

Social impact monitoring project report: January–March 2023

OVERVIEW

The key drivers of humanitarian need from January–March 2023 were social control requirements imposed by the de-facto authority (DFA) in the north of Yemen (also known as the Houthis), deteriorating health conditions accompanied by vaccine hesitancy across the country, increased disputes around land and natural resources, protection concerns for migrants, and reduced purchasing power throughout the reporting period. These factors were not new, and although they affected all Yemenis to a degree, groups such as women, children, and Yemeni and non-Yemeni migrant workers felt them more acutely.

Limitations

There is limited information available directly related to the impact on specific groups and categories of people who might be more exposed to certain risks and with specific needs. Most publicly available information on social impacts is qualitative, making it difficult to compare and aggregate data continuously and countrywide. ACAPS accounted for this constraint by structuring the available information and following up or confirming through interviews, consultations with experts, and joint analysis.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this report is based on the following:

- the daily monitoring of relevant indicators logged in the ACAPS qualitative database
- the analysis of data from ACAPS' core dataset
- a secondary data review of documents published in and on Yemen
- key informant interviews and discussions with context experts.

About the report

This social impact monitoring project (SIMP) report identifies the events and themes that emerged from January–March 2023 via the Yemeni information landscape on trends that have had, or are likely to have, a social impact. Social impact is broadly defined as the effect on people and communities of a specific action or event or the lack of action to intervene in a situation. The choice of themes was based on the considered significance of their impact (or potential impact) on people. The report aims to support the understanding of the social groups in Yemen facing the greatest challenges in meeting needs and those most vulnerable to protection concerns.

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DRIVERS OF HUMANITARIAN NEEDS BETWEEN JANUARY–MARCH 2023

Theme 1: increased vaccine hesitancy across the country

Since 2021, there has been a polio outbreak in Yemen, with over 228 cases as at 8 May 2023, 86% of which were from DFA-controlled areas. There were also over 22,000 measles cases in 2022, including 161 deaths (UN 08/05/2023). The first quarter of 2023 recorded over 13,000 measles cases, 8,800 dengue fever cases, and 20,080 suspected cholera cases. Diphtheria and pertussis cases are also on the rise, as are deaths from each disease. Gaps in health surveillance systems mean that actual numbers are likely much higher (WHO 21/04/2023).

The steady increase of diseases is a direct consequence of increasingly low immunity levels among children resulting from a decline in immunisation coverage and vaccine hesitancy (UN 08/05/2023).

Different factors and reasons are reported to contribute to the low uptake of vaccines, including access to misleading information, a lack of trust in health facilities and humanitarian organisations, political polarisation, and the absence of awareness campaigns.

Misleading information and perceptions: several reports and key informants noted that different misconceptions and rumours are circulating on YouTube, television, radio, and social media, causing fear and doubt (OCHA 16/04/2023; Internews 08/05/2023). Some people, such as health workers and Houthi leaders, even reference false research/studies that seemingly prove these misconceptions (KII 30/05/2023). The circulated misinformation includes the following:

- Vaccinations will lead to death not immediately but after a while (KII 30/05/2023; KII 01/06/2023).
- Vaccination introduces viruses and diseases to children's bodies, causing conditions such as brain atrophy, autism, cancer, and a weakening of their immune system (KII 30/05/2023).
- Vaccinations are sent from the West to kill Yemeni youth and cause infertility among Muslims (KII 30/05/2023; KII 01/06/2023; KII 02/06/2023).

A lack of trust in health facilities and aid organisations: several key informants reported a general observation that people lacked trust in health facilities and aid organisations, for multiple reasons:

- Previous incidents of expired aid have reduced trust in aid organisations. People link several news stories and incidents of expired food baskets from aid organisations to the

administered vaccines (KA 24/05/2023; KII 01/06/2023). They believe that the vaccines could also be expired, which would be dangerous for their children.

- There is also a belief that the West sends ineffective and low-quality vaccines manufactured in low-income countries 8 (Internews 08/05/2023; ACAPS 10/01/2022).
- There are documented cases of smuggled and expired medication in pharmacies and health institutions. In October 2019, ten child patients with leukaemia died after being administered expired doses of a cancer treatment (AP 14/10/2022; KII 02/06/2023).
- There are concerns around poor vaccine storage and handling. Many key informants reported that some health providers are not properly equipped with clean gloves. Others reported that electricity shortages lead to concerns of improper vaccine storage, making them inefficient to use (KII 01/06/2023).

