

Spotlight on Social Impact in Yemen (SoSI) Report: January-November 2025

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This Spotlight on Social Impact in Yemen (SoSI) report follows previous social impact studies (formerly referred to as Social Impact Monitoring Project reports). ACAPS' SoSI reports use interviews to shed light on how lives, households, and communities in Yemen are changing in response to evolving social conditions. Interviewees are drawn from the network of trusted sources that ACAPS has developed over years of analysis on Yemen. This qualitative, people-centred approach does not intend to replace quantitative data or other research; instead, it supplements these other sources, providing recent information on a context in which assessment and data collection face well-documented challenges that are increasing (ODI 27/01/2020; SCSS 15/06/2023).

This report focuses on the period between January and November 2025. The report's two themes investigate the following:

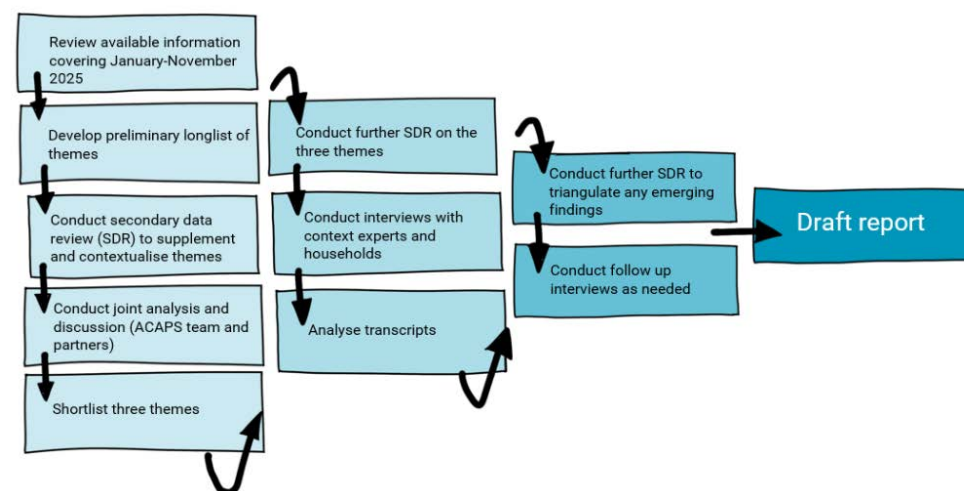
- lived experiences of host community members, IDPs, and returnees: a comparison between Taiz city, Marib city and Tuban district in Lahj.
- shrinking civic space: challenges facing local and national organisations.

Methodology and limitations

The report's two themes were selected from a longer list of emerging issues that carried the potential to have a social impact in Yemen. The longlist was built from a review of various information sources from January to November 2025, including published research, international and local reports, media, social media, and discussions with humanitarian actors and other consultations with local experts. The report uses a broad definition of social impact: the effect of an event or action (or lack thereof) on people and communities.

The list of themes was narrowed down based on an iterative process of discussions and secondary data review considering a combination of factors, including the likely significance of a theme's impact (or potential impact) on society, the frequency a theme was reported during the period, and the degree to which a theme is covered by other analyses.

Figure 1: Analysis development process



Source: ACAPS

See full size map on page 17

ACAPS conducted interviews on the selected themes using open-ended questions, allowing participants to respond in their own words and with their own stories, experiences, and insights. The team then thematically analysed the interview transcripts for recurring ideas, commonalities, and differences.

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The number of interviews for each theme is displayed in Table 1. Interviewees were selected from ACAPS' network based on their demonstrated knowledge of the relevant themes. Interviewees included humanitarian practitioners, local civil society representatives, and analysts with professional experience working on displacement, protection, and humanitarian response in the selected location. Interviews were conducted with context experts who are familiar with the dynamics between internally displaced persons (IDPs), host communities, and returnees in the selected locations. These interviews provided informed perspectives on social relations and tensions; however, they do not represent direct testimonies from displaced households themselves.

The thematic selection on the lived experiences of IDPs, host communities, and returnees was initially designed to enable comparison between Taiz city and Marib city. Tuban district in Lahj governorate was subsequently included because Tuban emerged repeatedly in conversations as an area where tensions were evident. Tuban also differs culturally from Taiz and Marib, adding nuance to the analysis.

All interviews were voluntary and conducted by two experienced Yemeni team members by phone between 3–30 November 2025. Interviews followed ACAPS' agreed guidance on ethical data collection, including adhering to the 'do no harm' principle, and only proceeded when both the ACAPS team member and the respondent were confident that the conversation did not put either party at risk. Interviews took the form of semi-structured conversations, lasting between 45–90 minutes.

Table 1: Interview database

THEME	INFORMATION SOURCE	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS
Lived experiences of host community members, IDPs, and returnees: a comparison between Taiz city, Marib city and Tuban district	Context experts in three locations	9
Shrinking civic space: challenges facing local and national organisations	Civil society organisation (CSO) leaders	8

Limitations

The limitations inherent to any small-sample qualitative research project are relevant to this study. While the interviews unavoidably present biases that cannot be fully eliminated, these have been partially mitigated through data triangulation, and the issues and perspectives that emerged are not exhaustive given insufficient data saturation. The findings presented cannot therefore be generalised across Yemen or to the populations of the locations they focus on, but efforts have been made to explain relevant contextual factors so that readers can determine whether the findings may be applicable to other Yemeni contexts.

