

## ***Strengthening the Humanitarian Response in Yemen – Event Communiqué***

The horrors facing millions of Yemenis, the challenges of impacting the humanitarian response and possible solutions were discussed by stakeholders from the international community and national civil society event ‘Strengthening the Humanitarian Response’ on the 26<sup>th</sup> January in London organised by eight aid agencies and sponsored by the MBI Al Jaber Foundation.

Participants painted a powerful picture of the scale of the crisis gripping Yemen, where almost 19 million people, or nearly 70 percent of the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance. We heard about collapsing health and education services. Less than half of the health centres across Yemen are functioning, and even these face severe shortages of medicines, equipment and staff. We also heard about an economy on the brink of collapse. As one speaker so eloquently put it, *“the humanitarian community is used to targeting assistance to the most vulnerable; in Yemen this is becoming impossible, because everyone is vulnerable”*.

Insecurity and threats from bombs, shelling, ground fighting and lawlessness, are major obstacles to the humanitarian response. Some of the biggest donor governments to the humanitarian response are complicit in the bombing. De-confliction is in place, but it offers little security from daily airstrikes and none from ground fighting. In some areas there is no effective control by the authorities. Agencies have had their premises destroyed, staff and beneficiaries have been killed. One speaker shared that he was reluctant to gather large groups of people to distribute aid, afraid that they will become a target. Lack of accountability has contributed to an environment where obligations under international human rights and international humanitarian law are not respected. All parties to the conflict must respect their obligations under international law.

Despite the hurdles, aid is getting through and making a difference in the lives of ordinary Yemenis. National and international NGOs are ready to do more, if funding is available. But reaching those in need takes time and flexibility. Access needs to be negotiated with multiple parties and at multiple levels. Permissions obtained in Sana’a or Aden are often meaningless outside of those cities, where various armed groups ultimately control access. Humanitarian work is being instrumentalised by both sides of the conflict. National NGOs are at the forefront of this response, often able to access the most remote areas that International NGOs cannot; yet we heard how their work is also hindered with staff detained at check points and even arrested as they try and deliver assistance.

Alongside the lifesaving humanitarian work that is happening, the issue of early recovery or development was also discussed. There were strong voices, particularly from Yemeni speakers, emphasising the need to ensure that systems, health and education particularly, continue to function, that first and foremost Yemenis need jobs or for their salaries to be paid. These things, whether termed development, early recovery or humanitarian plus, cannot wait for a political solution to the conflict but are urgently needed now.

### ***Weaponisation of the Economy***

On its own humanitarian aid cannot meet the scale of need, particularly in the wake of a collapsing economy. Speakers highlighted the scale of the risk posed by the potential collapse of the Central Bank facility and the resulting lack of hard currency in the country. There was strong sense among the speakers that what was happening to the economy could not and should not be delinked from the conflict, but in fact that what we are now seeing is the weaponisation of economy, a country being pushed toward economic and social collapse.

Public sectors employees, around 1.5 million people including teachers and doctors, have not been paid for several months, severely impacting the ability of families to meet their basic needs. The health system is collapsing. Commercial importers, already facing severe challenges due to the damage done to Hodeidah port by bombing, are increasingly unable to buy essential supplies of

wheat, rice and fuel on international markets. For a country that imports 90% of its basic food supply and was already suffering from high levels of food insecurity, this could now mean widespread famine. One NGO speaker recounted how, despite having received funds into their bank account, the lack of cash meant that they were unable to access those funds, putting projects at risk. There are no easy solutions to the technical challenges of capitalising the central bank, but solutions can be found given sufficient political will.

Humanitarians don't hold the keys to this crisis. Ultimately Yemen needs peace. We heard this from every speaker, but most powerfully from the Yemeni men and women in the room and remotely from Aden and Sana'a. National and international NGOs issued a challenge to other stakeholders to up their game by applying diplomatic pressure in the short term to improve humanitarian access on the ground, to find solutions to problems facing Yemen's economy and ultimately support inclusive efforts to secure peace. This will require building relationships with all parties to the conflict, increasing their understanding of humanitarian principles and their capacity to work with humanitarian actors. It also means creating the space for local NGOs to play a leading role in the humanitarian response.

### **Recommendations**

The international community and in particular the United Kingdom as a champion of women's inclusion, should redouble its efforts to reinvigorate the peace process and to press for more meaningful inclusion of women and other civil society voices at all levels, in line with international commitments.

The Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan needs to be fully funded. Funding needs to be flexible and responsive to the challenges on the ground and longer-term. Donors should also be cognisant of support costs, particularly those related to security.

Donors should find ways to increase and coordinate their presence on the ground. This will not only increase their understanding of the realities of delivering humanitarian assistance, but also allow them to build the relationships needed to apply diplomatic pressure in support of the humanitarian response and international humanitarian law. Recent visits by Dutch and Swedish representatives show that it is possible.

The international community needs to do more to support capacity building of national and local authorities on humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law as part of their efforts to improve humanitarian access.

Political will must be found and applied at all levels to ease restrictions of the flow of goods into and around the country. The cranes for Hodeidah port should be allowed into the country, commercial airspace should be reopened, and approval processes for the movement of humanitarian goods and personnel should be streamlined.

INGOs and UN agencies need to create mechanisms and institutionalise ways of working that allow national NGOs and civil society to become true partners in the humanitarian response.

