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## Middle East and North Africa Programme: Workshop Summary

# Malnutrition in Yemen: Developing an Urgent and Effective Response

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In partnership with UNICEF



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## Introduction

Yemen is facing an emergency situation when it comes to food security, with one third of Yemenis acutely hungry. While the situation is acute, it is also chronic, with limited progress having been made in improving food security over the last 30 years.

This paper is a summary of discussions that took place during a workshop held at Chatham House in February 2011. The workshop aimed to ensure that food security and malnutrition are urgently incorporated as top priorities on the policy agendas of the Yemeni government and its international partners. Organised in partnership with UNICEF Yemen, the workshop brought together a key group of stakeholders concerned with malnutrition and food security including representatives from governments, donors, NGOs and international organisations, along with some external experts.

There are a number of political obstacles blocking the path to improved food security in Yemen, and consensus still needs to be built around the best plan of action. However all participants agreed that action was urgently needed, and the meeting's plenary session identified a number of key recommendations and specific initiatives that should be taken.

Key recommendations emerging from the workshop included the need for:

- Consolidation of data and data analysis
- Concerted and more timely messaging
- A well prioritised and costed multi-year and multi-dimensional action plan
- Firm political commitment under the leadership of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC)
- Scaling up and acceleration of cost-efficient, evidence-based interventions
- Involvement by a wide range of stakeholders including civil society and tribal leaders
- Contingency planning for a nationwide humanitarian response, in the event of a protracted political shock that paralyses government machinery

The workshop also agreed on the need for the following specific initiatives:

- A formal debriefing with MOPIIC, to communicate the outcome of the workshop
- Effective follow-up through the existing informal working group on nutrition and food security in Sana'a, facilitated by UNICEF
- A sector-level political economy analysis of the food insecurity and malnutrition, potentially facilitated by Chatham House

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

#### **The Chatham House Rule**

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## **SESSION 1: SITUATION REPORT - CAUSAL ANALYSIS**

### **The extent of the problem: acute and ongoing**

The levels of malnutrition and food insecurity in Yemen place it among the worst countries in the world for food insecurity. The World Food Programme (WFP) ranks it as the 11th most food insecure country in the world, with one third of Yemenis acutely hungry. Children are among the worst affected, with malnutrition the underlying cause behind 80% of fatalities among children under five years old. Many Yemenis are acutely vulnerable to disruptions in the food supply deriving from conflict, climate, and price volatility.

The situation is chronic and long term as well as acute: levels of malnutrition have stabilised at a very high level – the 2005-6 Household Budget Survey (HBS) suggests 55% of Yemenis suffer from chronic malnutrition. There has been no drastic reduction in malnutrition levels in the last 30 years, and progress on the issue has been slow compared to regional counterparts.

### **Data: gaining a comprehensive picture of food insecurity in Yemen**

Food insecurity is a new priority for both domestic and international actors in Yemen, and although data availability is relatively good, additional data collection (especially in relation to causal analysis and the intersectoral correlations) would provide policymakers with a more comprehensive picture.

There has been no survey that provides a clear picture of malnutrition levels nationwide since 2007 and most of the recent figures are based on regional and local surveys and reanalysis of earlier data sets using different statistical methods and data projections. Newer disaggregated data would give a clearer picture of regional, gender and ages differences, as well as the rural-urban divide. Although food insecurity is primarily a rural phenomenon this is changing as increasing numbers of poor, rural Yemenis move to the cities. There is also a lack of data regarding accurate food prices and local food production trends.

The Food Security Information System (FSIS) developed by the Central Statistical Organisation (CSO) has provided some of the most comprehensive data, but to date has only surveyed the governorate of Hodeida. This system needs additional funding and support to be rolled out to other areas.

Nevertheless there are questions around how much focus should be placed on collecting more data. Existing data is sufficient to demonstrate that Yemen

is facing a crisis situation and that urgent action is required. There is consensus around the need for increased coordination on data collection between all stakeholders and the need to implement monitoring systems, but there remains a worry that a focus on collecting comprehensive data will be at the expense of taking action. Conversely, a rush to action may preclude an effective response.

Improving the presentation of existing data and developing a better communications strategy also need to be prioritised. At the moment much of the information is buried in lengthy reports, making it difficult to access. Some donors remain sceptical over the reliability of the data and improving its presentation could be beneficial in attracting funding.

There is also a need for identifying better targeting mechanisms, and special focus should be paid to social protection networks and other sectoral inputs (such as health, agriculture, education and social practices like the chewing of qat) to ensure sustainability.