In Yemen, humanitarian space is restricted and becoming more challenging over time. The information here is presented with that limitation in mind, considering its value in contributing to a very fragmented picture of the Yemeni experience.

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THEME 1: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HOST COMMUNITY MEMBERS, IDPS, AND RETURNEES: A COMPARISON BETWEEN TAIZ CITY, MARIB CITY AND TUBAN DISTRICT

Indications that social cohesion is deteriorating in Ma'rib city, Ta'iz city, and Tuban district

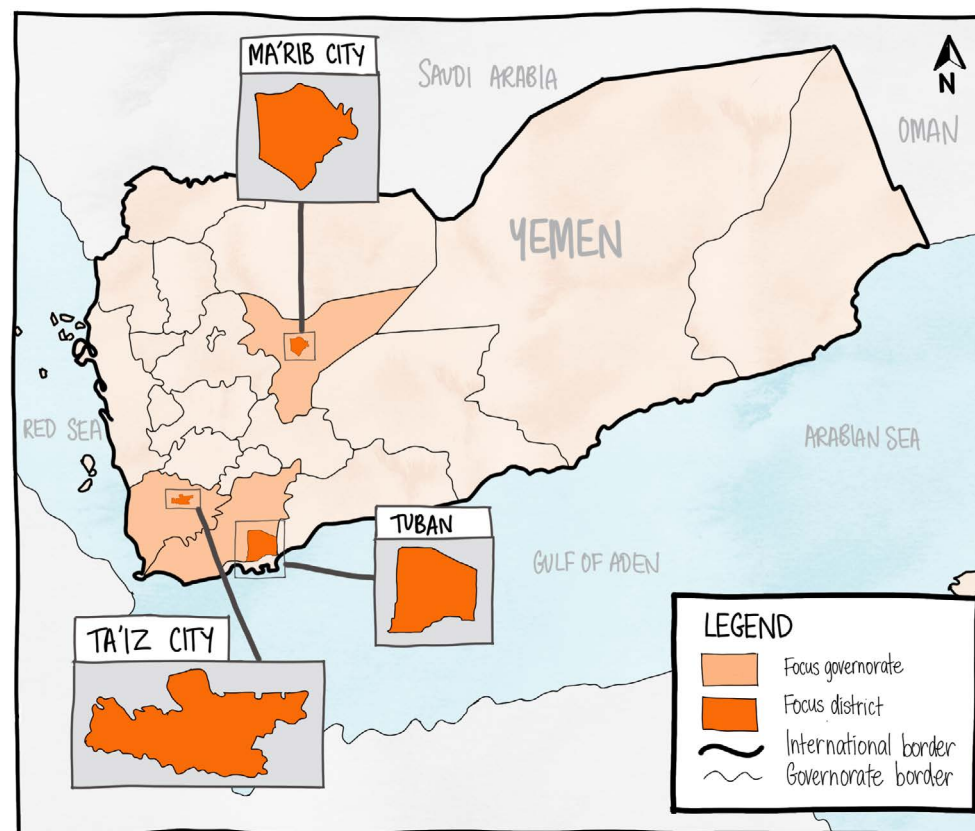
Social cohesion refers to the strength of the bonds that connect the people within a society to each other. There are multiple definitions of social cohesion. For the purpose of this analysis, key elements include belonging, trust, networks, interactions, values, solidarity, and a willingness to cooperate (Chatterjee et al. 24/04/2023; UNECE 2023).

Years of conflict in Yemen have resulted in displacement, bringing together people from diverse regions and cultural backgrounds to live side by side. Tensions between host communities and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have periodically flared, and indicators for 2025 suggest that social cohesion is deteriorating. This is evident in increased competition for limited resources and aid, as well as the weakening of traditional norms of hospitality that initially helped communities absorb the pressures of displacement (EIP 02/2025; Caton and Elie 05/02/2008). After more than a decade of conflict and displacement, growing needs and limited coping capacities appear to be driving social frictions. Longstanding political and social divisions—particularly between northerners and southerners, which pre-date the 1990 unification and are rooted in their distinct histories, ideologies, social structures, and economies—are re-emerging and intensifying (ECFR accessed 18/12/2025; EIP 02/2025; ODI 30/01/2020).

While displaced populations are among the most vulnerable, host communities also face mounting pressures of economic strain, reduced services, and weakening informal support networks. This analysis therefore examines interactions among IDPs, returnees, and host communities, and what they mean for social cohesion. Together, these dynamics narrow the space for solidarity and cooperation, replacing it with competition and mistrust. As cohesion weakens, communities become less able to manage shared challenges, resolve disputes, and sustain the reciprocal networks that underpin resilience, a pattern similarly documented across several Yemeni governorates (EIP 02/2025).

To assess whether there are signs of deteriorating social cohesion in daily life, ACAPS conducted interviews with context experts in Ma'rib city (Ma'rib governorate), Ta'iz city (Ta'iz governorate), and Tuban (Lahj governorate).

