have increased over the last 7 years in Yemen, except in 2021, where there were 200 fewer incidents than in 2020. These numbers increase significantly when adding incidents that do not target civilians specifically but affect them, like explosions and remote violence (see Figure 7).<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 7: Violence affecting civilians in Yemen, 2015-2021**



Source: Data Export Tool [Yemen data set] (ACLED 2022)

<sup>23</sup> ACLED. (2022). *Data export tool* [Yemen dataset]. Retrieved 15 February 2022 from <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>



Risks to humanitarian personnel include kidnapping by armed groups, criminality (for example, increased carjacking in the south) and airstrikes.

**Figure 8: Aid worker incidents in Yemen, 2015–2022**



Source: Aid Worker Security Database (Humanitarian Outcomes 2022b).

Figures for 2022 are partial and provisional.

Human Rights Watch reported that the conflict spread into 49 districts in 2021, up from 35 at the beginning of 2020.<sup>24</sup> In relation to affected aid workers, the Aid Worker Security Database shows that Aden was the site of the most incidents (3 incidents, 9 victims) in 2020, but since 2015 the five most dangerous areas for aid workers have been Ta'iz (14 incidents), Sana'a (6), Sa'dah (5), Aden (5) and Amran (4).<sup>25</sup>

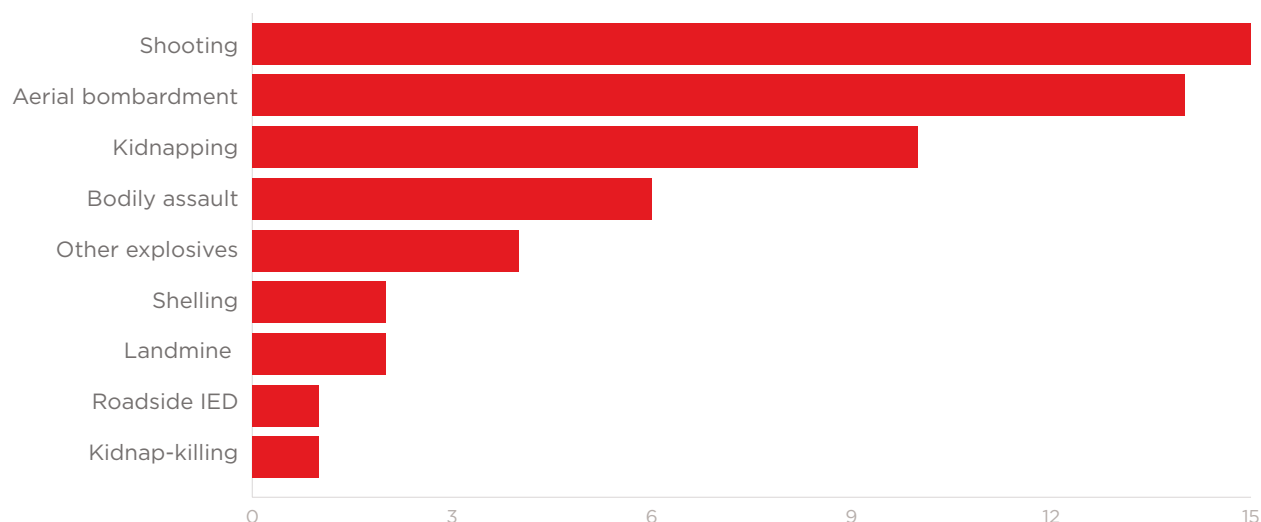
Crossfire and combat-related incidents (21) comprised most of the violence affecting aid workers from 2015, followed by ambushes (15) and individual attacks (6).<sup>26</sup> Fifteen of the incidents were shooting related, but aerial bombing by state, coalition and unknown actors was also prevalent (14). Kidnapping, endemic to Yemen, also affected aid workers (11 incidents, one resulted in the killing of two international aid workers from the United Arab Emirates, a country party to Saudi-led coalition forces, potentially resulting in the targeting of the aid workers by Houthi or Houthi-aligned groups), mostly national staff (16) followed by international staff (6) (see Figure 9). Most kidnappings occurred as ambushes while staff members were en route and were committed by non-state actors. While not a new phenomenon, the introduction of groups like Al-Qaeda in the early days (pre-9/11) and ISIS more recently may have changed the kidnapping landscape. Kidnapping has always been a significant generator of income, but previously the likelihood of eventual release was high, whereas with ideologically-driven groups, outcomes tend to be more fatal. Additionally, the highly transactional nature of kidnapping between groups means that victims can change hands from a more moderate group to one like ISIS, placing them in more danger.

