

Yemen

A shrinking civic space

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Introduction

Over four years of conflict have made many Yemeni people dependent on humanitarian aid for survival: 14.4 million people in Yemen are in need, 8.2 million of them in urgent need. The conflict continues to affect civilians on daily basis.

In November three representatives from Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Yemen visited the Netherlands.¹ Oxfam Novib and KUNO took this opportunity to brief humanitarian practitioners, academics and policymakers on the latest developments in Yemen and to discuss dilemmas, bottlenecks and chances with well-informed Yemenis and relevant stakeholders.

A shrinking civic space

One of the main points put forward by the Yemeni speakers is the shrinking civic space and the limited opportunities for NGOs and CSOs. The main challenges organizations face are the long processes in getting a project approved, the security situation, and the concerns and priorities among women (the economic situation hinders them from participating in peace-building activities). The impression is that authorities in the North want to control humanitarian activity and only allow activities that are supportive of the authorities.

In the North, the biggest challenge to civic space is NAMCHA (National Authority for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Recovery), established in early 2018. NAMCHA should facilitate NGOs and CSOs. However, NAMCHA often complicates things. They decide all the rules governing humanitarian aid organizations and thus also control who can go where. This makes it hard for people to travel to monitor or evaluate projects. And there is a huge risk that humanitarian aid will be used for political purposes. Another problem is the lack of coordination among organizations, which is getting worse, especially in the North.

In the South they also face different challenges. In this region there is a duplication of authorities due to the conflicting parties. The government is said to be the ruling party, but the reality on the ground is different. In their everyday life Yemeni people are ruled by the STC (Southern Transitional Council) and if you are not aligned with the STC, you are an enemy. There is also a lot of hate speech directed at the government and the STC by civilians. Humanitarian access is also an issue in the South. Moreover, there is a lack of capacities among organizations. For a long time the south of Yemen was a neglected part of the country, which led to a lack of expertise and capacities among organizations.

In the South of Yemen there is a relatively 'bigger' civic space. Therefore the South often tries to support organizations in the North. Humanitarian workers do their best to fight the shrinking civic space, but they have to be careful because the government acts harshly towards those who pose a threat.

¹ At the request of the Yemeni representatives we do not publish their names and organizations. Their organizations work in the field of peace building, social and economic development, and humanitarian support. Some are based in the north, controlled by the de facto authorities, others in areas in the south, under the control of the internationally recognized government.

Recent development: the Riyadh Agreement

According to the speakers, Saudi Arabia was forced to act, which resulted in the Riyadh Agreement (7 November 2019). Saudi Arabia, the government and the STC wished to form a united front against the Houthi militias. The speakers indicated, however, that they could not give clear insights, since they were only informed by information leaks: there was no public information. An important aspect of the agreement is the integration of southern parties and the prevention of bloodshed among them. A seat has been reserved for the STC in the government and in future peace-building talks. It attempts to settle the political struggle in the South and unite the agendas of different parties. The attendees from Yemen had one concern. During the talks for the Riyadh Agreement a lot of groups from the South showed up, seeking their 'piece of the cake'. They all wish to be part of the government and peace- building conversations. However, this could weaken the agreement.

War as opportunity to change the position of women?

Because of the war in Yemen, women have taken on new roles and responsibilities. However, it is doubtful whether the changes in the position of women are sustainable. As of now, women are forced to take on new roles, but there is also an increase in gender-based violence and domestic violence. When analysing the changing position of women, the social and cultural aspects are important and should be considered. The new roles women have to take on do not always bring empowerment. Moreover, women are not participating in all aspects of public life. When it comes to decision-making processes, only men are invited to the table, even though women have an important role on the ground.

Broader perspective on explosive weapons

According to an as yet unpublished research paper by Martin Butcher from Oxfam, it is necessary to look at the effects of explosive weapons in a broader perspective. Explosive weapons have a short-term and long-term impact. Moreover the consequences of explosive weapons are gendered, both for men and women. This research shows that explosive weapons lead to war crimes, also in the long run. Looking at explosive weapons from this perspective offers an opportunity to pressurize governments and companies into not selling and shipping these kinds of weapons to warring parties. Furthermore, states should support the development of a policy of international declaration to address these impacts of explosive weapons.

If you wish to read the full Oxfam-report, click [here](#).