Figure 2: Locations of focus



(Source: ACAPS)

See full size map on page 18

We conducted three in-depth interviews with context experts per location to understand:

- observed changes in social cohesion since the start of the conflict and particularly since the start of 2025 among IDPs, returnees, and host communities; and
- observations gathered through professional engagement with communities and local networks.
- all the context experts had both longstanding knowledge of and recent lived experience in the locations and of IDP and host community dynamics. The interviews provided insights into people's lived experiences. While it is difficult to know from this limited-scope research how widespread the issues raised are, the examples shared are indicative of some of the ways social dynamics in communities across the target locations are changing.

The examples and stories indicate worsening social cohesion in all three locations, each with its own specific challenges. Overall, the interviews point to two main, interconnected drivers behind this decline:

- growing scarcity of key resources, leading to increased competition; and
- greater social diversity from displacement and returns, fuelling 'othering' and discrimination.

Table 2: Key features of selected locations

LOCATION	KEY FEATURES
Tuban district (Lahj governorate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second most populous district in Lahj • Estimated host community population: 138,000¹ • Estimated IDP population: 34,000 (largest IDP population in Lahj) (OCHA 16/01/2025) • Most IDPs originate from Ta'iz, Al Hodeidah, and other parts of Lahj • Conflict is the primary driver of displacement (IOM 08/01/2026)

LOCATION	KEY FEATURES
Ta'iz city	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ta'iz city, the capital of Ta'iz governorate near the Red Sea port of Al Makha, comprises three districts: Al Mudhaffar, Al Qahirah, and Salah. • Estimated host community population: 721,600 • Estimated IDP population: 161,000 • Most displacement is internal within the governorate, with smaller numbers from Ibb and Al Hodeidah. • The main drivers of displacement are conflict and limited economic opportunities. Repeated waves of displacement and return have significantly reshaped the city's demographic makeup (SCSS 16/10/2024; OCHA 16/01/2025; IOM 08/01/2026).
Ma'rib city	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ma'rib city, located in north-central Yemen, is the capital of Ma'rib governorate. • Estimated host community population: 62,000 • Estimated IDP population: 1.1 million (OCHA 16/01/2025) • Most displacement is from DFA-controlled areas, mainly Al Hodeidah, Dhamar, and Sana'a (IOM 08/01/2026). • Ma'rib has transformed in the past decade of conflict, experiencing rapid economic and population growth and emerging as a strategic hub (UN-Habitat 16/04/2021).

In **Tuban**, interviewees reported variation in host community relations between IDPs residing within neighbourhoods and IDPs living in camps, with tensions most pronounced in relation to the latter. Reported grievances included host community perceptions that IDPs living in camps are associated with increased security incidents (despite the absence of verifiable evidence for these claims) as well as perceptions of prioritised aid assistance to IDPs living in camps, which is considered unjust as the host communities also identify themselves as experiencing significant levels of need. Conversations with interviewees revealed that some host community members observed that some IDPs traveling frequently between the camps and their places of origin, which contributed to doubts about the relative urgency of needs and allocation of assistance, especially in light of host communities' own significant needs. While relations with IDPs living in host community neighbourhoods tend to be more cohesive, interviewees noted that some host community members nonetheless questioned whether IDPs—including those living among them—should be entitled to receive aid (KII 20/11/2025; KII 05/11/2025).

¹ Population figures for Ma'rib city, Ta'iz city, and Tuban are drawn from OCHA's estimated population data. Total population and estimated IDP figures are reported as separate OCHA estimates and are not aggregated.

In **Ta'iz city**, interviews highlighted how displacement has fundamentally transformed social relations since the start of the conflict. Years of conflict and displacement have brought households from across Yemen into the same neighbourhoods. However, in the absence of prior local connections, shared neighbourhood histories, and differences in customs and traditions, physical proximity has become the only bond between them (SCSS 16/10/2024; KII 11/11/2025 b; KII 11/11/2025 c). Social solidarity has long been essential to how people cope with crises, and connections embedded in neighbourhoods provide reciprocity of support (MC 31/01/2022). Based on the interviewees, however, these pre-conflict bonds have largely eroded, with people increasingly forming social connections along political, sectarian, and regional lines rather than shared neighbourhood ties. This shift can narrow support networks to in-groups, reduce trust between communities, and make collective problem-solving and reconciliation more difficult. It may also heighten sensitivity around the allocation of resources and services, as perceived bias can reinforce factional affiliations and deepen mistrust, particularly where longstanding political and regional divides have resurfaced (KII 11/11/2025 b; KII 11/11/2025 c). This aligns with findings from a recently published study, which similarly documents the erosion of pre-conflict reciprocity and the emergence of identity-based affiliations (EIP 02/2025). As identity-based affiliations replace neighbourhood-based solidarity, the informal safety nets that communities rely on in times of crisis become increasingly fragmented and exclusionary, leaving those outside dominant groups with fewer pathways to support.

In **Ma'rib city**, interviewees noted disputes and complaints between the host community and IDPs over scarce resources, including access to water and other basic services; rising competition for housing and jobs; and heightened sensitivity around aid distribution. These tensions have surfaced periodically since IDPs first arrived early in the conflict, but interviews suggest they are increasing as displacement continues and resources become more strained (KII 14/11/2025; KII 15/11/2025).