"I believe that vaccines are harmful because I have witnessed many children around me with weakened immunity experiencing diseases that do not happen to us, and this occurs because of the poor vaccines in poor storage and with poor quality that they supply to Yemen" (Internews 08/05/2023).

Authorities' attitudes and approach towards the vaccines and their influence on the community: there's an absence of vaccine campaigns in Yemen compared to before the war. Previously, there were large campaigns targeting all social groups in the community. The campaigns were in the form of songs played through loud car speakers roaming the streets and through television. The absence of campaigns has been witnessed in both areas of control, but reasons vary.

In general, the DFA's refusal of the vaccine is indirect or semi-public (ACAPS 10/01/2022). Houthi leaders have only indirectly hinted at their refusal of vaccines, with the health minister saying that the DFA is not responsible over people taking vaccines (KII 28/05/2023).

There have been some examples and patterns witnessed since 2017 of the DFA prioritising other political demands over vaccine availability. For instance, when the UK pledged to send COVID-19 vaccines to Yemen, Muhammad Ali al-Houthi, member of the supreme political council, urged them to instead stop arms export (Muhammad Ali al-Houthi Twitter 05/02/2021).

One example of the DFA's complex relationship with vaccines was between 2017–2018 during a cholera outbreak. Houthi leaders negotiated with WHO over vaccines after the DFA declared a state of emergency, requesting 3.4 million vaccine doses or nearly all the global stockpile (Al-Mekhlafi 19/03/2018; Spiegel et al. 15/07/2019).



After the granting of 500,000 doses, they cancelled the request because of a belief among DFA health authorities that the vaccine was ineffective (ACAPS 10/01/2022).

On the other hand, while the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen encourages the population to get the vaccine, uptake is still slow, and there is a lack of proper vaccination campaigns (KII 01/06/2023; KII 30/05/2023).

Rumours and misconceptions in Yemen travel widely across areas of control and influence people's attitudes and behaviours. Read more about previous examples of vaccine hesitancy in Yemen: ACAPS vaccine hesitancy report.

Social impact

Widespread health-related rumours mislead the community, escalate social panic, compromise vaccine credibility, and threaten public health. Misinformation opens the door to the spread of other viruses and diseases and may increase the risk of illness, leading to low immune systems and possibly death. The lack of vaccines also leads to higher rates of infant mortality. Anecdotal observation suggests that some women have stopped giving birth in hospitals to avoid the costs and because of a lack of trust in health facilities, with the belief that vaccinations will harm them and their babies (KII 30/05/2023; KII 28/05/2023).

The world health organization defines infodemic, false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak (WHO accessed 19/06/2023). A review of research on infodemics and health misinformation found that misinformation distorts scientific evidence; leads to opinion polarisation and echo chamber effects (i.e. the formation of groups of like-minded users framing and reinforcing a shared narrative); promotes fear and panic; increases the population's mental and physical fatigue; and decreases the credibility of circulating information that does not align with the misinformation (Borges do Nascimento et al. 30/06/2022). The review confirms recent evidence and observations in Yemen.

The research review adds that infodemics could lead to the misallocation of resources and increase stress among medical providers; decrease access to healthcare; increase vaccine hesitancy; and stoke conspiracy beliefs. Infodemics may delay the delivery of high-quality care and proper treatment to patients, further affecting public healthcare systems (Borges do Nascimento et al. 30/06/2022).

Theme 2: an increased level of local conflict around land and natural resources

The first quarter of 2023 saw continued localised armed conflict. Since April 2022, there has been a decrease in violence across front lines thanks to the truce that lasted six months and active peace negotiations. That said, data and observations suggest that there has been an uptick since April 2022 in local and tribal conflict across Yemen over land, blood feuds, family quarrels, and economic disputes related to levies and revenues (CIMP accessed 01/04/2023; ACLED 14/10/2022). Local conflict is complex; the factors causing the violence differ between every governorate and can be broadly grouped as follows:

- political motivations and power dynamics between parties of the conflict
- land and natural resource disputes.