### **Causes – immediate and structural**

Consensus exists over the immediate causes of malnutrition and food insecurity in Yemen, which include poverty, illiteracy, low availability of clean water supplies, low levels of breastfeeding, and dependence on imported grain as a staple. Conflict plays a clear role in aggravating malnutrition and food insecurity – one third of all malnutrition cases are located in the four northern governorates, which have been the location of an on-off insurgency since 2004.

However the underlying structural causes are less clear and there is no shared strategy to address structural causes. Increased coordination may help stakeholders to pool resources and share knowledge but the complexity of the issues at hand may require careful prioritisation and focusing resources on key areas where humanitarian and development actors can make a difference. Land ownership is a vital issue but the entrenched nature of patronage politics in Yemen means that in the short term it is a problem which is extremely difficult to address, and resources may be better directed elsewhere.

Inadequate information on underlying and root causes of malnutrition will hinder any efforts to make long-term gains.

## **SESSION 2: THE NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK AND THE CURRENT RESPONSE**

### **Yemen's National Food Security Strategy**

Working in partnership with UN agencies and other donors, the government of Yemen has developed the National Food Security Strategy (NFSS). One of the few multi-sector strategies to be agreed by the cabinet, the NFSS was launched in December 2010 and aims to comprehensively tackle food insecurity in Yemen.

Objectives by 2020 include reducing food insecurity to one third of its baseline status, achieving a 'medium' status of food insecurity and decreasing acute malnutrition among children by 1% annually.

Priority interventions proposed by the NFSS include:

- the reduction of oil subsidies;
- improving the investment environment;
- bringing in policies to reduce qat consumption;
- promoting competition among grain importers and building up strategic grain reserves;
- implementing a water strategy;
- increasing infrastructure, health and agriculture investment in rural areas;
- strengthening nationwide interventions to improve maternal health, child nutrition and women's education and empowerment.

Widely praised by donors and aid agencies, the NFSS sits alongside a strategy focusing on malnutrition developed by the Ministry of Health. However it is clear that a great many obstacles stand in the way of effective implementation of the NFSS.

Contingency planning is also necessary, in the event of a protracted political shock that paralyses government machinery.

## **The macroeconomic situation**

The poor state of Yemen's economy is both a key factor in the vulnerability of Yemenis to food insecurity and a significant obstacle to the implementation of the NFSS. Yemenis are highly dependent on wheat as a staple for the majority of their calorific intake, and 90% of wheat is imported. This means food prices in Yemen have been closely linked to international food prices, and Yemenis were heavily impacted by the international food price crisis in 2008. This situation could be repeated as the global food price index in December 2010 reached levels above its peak in June 2008.

Yemen's volatile exchange rate is a complicating factor in Yemeni food prices, with depreciation of the riyal in 2010 causing food price increases when the international wheat price index was decreasing. Without a reduction in the deficit the riyal will continue to depreciate, impacting food prices and leaving vulnerable Yemenis on the brink of starvation.

Policy options are limited. Producing more food domestically is difficult due to resource limitations, and building up grain stores is expensive. An IMF programme has been agreed to help bring about macroeconomic stability by meeting budget deficit targets that aim to prevent the rapid depreciation of the riyal. Yemen also needs to find new sources of foreign exchange earnings, through building up its non-oil economy and increasing remittances from Yemenis working in the Gulf states.

## **The need for prioritisation – addressing political questions**

Yemen's limited financial resources emphasise the need to further prioritise which of the NFSS's proposed interventions should be most urgently implemented.

While the NFSS is commendable for its comprehensiveness, it does present a long 'shopping list' of proposals that cannot all be feasibly implemented in a short time frame. All stakeholders need to work together to support the Yemeni government in deciding how to prioritise interventions and design policies which have the greatest possible impact given limited resources.

Prioritisation is a political decision, which highlights the need to address the crucial political dimensions of food insecurity in Yemen. While there is a tendency for some actors to see the situation through a purely economic lens or focus only on technical solutions, it is apparent that there are political aspects that underpin the problem.

While Yemen's financial resources are certainly limited, spending allocations to nutrition and food security strategies are low, raising questions about the government's commitment to tackling these issues. The Ministry of Health receives \$30,000 per year for its nutrition strategy.

The government requests significant amounts of money from international donors to fund nutrition and food security initiatives but is unwilling to commit more than a small percentage of its own budget to these issues. Currently only 1-2% of the national budget is allocated to health and close to nothing is allocated to nutrition.