“The relationship between displaced people and host communities is complex owing to scarce resources, limited opportunities, a lack of livelihoods, population growth, rising prices, and pressures on basic services.”

-Female interviewee, 15 November 2025

Overstretched resources are making it harder to meet needs

All of the interviewees in **Ta'iz city and Ma'rib city** identified growing challenges in meeting needs as a driver of social tensions. Interviewees described how displacement has strained coexistence and coping capacities, leading to a reduction in unconditional support from the host community for IDPs and a growing sense of unfairness over access to resources and aid distribution (SCSS 01/06/2023; KII 11/11/2025 a; KII 11/11/2025 c; KII 14/11/2025; KII 15/11/2025; KII 16/11/2025).

“Pressure on resources and the economic situation has reduced people’s tolerance (for each other). People don’t have the emotional space or patience to deal comfortably with each other; even small things can turn into disputes. Scarcity has also fostered a sense of self-preservation, where individuals prioritise their own survival, giving rise to a form of social selfishness.”

-Female interviewee c, 11 November 2025

In **Ta'iz city**, residents struggle to meet their basic needs; the population has grown significantly while at the same time the conflict has damaged or depleted essential resources. This, in turn, fuels tensions underpinned by competition over limited resources. In Ta'iz, housing has been a particular cause of friction. Residents flee during periods of intense fighting, and during their absence, people from other locations might move into these vacant homes. When the original residents return, they find their houses and neighbourhoods inhabited by strangers (JYP 10/11/2025; NRC 02/11/2023; UN-Habitat 11/2020; KII 11/11/2025 a; KII 11/11/2025 b; KII 11/11/2025 c). Even when families are able to reclaim their houses, not all their neighbours succeed. As the quote below highlights, this can decrease returnees’ sense of familiarity and belonging in their old neighbourhood (KII 11/11/2025 a; KII 11/11/2025 c).

“My own family was displaced from Salah district in Ta'iz city to the centre of the city at the start of the war. Later, we managed to return to Salah but not to our original home. It wasn’t easy; we really had to push our way back. I know other families who tried and couldn’t. You see it all over social media; people just can’t return to their homes because the people who moved in refuse to leave. Even though we are back, everything feels different. The neighbours are gone; the place has changed. Even if the house has the same name, it no longer feels like home.”

-Male interviewee a, 11 November 2025

In **Ma'rib city**, interviewees indicate that the hospitality once shown by the host community to IDPs has diminished over time, due to prolonged conflict and growing economic pressures. The main reason appears to be that the capacity of the host community to cope with their own needs has become stretched (KII 15/11/2025; KII 16/11/2025; KII 14/11/2025). For example, several interviewees noted that support has become less unconditional and more interest-based, shaped by both the host community's ability to help and what may be gained in return. They also described increasing competition linked to the continued influx of IDPs, particularly over housing, food, and access to water. This competition has contributed to IDPs experiencing growing marginalisation and discrimination, further deteriorating social relations between the two groups (KII 14/11/2025; KII 15/11/2025).

“Most of the tension comes from a lack of the basics. Housing is hard to find, water and services are limited, and jobs are scarce, so competition is growing between host communities and displaced people. Aid distribution is also causing friction, especially when there isn't enough support for everyone. All of this is putting real pressure on the community.”

- Female interviewee, 15 November 2025

“The situation of hospitality has changed compared to the beginning of the conflict, with the influx of IDPs into the area leading to competition over sources, including access to housing, food, and water. Marginalisation and discrimination have also contributed to a deterioration in social relations. We can't say there's no solidarity and support; it's still there, but it has decreased.”

- Male interviewee, 16 November 2025

Interviewees noted that when aid is insufficient for the number of people who need it, frustrations emerge and are expressed through complaints, the criticism of services, or disagreements over aid prioritisation. As noted in the quote below, in Ma'rib city, interviewees indicated how these tensions are often subtly reflected in the quality of community interactions rather than direct confrontations. Interviewees explained that some host community members feel that IDPs are taking their opportunities, while displaced people express feeling unwelcome or marginalised (KII 14/11/2025; KII 15/11/2025).

“Tensions often show up through everyday complaints between residents, comments about the lack of services, or disagreements over priorities during aid distributions. Sometimes, they appear in small disputes over shared resources such as water, electricity, or housing. They can also be felt as social sensitivity, where some residents feel that displaced people are taking their opportunities, while displaced families feel they are not fully welcome. These tensions are usually not openly confrontational, but they are noticeable in the way people talk, how decisions are received.”

- Female interviewee, 16 November 2025

Tension over livelihood opportunities

Based on conversations with context experts, IDPs across Yemen have been found to work for less than the usual market rate, depressing wages overall. This was confirmed by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation, which found that in IDP camps, most displaced people engaged in heavy labour such as portering in markets, car washing, and collecting rubbish for resale, earning between 20,000–40,000 YER per month—well below normal market wages for comparable work with many relying on charity and humanitarian assistance to make up the shortfall (IASC 14/07/2022). This desperation to secure any available income, regardless of the rate, has been documented as a source of downward pressure on wages in displacement-affected areas, undermining the livelihoods of host community members who cannot compete at the same price. This was reported by interviewees in **Tuban** as a source of resentment for the host community (KII 05/11/2025; KII 10/11/2025; KII 20/11/2025). This dynamic is noteworthy because it suggests a shift in how some host community members perceive IDPs—not only as people fleeing hardship, but increasingly as potential economic competitors. Once such perceptions take hold, they can be difficult to reverse and may contribute to broader social tensions that extend beyond the labour market.