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch. (n.d.). *Yemen: Events of 2021*. Retrieved 7 February 2022 from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/yemen>

<sup>25</sup> Salah also had two incidents but with less affected aid workers.

<sup>26</sup> This tied with the number of attacks where the attack context could not be determined, followed by raids (5), detention (1) and mob violence (1).

**Figure 9: Types of incidents affecting aid workers, 2015–2022**



Source: Aid Worker Security Database (Humanitarian Outcomes 2022b)

Most shootings occurred on the road (8) and at project sites (5). The aid workers that were caught in aerial bombings (14), were also predominately on the road (5) and at their project sites (5). Between 2015 and 2022, the Aid Worker Security Database notes that non-state actors were responsible in 14 incidents while foreign and host state forces were responsible for 12 confirmed attacks that affected aid workers.<sup>27</sup> Nine incidents involving explosives (aerial, landmines, shelling and other explosives) in the Aid Worker Security Database were not able to be attributed to any group. The Civilian Impact Monitoring Project notes that there have been 4,482 civilian casualties due to airstrikes since 1 December 2017, an additional 4,259 due to shelling, and 930 due to landmines—some of which were antipersonnel landmines used by the Houthis that were banned by the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty.<sup>28</sup>

In response to these very real risks, aid agencies have put in place tight security management systems which, particularly for UN agency staff, have made movement out of heavily guarded compounds in Sana'a, Aden and a small number of other hubs difficult. UN staff require armed escorts even for small movements and (until recently) senior level sign-off from headquarters, in addition to going through deconfliction processes with the Saudi authorities. These security management processes were widely viewed by practitioners interviewed from both within and outside the UN as unnecessarily restrictive and harmful to operations. According to interviewees these measures have severely inhibited the ability of staff to understand and monitor programmes and build relationships and trust with authorities, implementing partners and local communities. People described how it could be an intensive five-day process to get the necessary agreements and permissions for staff movements. UN ceilings on staff numbers and field accommodation standards have also been blamed for inadequate staff capacity in Yemen, particularly outside Sana'a and Aden.<sup>29</sup> The IAHE found that the security arrangements in Sana'a, Aden and regional hubs were at odds with the existing security context and that overly restrictive policies were putting a barrier between the humanitarian operation and the people they are supposed to serve.<sup>30</sup> Interviewees for this study pointed to recent efforts on the part of the UN to review the approach to enable staff to travel more frequently and be better able to get out to programmes.

<sup>27</sup> Confirmed attacks are those where the incident can be attributed to an actor. Otherwise, it is marked as unknown. Out of 54 incidents for the time period, 2015–2021, 24 are unknown.

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Protection Cluster for Yemen. (n.d.). *Total civilian casualties by type of armed violence*. Civilian Impact Monitoring Project. Retrieved 14 March 2022 from <https://civilianimpactmonitoring.org/>