### **Political leadership and commitment**

Significant improvements in political leadership and commitment are crucial to Yemen's efforts to address food security and related challenges. Water resources in Yemen are extremely limited; increasing rain-fed agriculture will help make the best use of available resources, but implementing the water law and stopping new wells being drilled both require effective political interventions.

The issue of qat is closely linked to that of water and agriculture more generally, with one third of water from underground aquifers being used to grow qat and more than 160,000 hectares of agricultural land dedicated to qat growing. Reducing qat farming will mean encouraging people to take up alternative livelihoods (such as coffee farming), but for the time being the qat market is being artificially sustained by fuel subsidies, which reduce water pumping costs. Reducing smoking in Europe was a long and contested process, which meant taking some difficult political decisions over taxation and banning smoking in public places. Tackling qat consumption will take a similar degree of political leadership and commitment.



## **SESSION 3: RELIEF, RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **Global responses to food insecurity: the UN Taskforce**

Following the 2007-8 food crisis, the UN set up a high level taskforce on global food security. Its first activity was creating a global framework for agriculture and food security: the Comprehensive Framework for Action, published first in 2008 and updated in 2010. The framework outlines five key elements for judging the effectiveness of a policy. A policy must be:

1. Twin-tracked: addressing both the immediate emergency and long-term investment requirements.
2. Comprehensive: cover the availability of food (production and importation); ensure access to food (addressing not just economic growth but social protection policies); and address nutritional issues (including how food is used and to what effect). Food security should not be the preserve of an individual sector.
3. Based on country leadership and ownership. This recognises that in some previous cases the UN has not been sufficiently joined-up in its response and had potentially prohibited the emergence of regional ownership.
4. Based on inclusive processes with a broad range of stakeholders.
5. Work towards increased investment in a country's food systems, reversing the trend towards a decline in investment in agriculture.

The 2010 update reframed the document around the basic right to food, with added emphasis on the role of women, small-scale farming, ecosystem management, the respective role of public and private sectors and land and water access.

### **Competing concepts? 'Food aid', 'Food assistance' and 'Food Security'**

The increasing shift in terminology from food aid to food assistance represents the trend for technicians and policymakers to embrace a wider toolbox, including cash and voucher-based approaches, livestock interventions and greater attention to markets. Practitioners are also making stronger links between food assistance and nutrition strategies, and placing greater emphasis on the nutritional impact of interventions like food aid, cash, vouchers, new products for acute malnutrition (CSP plus, plumpynut) and supplementary feeding.

Food assistance is also linked into broader social debates. There is a growing willingness to look at increased investment in social protection and in the

broader state-building agenda while maintaining space for independent humanitarian action.

There are, however, difficulties around monitoring the impact of food assistance and it is important to acknowledge the difficulty of targeting the poorest where poverty is widespread.

Questions around food assistance relevant to Yemen:

- Are nutrition and food assistance sufficiently linked?
- Are social protection and food security sufficiently linked?
- Is the toolbox wide enough and innovative enough?
- Is there adequate monitoring in place?

The concept of food security, on the other hand, was conceived twenty years ago, with four pillars: availability, access, use and sustainability of response. It takes into account nutrition as an essential parameter within this integrated approach. However, this it is difficult to implement, and interventions have often been constrained by false distinctions.

There is also a question over when food assistance should stop, and long-term development approaches should be phased in. Currently there is a way of dividing resources by responding to acute and chronic nutrition levels. However, these two categories can overlap, and acute malnutrition can require a development response (and vice versa).

### **Harmonising humanitarian and development approaches**

There is broad agreement that humanitarian and development approaches should be harmonised, and not considered linear. However, there is some disagreement over to what extent this has been achieved and to what extent there is already a successful twin-track approach or merged strategy. Food security can be seen as at the forefront of this debate: falling in the 'no man's land' between the two approaches. 'Relief, Rehabilitation and Development' is a useful tool for harmonising these approaches, but is also difficult to implement.

Many institutions, including the World Food Programme and UNICEF, already have a dual mandate for handling emergencies and development. Implementation problems often lie in the lack of on-the-ground coordination between various donors and implementing partners, hampering medium-term

and early recovery aspects, rather than the lack of consensus over long-term strategy.

Humanitarian actors tend to look for short-term lifesaving approaches, but often overlook local capacity-building and bypass local actors. Development actors, on the other hand, are constrained by procedures and questions of capacity because everything must be done through partnerships.

### **The case for action: basic rights**

It is crucially important to consider what it means for a child or mother to be malnourished, and to put children's rights and human rights at the forefront of peoples' minds when considering interventions in this sector. We tend to forget the immediate, visceral nature of the problem: that malnourished children are dying because their families don't have enough food.