“Displacement has affected local labour dynamics. The arrival of displaced workers willing to accept much lower wages – for example, YER 3,000 a day compared to the local rate of YER 8,000 – has pushed wages down for the host community, too, and increased pressure on local livelihoods. This has created quiet resentment and a growing sense of economic insecurity among the host community.”

- Male interviewee, 5 November 2025

Two experts from **Lahj** heard of IDP households working on farms in exchange for accommodation, reducing opportunities previously available to host community labourers, particularly women, for whom casual agricultural labour was one of the few opportunities for paid work (KII 20/11/2025; KII 05/11/2025). This dynamic appears particularly relevant for women's economic autonomy. Interview accounts suggest that as some IDP households take on whole-farm arrangements, host community women may be pushed further to the margins of the agricultural labour market. This, in turn, could narrow their already limited livelihood options and heighten their economic vulnerability.

“Before, farms were either run by the owner or by workers hired for specific tasks. That’s changed since displaced families from Al Hodeidah arrived. Some families have come to offer to manage farms from A to Z in exchange for living there. I’ve seen this on two farms – a whole family working the land. This has reduced jobs for host community workers, especially women, who are now only hired during peak seasons such as tomato or onion harvests instead of working every day.”

Male interviewee, 20 November 2025

Interviewees from **Ma’rib** said the combination of limited employment opportunities and rising poverty is increasing pressure on host community households, further aggravated as IDPs also compete for the few opportunities available (KII 12/11/2025 b; KII 15/11/2025; KII 16/11/2025).

“There just aren’t enough basics to go around. Housing is hard to find, water and services are limited, and jobs are very few, so competition keeps growing between host communities and displaced people.”

Female interviewee, 15 November 2025

Interview insights from these locations point to livelihood tensions shaped by broader structural pressures. When displacement concentrates large numbers of people in areas with few economic opportunities, competition for work can appear zero-sum, with both host communities and IDPs disadvantaged. Host community members report downward pressure on wages and reduced access to jobs, while IDPs often remain in precarious or exploitative arrangements out of necessity. This shared economic precarity, if left unaddressed, may contribute to more persistent inter group tensions and weaken prospects for social cohesion.

Disrupted identities and the breakdown of social capital in Ta’iz

Leveraging social capital is a longstanding source of support for Yemeni households in times of need. This is often centred around neighbourhoods and community vendors. For example, households may rely on nearby relatives and neighbours for small loans, shared food, or childcare, while community shops and vendors may extend informal credit or allow delayed payment based on established relationships. This informal social safety net is based on reciprocity, and as the reciprocity continues, it is self-reinforcing, with connections sustaining social cohesion (MC 01/2022; ACAPS 24/05/2025). The changes to the demographic composition of Ta’iz city have affected the networks and social capital households can rely on.

The presence of households perceived as linked to armed militia can create a sense of insecurity and a perceived power imbalance in neighbourhoods, reducing trust and everyday interaction. It may also shape how returnees interpret access to housing and services, where affiliation is seen as providing protection or influence, fuelling resentment and localised tensions (KII 11/11/2025 a; KII 11/11/2025 b; KII 11/11/2025 c). This matters because social capital is not only a source of comfort but also a practical coping mechanism. When it weakens, households may lose access to informal support systems that help them manage shocks, and less resilient in the face of future challenges.

“In places such as Salah district in Ta’iz city (which is a frontline), people who return don’t find the original residents. Instead, they find new families often linked to fighters who have moved into the houses. So, when people come back, especially to areas near the front lines, their neighbourhoods have changed.”

Male interviewee a, Ta’iz city, 11 November 2025

Increasingly, political and sectarian affiliation has come to define how people in Ta’iz city interact. According to interviewees, political and sectarian affiliation before the conflict was not a feature of daily interactions. Ideological differences existed but were not socially defining. With the war, these alignments have come to influence the support households can access. Political identity has become intertwined with social identity, contributing to a climate of mistrust. Interviewees noted that disputes emerge through political accusations, exclusion based on perceived loyalties, and suspicion of motives, and in this environment, disputes are harder to resolve (KII 11/11/2025 b; KII 11/11/2025 c; SCSS 24/01/2022).

“Before, people accepted differences. If someone was socialist, fine; Islah (Islamic brotherhood), also fine. We worked with colleagues for years without knowing their political or sectarian background. Only after the war did people start saying things like ‘She is Shi’a’ or ‘He is this or that’. These labels didn’t matter before. Now people constantly classify each other; everyone wants to know where you stand so they can decide how to deal with you and put you in a box.”