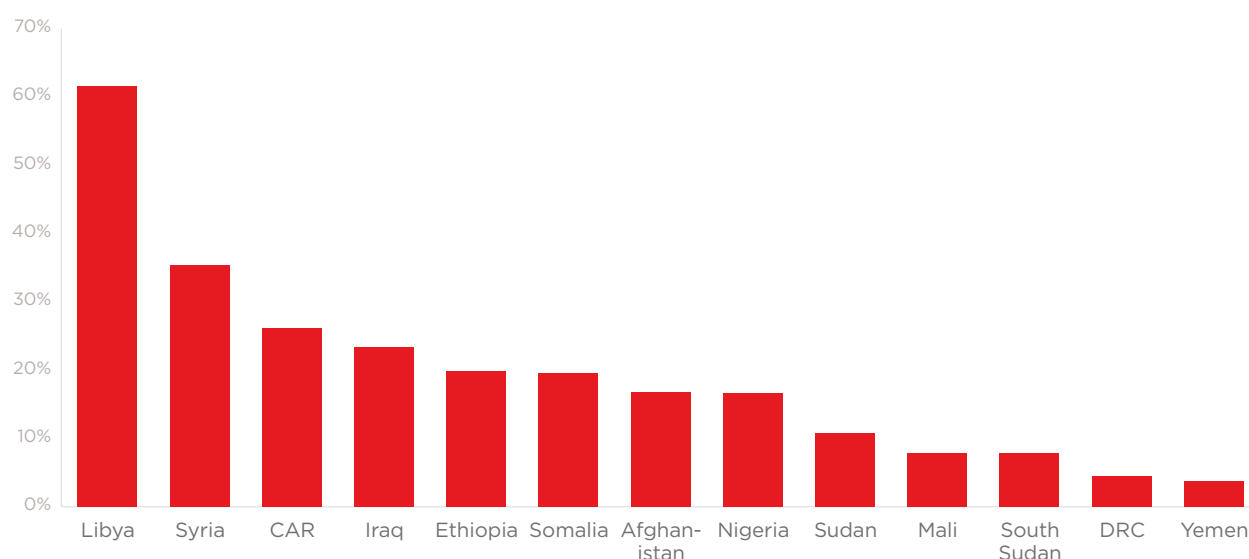
<sup>29</sup> Vuylsteke (2021).

<sup>30</sup> Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (Forthcoming 2022).

As in many other settings, counter-terror laws and regulations increase the risk to aid organisations and pose additional obstacles to humanitarian access. In January 2021 the U.S. secretary of state announced an intention to designate Ansar Allah (the Houthi government) as a terrorist organisation. There were fears that this could lead to further disruptions to humanitarian operations, banking systems, supply chain and transport networks that humanitarian actors and ordinary Yemenis rely on.<sup>31</sup> The designation was swiftly revoked by the incoming Biden administration.<sup>32</sup> However, recent reports suggest that the U.S. is reconsidering a designation, and a UN security council classification of the Houthis as a terrorist group has renewed fears of further disruptions to humanitarian operations.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the ability to make progress on access constraints and to develop more effective presence beyond Aden and Sana'a has also been constrained by movement restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Requirements to work remotely and to limit movements both within Yemen and internationally made it hard to get beyond maintenance of a problematic status quo. The Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2021 noted that the 'effects of the pandemic included a restricted operating environment as COVID-19 precautionary measures were implemented, creating challenges for humanitarian response planning and monitoring operations'. Yemen also received significantly less COVID-19 vaccines than other emergency contexts in the region, covering less than 4% of the population.<sup>34</sup>

**Figure 10: Percent of the population covered by two doses of COVID vaccine**



Source: COVID-19 vaccine doses in HRP countries, Humanitarian Data Exchange, (OCHA 2022b)

<sup>31</sup> ACAPS. (2021, 14 January). Yemen. US terrorist designation of Ansar Allah: Risk alert and humanitarian impact. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-us-terrorist-designation-ansar-allah-risk-alert-and-humanitarian-impact-14>

<sup>32</sup> Van der Kroft, L. (2021). *Yemen's Houthis and the terrorist designation system*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. <https://icct.nl/publication/yemens-houthis-terrorist-designation-system/>