Whatever the debate, swift action needs to be taken, and urgent leadership is needed. Different actors will inevitably design different interventions to address a range of needs. It is crucial that humanitarian actors and development actors do not get weighed down by ongoing arguments about theory when designing their interventions.

### **Effective policy is joined up policy: donor coordination in Yemen**

Donors are often part of the problem rather than the solution. Donors in Yemen are currently perceived to lack a broad agreement or joined up strategy on the issues of food security and malnutrition. Partly as a result of this, there is an unhelpful degree of rivalry among delivery partners over funding and solutions; and there is not enough joint programming. Donors need to harmonise, reassess their own roles and engage in a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder dialogue, leading to shared analysis, shared priorities and a coordinated response.

The National Food Security Strategy – approved by the Yemeni Government – is straightforward and comprehensive. It provides an adequate framework for pulling disparate and contested efforts together. What is missing is a coordinated response under the leadership of the donor community. Who will take responsibility for coordination and decision-making and take a leadership role in moving this issue forward? Several actors at the workshop pledged money to support a process that seeks to improve coordination and develop a shared strategy among all the actors in the food security space in Yemen, but

that also requires motivated stakeholders to initiate the process and sustain momentum.

### **Understanding root causes and political obstacles in Yemen**

There is a need for a qualitative assessment of the causes of malnutrition and food security in Yemen. Although the immediate causes are understood, the root causes are not (see work by Save the Children and UNICEF), and there is a need to go deeper. This is essential because the most obvious response is not always the most appropriate response and funding needs to be spent on programmes that display an understanding of underlying causes. Solutions are not simple and there are relationships with the water and fuel sectors that need to be better understood, as well as a need for studies on patronage networks and how related resources are allocated in Yemen.

We need to reconcile the need to respond urgently with the need to respond effectively. The comparative advantage of humanitarian actors is that they can act quickly in emergency, but there is also a question of how to define an emergency. When solutions are not straightforward, a quick response can leave you back where you started or make things worse: it's not a case of "anything better than nothing"; failed responses can cause damage.

On the reverse side, it is also argued that there is a consensus, globally, on the root causes of malnutrition and that in no country are you starting from scratch: in each case all you need to do is see the relative weight of well-known causes. The problem lies in implementation.

### **Yemeni leadership**

Leadership is also required from the Yemeni government. Excellent direction has already been shown through the production of the National Food Security Strategy, which displays ambition and political will. The fact that the Deputy Prime Minister has asked the proposed multi-donor trust fund for money to support the NFSS is a positive step.

However, a great deal more work needs to be done in translating the strategy into action.

### **Expectation management**

There is also some work to be done by the donor community on expectation management, on both sides. There is a feeling on the part of the Yemeni

government that they have put a lot of work into developing the strategy but have received little in the way of a concrete, material response from the donor community.

Conversely, it is also important for the donors to acknowledge the limited implementation capacity of the relevant Yemeni ministries, and to recognise that this capacity may reduce even further over the coming months. Plans for future interventions need to be based on a full knowledge of the current political complexities within Yemen.

## PLENARY SESSION: THE WAY FORWARD

### Areas for action

#### *Messaging*

There is a need for better and more timely messaging about the problem of food insecurity and malnutrition in Yemen, as well as better coordination of ongoing data gathering and analysis. Donors confront a range of competing appeals, and the various delivery agencies need to make it easier for the donors to understand how they can support effective interventions in this area.

#### *Prioritisation, funding, and resources*

The National Food Security Strategy and the national nutrition strategy are both solid frameworks, owned and led by the government of Yemen. However, neither has been properly costed. We need to support and encourage the government to cost and prioritise short-term and long-term interventions.

There is funding available from a number of donors, but we must be aware of donors' differing agendas. The politics of austerity in the West mean some donor governments are rethinking spending structures and regrouping around certain areas. For example the Dutch will be concentrating on food security and water, and this could be used to Yemen's advantage.

The Gulf donors potentially offer significant resources, but they are more interested in traditional infrastructure projects. While we should not overlook long-term interventions and what communities' priorities are, it is important to ensure that activities that support food security are alongside the DPPR (Development Plan for Poverty Reduction), to avoid getting big-ticket infrastructure items such as roads and hospitals which aren't a priority.

#### *Galvanising political leadership – a test of commitment?*

In light of the multi-sectoral nature of food security and nutrition, leadership from MOPIC (Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation) and the Deputy Prime Minister will be critical, as will ensuring the line ministries coordinate with MOPIC. A follow up debriefing with the DPM is an action point to carry this forward.