-Female interviewee b, 11 November 2025

Deterioration in social order over perception of increased insecurity in Tuban

A report by the European Institute of Peace examining conditions in several governorates in Yemen noted a general rise in criminal activity linked to the broader economic collapse. As unemployment and livelihood deterioration deepen, survey participants described how some unemployed youth have turned to crime to survive. Many respondents recounted increases in theft and fraud as families struggle to cover basic expenses (EIP 02/2025). Interviewees for this report, mentioned observing increased criminal activity and security incidents in Tuban, where according to context experts, increasing theft, illicit drug use, and harassment have contributed to an environment where people feel uneasy and social cohesion shows signs of fragmentation. While there is no evidence that the increase in crime is a result of IDP presence, interviewees noted that they are often blamed for it, perpetuating negative attitudes towards them (KII 20/11/2025; KII 05/11/2025; KII 10/11/2025).

Interviewees noted that direct conflict between IDPs and host communities can escalate rapidly as people collectively take sides based on displacement status, irrespective of culpability, resulting in deepening hostility (KII 20/11/2025; KII 10/11/2025; KII 05/11/2025).

“Host-IDP disputes often escalate because camps instinctively rally behind the accused IDP, even when they are not at fault. This collective defence provokes stronger reactions from host community members, turning individual disagreements into group-based conflicts. As a result, tensions intensify along displacement lines, regardless of personal responsibility.”

-Male interviewee, 5 November 2025

Tensions over shifting practices and social roles

Across Yemen, there are notable social and cultural differences. There are also notable differences across communities shaped by local context, including geography (e.g. coastal versus highland settings and rural versus urban livelihoods), religious traditions, tribal affiliation, class, and external influences that have shaped daily life. For example, communities with strong connections to trade routes, migration, or historically international urban centres have developed distinct social norms and expectations compared to more isolated rural areas. As a result, practices that are acceptable in one area, may be viewed as inappropriate or unfamiliar elsewhere. This includes expectations around how men/women interact and dress, wedding and mourning customs, forms of socialising, or local interpretations of hospitality and privacy (CARPO 05/03/2019). Interviews and discussions suggest that these differences can become a source of tension when people from different backgrounds live in proximity and interpret each other’s behaviour through different social norms (KII 20/11/2025; KII 10/11/2025; KII 05/11/2025).

Certain behaviour observed among IDP populations can generate negative perceptions within host communities, even when those behaviours stem from the difficult conditions of displacement rather than cultural tradition. In Tuban, interviewees raised concerns about open defecation among camp-based IDPs, citing fears of deteriorating hygiene, contamination of shared spaces, risk of disease, and perceived erosion of social norms around privacy and acceptable public behaviour. Rather than recognising inadequate access to sanitation as the likely underlying cause, host community members attributed this practice to IDPs themselves, reinforcing perceptions of IDPs as a bad influence—including on youth—and deepening social tensions and the othering of IDP communities (KII 10/11/2025; KII 05/11/2025; KII 20/11/2025).

In January 2025, around 15.2 million people across Yemen did not have access to clean water and sanitation, and the sanitation situation has deteriorated from the conflict (OCHA 15/01/2025; Mohammed 15/06/2023). In 2024, Yemen had the highest global burden of cholera of almost a quarter of a million suspected cases, illustrating the negative health impacts of unsafe water use and inadequate sanitation (UN 23/12/2024; WHO 05/12/2024). Framing open defecation primarily as an IDP behaviour, rather than as a consequence of inadequate sanitation infrastructure, shifts attention away from the systemic conditions driving it, toward displaced populations (KII 05/11/2025).

A distinct but related dynamic concerns social practices that may be more prevalent in IDPs' regions of origin than in host communities. All three interviewees independently raised a perceived increase in cases of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Tuban, which they linked to the arrival of IDPs from areas where the practice is more widely observed. Unlike open defecation, this is not a behaviour arising from displacement conditions but rather reflects differing social and cultural practices between IDP and host communities.

The households discussed were identified as being from Al Hodeidah, and the practice was said to be causing friction between the host community and the IDPs. This friction stems from the strong resistance to FGM in Lahj, and there are concerns that the IDPs practising it could become a re-entry point for the practice to increase in the wider community (KII 05/11/2025; KII 20/11/2025). One of the interviewees said, *"We spent years fighting FGM; bringing it again means it will increase in the community"* (KII 20/11/2025). This reflects concerns that renewed exposure to the practice may reinforce social pressure and acceptance around FGM.

"Displaced families arriving from Al Hodeidah and other areas have brought back abandoned traditions, such as FGM, to areas that had previously stopped these practices. This revival of old customs has created cultural friction between the host community and IDPs."