This edition of the SIMP report focuses on land and natural resource disputes. According to civilian impact monitoring and ACLED data, there has been an increase in looting and land disputes across Yemen (ACLED accessed 30/05/2023; KII 04/06/2023; KII 05/06/2023). This increase has been steady during the truce and after it ended in October 2022 across all areas of control, but the highest incidents have mainly been in Al Hodeidah, Ibb, and Sana'a governorates and in Sana'a city (ACLED accessed 30/05/2023). Several reasons contribute to the increase, including:

- **The return of tribesmen to their places of origin triggering conflict over disputed land:** there has been a decrease in overall violence in front lines between parties to the conflict thanks to peace negotiation efforts. As a result, many tribesmen have returned to their places of origin with the goal to either benefit from their land or sell it given a lack of income resources. That said, many return to inaccessible lands that have been either confiscated or sold by other family members. Others are unable to access their lands given a lack of legal property documentation or changes in tribal leaders, as detailed below (KII 05/06/2023; KII 04/06/2023).
- **The social and economic importance of land:** land is usually the most valuable asset people own. Parting with land in the ancestral village is very serious, as the land represents their link to the village, the origins of their family, and the tribe. A key element of claiming tribal affiliation is proving one's origins linked to land tenure (ACAPS 22/05/2022). That means that land is 'something worth fighting for'. As economic decline persists and high levels of social and political tensions continue, competition over natural resources, including land, intensifies, leading to conflict and directly affecting people.

- **The interconnection between access to land and access to water:** according to key informant interviews, land and water disputes are interlinked. Controlling land means having access to water, which is essential in a country known to have scarce water resources (YPC 12/2021). This is true in rural areas, where water accessibility is integral for agriculture or other business or personal use (KII 05/06/2023; KII 04/06/2023). A 2021 report validates this, as upstream users typically have priority to use surface water flows and the digging of wells happens predominantly on private land (YPC 12/2021).
- **Poor resource management:** prior to the conflict, resource management had already been a problem. The current breakdown of government institutions has crippled the much-needed effort to improve or simply manage critical resources. Inconsistent salary payment and political fragmentation have left many local public institution offices either in a state of complete collapse or operating at a minimal level, which is not enough to undertake any formal land management activities. This has resulted in the ineffective management of land (CIVIC 04/10/2022; KII 04/06/2023).

Social impact

Historically, local disputes over land and water distribution have been a major source of conflict. Disputes directly affect people's lives and severely inhibit social and economic development. According to statistics from the Yemeni Ministry of Interior, around 4,000 people die each year from violent disputes over land and water (CIVIC 04/10/2022; YPC 12/2021).

According to available literature, conflict over resources is witnessed between villages, communities, tribes, groups within IDP camps, and neighbours. For example, in a case studied in a Yemen Policy Center assessment, conflict over access to water between two villages in Ta'iz lasted 13 years. Despite mediation efforts, this conflict not only persisted but also worsened with the war (YPC 12/2021).

Some of the owners of the land that IDPs have moved to either have allowed them to stay temporarily, are not in the area and are unaware that IDPs are living on their land, or do not have the ability to remove them. This may result in conflict as returning owners demand or threaten the IDPs to leave. For example, in conversations conducted by CIVIC, some IDPs stated leaving Al Jubah district in Ma'rib governorate for a land in Al Wadi' district, where the landlords eventually came back and asked for their land, threatening the IDPs (CIVIC 04/10/2022).

"When the war is over, a real conflict will occur, because these properties are not government-owned. The land they're on belongs to specific tribes, and people keep going to these lands with no rights. So after the war finishes and people will come back to these houses and demand their land back and at that moment the real conflict will start." (CIVIC 04/10/2022)

Many IDP hosting sites do not have adequate sources of water, such as wells, and the communities living within them are forced to either rely on expensive water trucks to deliver water or obtain it through other means. Many IDPs have lost their livelihoods and do not have adequate income sources, making the situation even more challenging. Circumstances are particularly acute for the many families displaced from rural areas. They often relied on farming and agriculture for their livelihood and may not have the skills or opportunities to find new jobs in their areas of displacement. IDPs and refugees not living in camps are also often in vulnerable positions with respect to the host community, who may blame them for straining local resources and driving up rent prices (CIVIC 04/10/2022).

Water scarcity particularly affects women and children, who are usually tasked to fetch water even from sources that are kilometers away. As sources decrease, women have to go farther distances to collect water for their family. Children, especially girls, sometimes end up missing school because of this responsibility, which would take a significant time given the inaccessibility of sources (CIVIC 04/10/2022).

Theme 3: the Mahram requirement impeding women's movements in DFA areas

During the reporting period, the requirement for women to be accompanied by a Mahram (male guardian) remained a main issue and a critical challenge especially in DFA-controlled areas. The requirement bans women from travelling unless accompanied by or with the written approval of a Mahram in governorates under DFA control, including when they travel outside the country from Sana'a airport. There has been no official written declaration about this requirement apart from

The paper sent by Houthi leaders to transportation companies urging them to refuse female passengers without a Mahram. The authorities have rejected all requests from aid and civil society organisations to travel without a Mahram.