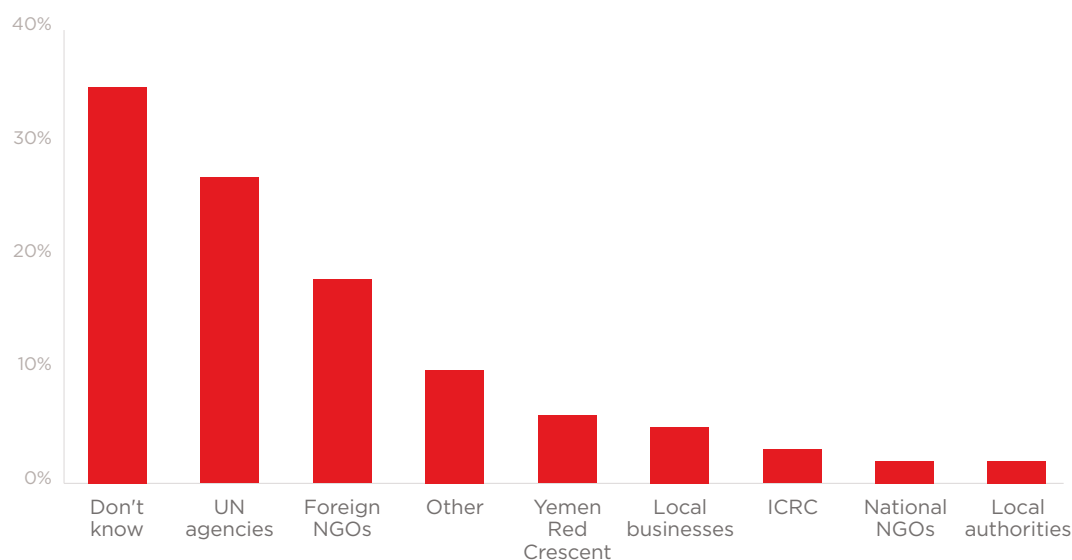
<sup>33</sup> Salisbury, P. and Wahid Hanna, M. (2022, 1 March). *Ending war in Yemen requires talk, not labels*. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/01/yemen-war-terrorism-un-houthi-uae-russia/>; United Nations Security Council. (2022, 28 February). *Security Council renews arms embargo, travel ban, asset freeze imposed on those threatening peace in Yemen, by 11 votes in favour, none against, 4 abstentions*. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14810.doc.htm>

<sup>34</sup> OCHA. (2022a). *Covax facility interim distribution forecast*. Humanitarian Data Exchange. Retrieved on 15 March 2022 from <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/covid-19-vaccine-doses-in-hrp-countries>

## The most present and effective aid providers

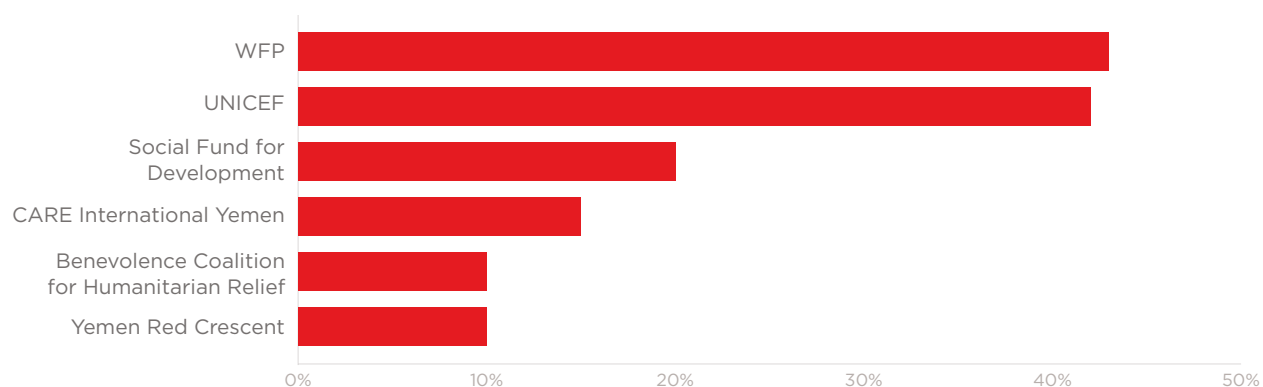
Most Yemenis surveyed were not able to name specific humanitarian actors or judge which of them were most present and effective. In general, the UN agencies were better known and more visible in more parts of the country, and respondents that had an opinion rated them as having the best reach. The most frequently named organisation was WFP (43% of respondents), followed closely by UNICEF (42%). The next most named organisation of any kind was the national entity, Social Fund for Development. Apart from CARE Yemen, no other international organisations were cited by more than single digit percentages of the respondents.