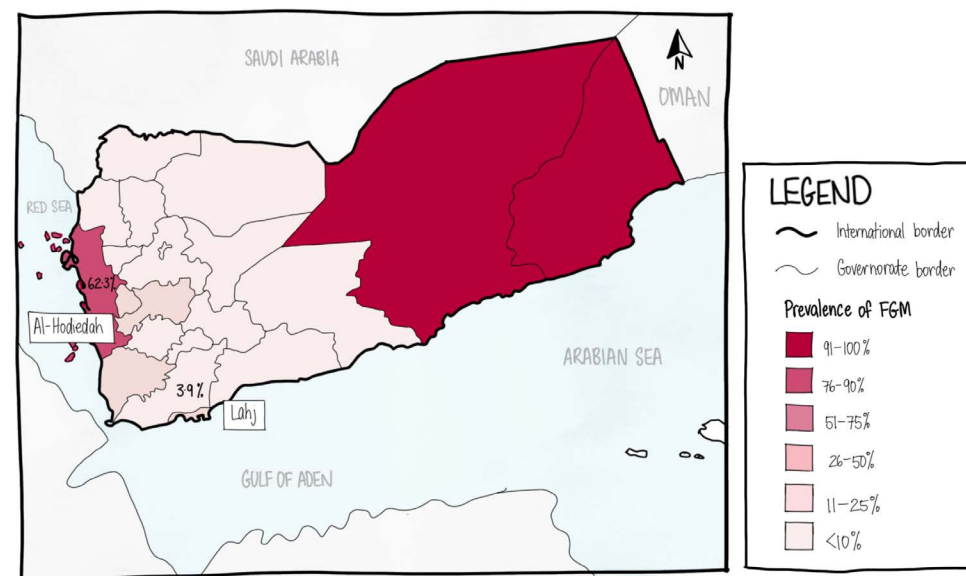
Male interviewee, 5 November 2025

Recent comprehensive data on FGM is not available given the sensitivity of the subject matter and the challenges posed by the war inhibiting widespread data collection. Data from 2013 found that nationally, an estimated 18.5% of women and girls aged 15–49 had undergone some form of genital cutting, with significant regional disparities. At the time, Lahj was among the governorates where prevalence was lowest, while Al Hodeidah had the third-highest prevalence at 62.3% after Al Maharah (84.7%) and Hadramawt (79.9%) (FGMCRI 09/2020; MoPHP/CSO 07/2015; ACAPS 17/11/2023). In Lahj, displacement may alter the risk environment, where communities with different practices and norms are living side by side; however, there is insufficient recent data to assess whether prevalence has changed. War and instability has severely disrupted efforts to combat FGM, and alongside high rates of violence against women and the prevalence of harmful gender norms FGM is perceived to remain widespread to varying degrees across Yemen (Al-Taj and Al hadari 17/07/2023; UNFPA 09/02/2025).

It should be noted that the above issues were not suggested by the interviewees but raised independently by the experts, with two raising open defecation and all three raising FGM (KII 10/11/2025; KII 05/11/2025; KII 20/11/2025).

In conclusion, social cohesion across the three locations shows signs of weakening as protracted displacement, rising needs, and shrinking coping capacities strain trust, reciprocity, and everyday cooperation, increasing othering and friction over scarce resources and assistance. As pressures persist, traditional norms of hospitality and solidarity that initially helped absorb displacement appear to be giving way to more conditional, interest-based support, while perceptions of unfairness in aid and service access heighten everyday grievances. These dynamics risk narrowing social networks to in-groups, deepening mistrust between communities, and reducing the space for collective support. These dynamics also have implications for conflict sensitivity. Perceptions of unequal access to assistance, competition over resources, and identity-based divisions risk reinforcing existing grievances.

Figure 3: FGM prevalence in Yemen by governorate (2013 data)



Source: FGMCRI (accessed 25/01/2026)
See full size map on page 18

THEME 2: SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE: CHALLENGES FACING LOCAL AND NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Local organisations play a vital role in meeting community needs and delivering humanitarian assistance across Yemen, often serving as the primary lifeline for vulnerable populations in hard-to-reach areas. Throughout 2025, the operating environment for local and international civil society organisations across areas of control of both the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen (IRG) and the De-Facto Authority (DFA) in the north of Yemen (also known as the Houthis) has continued to deteriorate.

Within Yemen, aid workers have been detained, bureaucratic processes have become increasingly restrictive, and negative attitudes towards humanitarian organisations shared by conservative groups have affected public perceptions. Internationally, both the designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) and reduced donor budgets for aid funding, have affected the amount of assistance entering the country (US DOS 04/03/2025; SCSS 18/03/2025). The net result is that across the country, the operational space has narrowed, costs associated with aid provision have increased, risks to responders have heightened, and responding to needs has become more challenging. Both interviews and secondary data indicate that these challenges are more severe in DFA-controlled areas given tighter controls and the detention of aid workers.

Based on interviews with eight CSOs, the challenges facing Yemeni organisations can be grouped into three main categories:

- challenging bureaucratic and administrative processes;
- negative perceptions of humanitarian responders, fuelling community resistance; and
- decreased funding.