There is an urgent need for institutional measures to be taken, including establishing the National Food Security Secretariat and strengthening the Central Statistical Office and the FSIS. The informal working group – the

multi-stakeholder forum – should be expanded and formalised once the Secretariat is established.

The government needs to be helped in tackling critical bottlenecks including the issues of land, water, patronage networks, qat, and the status of women. These will require some tough decisions and failure to make progress in these areas may bring into question the government's commitment. Clarity is also needed on the government's budget, as it is currently difficult to understand how much the government is actually allocating and spending, and it is important that the government should always be contributing, even if modestly.

A thorough political economy analysis at the sector level would enable Yemen's international partners to better support the government in tackling these critical bottlenecks. This could throw light onto structures and practices that are affecting how the markets operate, and open up potential for some innovative approaches. A working group on political economy analysis could carry this forward.

#### *Toolboxes and implementation*

Operational partners should look into the concept of toolboxes, adapting according to people's needs – this has the potential to absorb some of the debates around emergency vs. development aid. We should also acknowledge that the debate is much wider than cash and food, and sometimes we need unknown and unexplored solutions.

#### *Operational research and pilots*

Pilot projects could be conducted to test the effectiveness of a 'comprehensive' approach to food security, combining health, education and agriculture interventions with social protection mechanisms such as cash and voucher schemes. Until now no impact evaluation has been done on the 'comprehensive' approach to food security. This could also be used to see how coordination of different donors works in practice.

Impact evaluation of pilots and further operational research are important for testing some of our assumptions about which interventions will work best. Given that donors (EC and the Dutch in particular) will be continuing to allocate significant funding there is a case for dividing resources, and keeping some aside for innovative solutions.

We should also consider the political impact of certain interventions, particularly as the political environment is becoming more fragile. For

example, there is a danger of NGO presence in certain areas becoming politicised.

#### *Lessons learned and scaling up*

However a number of pilots are already ongoing and with such high acute indicators, it is clear that broad, comprehensive, large-scale intervention is needed as soon as possible, particularly as during the hunger period (May to October) we'll see acute levels rise again.

We should ensure that we share information and learn lessons from other contexts and what is already happening on the ground, such as the rollout of the voucher scheme by the WFP in Sa'dah. Scaling up assistance should be an urgent priority to ensure effective delivery on the ground. A real time monitoring system would mitigate potential risks associated with rapidly upscaling a new approach.

UNICEF coverage of CMAM (Community-based Management of Acute Malnutrition) is at 12% which is very low, and expanding this would be an immediate practical action to reach the most vulnerable households.

### **Political unrest in Yemen**

What if Yemen goes in the direction Tunisia and Egypt? What happens if we see government capacity weaken or temporarily disappear? Current political unrest in Yemen raises many questions about international interventions that rely too heavily on the current government's leadership.

What would happen in the event of a transition of power, and who would the international community partner with? Would this create an added difficulty, or an opportunity to champion a radical new strategy?

If the current government collapses, the economy is likely to follow, with negative consequences for the exchange rate and a knock-on impact on food prices. In these circumstances, would the IMF attempt to stabilise the economy and/or would the donor community increase their allocation of resources to humanitarian activities.

Is there a contingency plan for a fully-blown political and humanitarian crisis? And at what point – if any – might international staff be withdrawn from the country?



*Fragmentation and the role of non-government actors*

In the eyes of many practitioners, Yemen's tribal structure presents practical options for grassroots delivery partnerships. Many practitioners already deliver small programmes in partnership with Yemen's tribes. Regardless of Yemen's overall political direction, these arrangements are likely to continue. However, the fragmentation of power at the national level – following from a contested transition of power or a civil war – is likely to complicate current delivery arrangements.

Young Yemenis are playing an unprecedented role in the current pro-democracy protests, demanding a greater say in their own future. We should consider what role young people can play in tackling food security.

*Friends of Yemen and political pressure from the international community*

The National Democratic Institute has been trying to support bi-partisan dialogue in Yemen for several years but they are not operating at a high enough level to resolve Yemen's current political crisis. How can the international community, or the Friends of Yemen (FoY), apply effective pressure to resolve the current stand-off between President Saleh's regime and the pro-democracy protestors?

Many of President Saleh's critics are calling for high-level engagement from the FoY, and the appointment of a dedicated FoY envoy, to help broker a political deal. However, there is still confusion about the purpose of the FoY among many Yemeni civil society groups, as well as INGOs.