**Figure 11: Which type of aid provider was best able to reach populations in need in the last year?**



Source: Yemen—Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach and Effectiveness (Humanitarian Outcomes 2022a)

**Figure 12: Which specific organisations were best able to reach populations in need in the last year?**



Source: Yemen—Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach and Effectiveness (Humanitarian Outcomes 2022a)

When asked about their own perceptions of what it takes to program effectively in an access-constrained environment like Yemen, humanitarian actors interviewed said that long-term presence, flexible funding and the ability to build relationships and trust through sustained engagement were critical.



## Promising developments and practices

The SOM and TMG, which bring donors and aid agencies together to address access challenges, were seen as having catalysed more effective coordination and collective advocacy since 2019.

New humanitarian hubs—compounds in towns outside Aden and Sana'a—are designed to enable UN agencies to have a presence across more of the country. In addition to their main office in Sana'a, OCHA staff are currently deployed in four operational hubs in Al Hodeidah, Ibb, Sa'ada and Aden. Plans are also underway to establish an additional hub in Al Mukalla.<sup>35</sup> If they have sufficient resources (including staff) and authority, these new centres could potentially improve the response.<sup>36</sup> The International Organization for Migration (IOM) was highlighted by interviewees as having a strong staff presence outside of Sana'a and Aden. For example, it has more than 200 national staff and 25 international staff in Ma'rib and sees a strong presence as being critical to local negotiations with authorities and supporting quality programming. IOM strategy is 'guided by a model of expanding frontline capacity in underserved locations.'<sup>37</sup>

Interviewees saw some progress in reviewing security management approaches to enable greater travel and leadership that recognised the importance of greater proximity to populations. There has also been progress in analysis and needs assessment processes in 2021 with, for example, WFP able to complete a nationwide food security and livelihoods assessment that surveyed 83 households. UNICEF has also reported progress with SMART nutrition surveys.<sup>38</sup> Out of 44 planned SMART surveys, 7 have been completed in the northern governorates and 11 in the southern governorates, representing 75% of the total planned.<sup>39</sup>

In response to constraints to monitoring and challenges to operational independence particularly in targeting, agencies have made major investments in significant third-party monitoring processes. WFP third-party monitors make and receive over 30,000 calls per month and make several hundred in-person visits.<sup>40</sup> NRC mitigates authorities' insistence on providing beneficiary lists by conducting verification visits for all recipients.

Some agencies have invested in access strategies and training. For example, NRC has a strategic focus on accessing hard-to-reach areas and has invested in capacity to enable this, including a full-time access adviser who co-chairs the access working group. A new access strategy for Yemen has a focus on capacity-building for staff, including training in negotiations and operationalising principles so frontline staff can analyse access dilemmas and make informed compromises and decisions. A third pillar of the strategy is stronger engagement with communities and authorities. In its 2018 interim country strategic plan for 2019 and 2020, WFP committed to 'strengthening contextual and protection analysis, community feedback mechanisms and staff competences on protection and humanitarian principles and access, and giving more priority to humanitarian principles in engagements with all stakeholders', building on findings from evaluations of protection and principles and access.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>35</sup> OCHA. (n.d.) *About OCHA Yemen*. <https://www.unocha.org/yemen/about-ocha-yemen>

<sup>36</sup> Vuylsteke (2021).