In January, DFA authorities arrested three women for travelling between governorates without a Mahram (SCSS 10/03/2023). Although the requirement applies to those travelling between governorates or outside the country, Sa'dah governorate additionally enforced a ban on women without a Mahram from going out into the street for shopping or to visit family, neighbours, and friends. In March, the authorities in Sa'dah, through loud car speakers that roamed around the streets, reiterated the ban on women from going out without a Mahram and specifying the markets where they could shop for Ramadan and Eid (Arab News 24/03/2023).



These incidents confirm the patterns and trends observed in the enforcement of these restrictions, with authorities often practicing a fundamental or even radical version of Islam. The DFA often begins implementing these initiatives in more conservative governorates before rolling them out across their areas of control. They use the governorates where they are most likely to succeed as pilot cases to understand the level of community pushback or acceptance. This pattern has not just been seen in relation to the Mahram requirement but also with regard to the enforcement of certain dress codes for both men and women, the restriction of family planning methods, and the enforcement of gender-segregated spaces.

In less conservative cities or areas, the DFA has faced pushback – such as from a group of 25 prominent women working in the public sector and coming from Houthi families in Sana'a. In February, these women sent a letter to DFA Prime Minister Abdulaziz bin Habtoor calling for an end to the trend of gender discrimination against women in DFA areas. It addressed the negative impact of the Mahram requirement on women, which excluded them from public work, hindered their movement, and segregated women inside ministries. They also noted the negative impact of the Friday sermons against working and studying women and girls (SCSS 10/03/2023).

Social impact

The Mahram requirement has affected the population, especially women's participation in different aspects of life, such as politics, the social sphere, and employment. It has limited women's career opportunities and progression and narrowed their freedom and right to be independent. It has also affected the work of humanitarian, development, and civil society organisations. This constraint has also created an information gap that limits the degree to which humanitarian response can target and meet the needs of women.

Obtaining approval for a travel permit is time-consuming, taking women up to ten days to acquire the appropriate documents to travel; exposing them to protection concerns, such as harassment; and incurring costs many households would struggle to afford. It opens the possibility for authorities to request payments to facilitate different parts of the process, creating an economic burden on families.

Read more about the associated social impact of the Mahram requirement in these ACAPS reports ([here](#) and [here](#)).

ON THE WATCH LIST

The watch list comprises themes that are part of our overall monitoring and that emerged from the SIMP review process but that we have not focused on deeply in this product as they were less prominent than what's included. We list these to alert the reader of issues that may become a focus of future reports.

Migrants facing heightened protection risks across different migration routes

Between 1 January and 31 March 2023, over 41,500 migrants entered Yemen (IOM 31/03/2023). Migrants are still facing high protection concerns in the form of detention, sexual abuse, and violence while crossing the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. A new movement trend has been observed; migrants are arriving in Hadramawt and Al Mahrah governorates to access economic opportunities in Oman given the difficulties in accessing Saudi Arabia.

As at March 2023, over 5,200 migrants were present in Al Mahrah governate. Health and social services are limited, and there are reports of forced deportation from Oman given the strict immigration regulations in the country (IOM 09/05/2023).

Weak purchasing power across the country

The root causes of people's low purchasing power, such as high and unaffordable prices, the weak Yemeni rial, continuous inflation, a lack of adjustment in public institution salary payments, and inconsistent salaries, persist. The trend continues to decline, and, with continuously occurring shocks, is exhausting people's coping strategies.

Recurrence of flash floods

Between 13–18 March 2023, heavy rains and winds caused widespread damage and affected 50,000 individuals in Yemen, most of whom were IDPs in host sites in Ma'rib city and Ma'rib district (ECHO 24/05/2023). The seasonal rain in Yemen starts in March and ends in October. Flash floods are not new in the country. That said, nine years of conflict accompanied by multiple displacement and economic decline have affected people across Yemen, depleting IDPs' resources and forcing them to take risks that include staying in dangerous areas. An example is staying close to streams, which increases their exposure to the impact of floods, such as the loss of assets, damage to shelter, and injuries or death. For people residing in their own homes or those in rented accommodation, the lack of repairs and maintenance to infrastructure and houses with flood damage from previous years or run down during the conflict makes them vulnerable to the impact of floods. Flood-affected people face increased social and economic vulnerability. Severe weather has been forecasted for Yemen, meaning several parts of the country continue to be at risk of flooding as the seasonal rain continues.