<sup>37</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM). (n.d.). *IOM Yemen response strategy 2021-2022 summary*. [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iom-yemen-mission-response-strategy-2021-2022-summary\\_v2.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iom-yemen-mission-response-strategy-2021-2022-summary_v2.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> The SMART methodology (standardized monitoring and assessment of relief and transitions) is widely used to conduct timely nutrition surveys in emergency, development and displacement contexts. For further details, see: [smartmethodology.org](http://smartmethodology.org)

<sup>39</sup> UNICEF. (n.d.). *Yemen country office humanitarian situation report, 1-30 November 2021*. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20Yemen%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%2030%20September%202021.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> World Food Programme (WFP) (2021). *WFP Yemen country brief, December 2021*. <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000136019/download/>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

IOM is unique among UN agencies in Yemen in that it does 90% of its programming directly, and uses a large contingent of third-party contractors as workers. This allows it greater freedom of movement than allowed under United Nations Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) restrictions.<sup>42</sup> As a result, it has been much more operational outside of Sana'a and Aden than other agencies. For example, it has over 200 national staff and 25 international staff in Ma'rib.

## Weaknesses and areas for improvement

Compromises on principles continue to be made and lines crossed in ways that many humanitarians interviewed saw as problematic. For example, accepting that authorities provide beneficiary lists, paying authorities per diems and other payments to supervise distributions and programming, making payments to facilitate progress on sign-off of agreements, and other permissions. These compromises and transgressions, moreover, are not openly discussed among agencies, inhibiting coordination and joint action to tackle them. A culture of secrecy, lack of transparency and suspicion between organisations has developed, while encouraging authorities to seek ever greater control.<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch found that the humanitarian community's response to aid obstacles had 'numerous shortcomings and may have exacerbated the problem'.

While formal coordination structures are in place around access (there is an access working group and a donor led process), there is no joint access strategy, and the access working group has lacked action plans since 2015. It has too often played a role of documenting and counting access incidents without strategic thinking or analysis around how to tackle challenges.

The heavily restrictive orientation of the UN's security risk management has resulted in more than usual dependence on NGOs as implementing partners. This reportedly slowed down the initial response to the crisis and the passing down of restrictions has meant that overall humanitarian action in Yemen has been hampered by risk aversion.<sup>44</sup>

There is currently no space for Yemeni organisations to participate in current coordination structures around access. While understanding the concerns around confidentiality, there needs to be more effort made to find a way to include national staff and national organisations in strategic planning and coordination around access.

<sup>42</sup> Although contracted staff are not subject to the same security restrictions as regular workers, thus allowing better access, this practice raises potential ethical questions if they also do not receive the same level of security protection and insurance.

<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2020, 14 September).

<sup>44</sup> Cunningham, A. (2016). *Enablers and obstacles to aid delivery: Yemen crisis 2015*. <https://arhp.msf.es/emergency-gap-case-studies-aid-environment/enablers-and-obstacles-aid-delivery-yemen-crisis-2015>

## Conclusion

Since the start of the conflict, humanitarian actors have had to navigate a balance between maintaining access in the face of widespread needs and the humanitarian imperative to act and standing up to demands that would compromise principles of independence and impartiality. This perennial dilemma has been particularly problematic in Yemen, given the scale of need, uncertainties over the severity of need resulting from information blockages and the efforts at control and manipulation of aid from parties to the conflict.

Given the critical lack of ground-level information, it is hard to assess how well the humanitarian response is meeting needs within the constraints. And lacking a counterfactual as to what would have happened if the humanitarian community had been more unified and insistent in standing up to authorities, it is also impossible to make a clear judgement on whether humanitarians struck the right balance between speaking up or 'putting up' in order to maintain access.

Regardless, stronger and better coordinated negotiation with authorities is required to ensure greater operational independence in assessment, targeting and monitoring. And a more enabling as opposed to restrictive approach to security management (for UN actors in particular) would help aid workers get out of compounds and see the aid response for themselves.

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