Table 3: Challenges facing Yemeni organisations in IRG-and DFA-controlled areas

CHALLENGE	IRG-CONTROLLED AREAS	DFA-CONTROLLED AREAS
Challenging bureaucratic and administrative processes	Fragmented governance in the IRG areas affecting access and the ability to get permission to operate	Complex and time-consuming approval processes Scope of operations restricted to only life-saving programmes, with specific types of activities prohibited (especially related to protection and gender) Designation of the Houthis as an FTO impeding collaboration with and funding from international organisations
Negative perceptions of humanitarian parties fuelling community resistance	Campaigns by religious leaders, imams in the mosque, or influential figures on social media using Yemeni culture and religious justifications to criticise civil society groups and cast doubt over their motives, making it increasingly challenging for organisations to build trust with communities	DFA-led campaigns portraying humanitarian organisations as spies with a Western agenda, creating mistrust, reducing community acceptance, and increasing risks for staff Detention and arrest of staff
Decreased funding	Overall reduction in funding, including the 2025 USAID cuts The relocation of many organisations to non-DFA areas increasing competition for the reduced funds	The closure or relocation of many international responders and some Yemeni organisations as a result of severe funding contraction linked to the DFA's designation as an FTO, coupled with the targeting of aid workers and human rights defenders increasing risks to staff

Challenging bureaucratic and administrative processes

Bureaucratic and administrative impediments are among the main constraints on humanitarian activities in Yemen. All eight interviews conducted with CSOs highlighted bureaucratic impediments as a major challenge across the country, with interviewees reporting that they are particularly severe in DFA-controlled areas. Here, organisations face complex and time-consuming approval processes, and significant interference in field activities, such as the detention of staff by the DFA or pressure from authorities, recurrently disrupt aid provision. As of December 2025, at least 69 UN staff and an unknown number of I/NGO staff remained detained without due process, highlighting the operational risks of working in DFA-controlled areas (UN 19/12/2025; HRW 08/01/2026).

The 2025 FTO designation of the DFA has compounded these challenges, disrupting banking channels, and creating uncertainty over what constitutes “material support to a designated entity” (AidData 01/11/2025; SCSS 12/11/2025). Although humanitarian exemptions are technically available, they are narrow and poorly communicated, leaving many organisations unable to operate effectively in these areas (AidData 01/11/2025; Reuters 17/09/2025).

In contrast, IRG-controlled areas are generally less risky for responders and humanitarian organisations, but bureaucratic challenges persist. At the time of writing (Dec 2025), multiple authorities, including the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in the south, Islah-aligned authorities in Ma’rib and Ta’iz, and Tariq Saleh along the west coast, maintain control across different regions and governorates. The different authorities have their own procedures, which can be overlapping and contradictory. Territorial control is also currently in a state of flux, with significant changes especially since the escalation of conflict between the IRG and STC in December 2025 (which took place after data collection for this report) (SCSS 12/12/2025; AJ 14/01/2026). Interviewees explained that overall, navigating the complex bureaucratic requirements slows down programme implementation and can also increase the operational costs needed to build strong relationships with a range of different responders (International IDEA 09/04/2025; INTERSOS 24/04/2024; KII 23/11/2025; KII 25/11/2025; KII 27/11/2025)..

“Different authorities control different regions: the STC in Aden and Lahj, Islah in Ma’rib, and Tariq Saleh’s forces in the west coast each imposing its own requirements, gatekeepers, and political expectations. Humanitarian work is often used to advance political agendas, and in some areas, organisations cannot operate unless they have strong connections with local power structures.”

-Female interviewee, 23 November 2025

Negative perception of humanitarian responders fuelling community resistance

Negative perceptions stemming from deliberate campaigns have increasingly constrained humanitarian operations across Yemen by creating mistrust in communities and making it more challenging for humanitarian organisations to build the relationships needed to operate.

In DFA-controlled areas, information campaigns against humanitarian organisations come directly from DFA leadership and are disseminated through documentaries, religious speeches, and public messaging. They portray humanitarian organisations as spies with the objective of advancing a Western agenda (WJWC 22/10/2025; HRW 16/01/2025; Al Araby 18/10/2025). These narratives have contributed to heightened mistrust of humanitarian organisations within communities, reduced community acceptance, and increased risks for staff (WCYS 03/11/2025).

Interviews with CSOs and literature review indicate that in IRG-controlled areas, online campaigns and religious messaging, particularly during Friday sermons and prayers, increasingly criticise women’s participation in public life and women-led organisations (UN Women 08/12/2025; GSF 03/2025). Because religious authorities are widely trusted and sermons strongly shape public opinion, such messaging can quickly influence community attitudes. This has contributed to declining community trust and acceptance of the response, especially in rural areas, prompting organisations to exercise greater caution in how gender-related activities are framed and implemented (WJWC 09/02/2025; ACAPS 30/08/2023).

“Campaigns against women and civil society organisations are widespread. Some mosques often affiliated with political parties deliver sermons containing hate speech against women and organizations. Influential social media figures also spread hostile narratives, exploiting the public’s high engagement with social media. These campaigns damage the reputation of civil society organisations, create security risks, contribute to organizational closures, and erode community trust. They reinforce traditional gender norms and increase violence against women.”

-Female interviewee, 27 November 2025

Interviews with CSOs indicate that across the country, negative community perceptions of humanitarian organisations have limited humanitarian access, forced programme adaptations, and reduced the ability of grassroots organisations to deliver inclusive and principled assistance. This is not new; since 2017, misinformation and anti-international narratives have been circulated, leading to mistrust of international responders. Such narratives create a challenging environment for humanitarian organisations, particularly those working on gender and protection (SCSS 31/07/2024; ACAPS 30/08/2023; MCD 16/12/2022; SCSS 15/12/2019).

“Hate speech disseminated through mosques and media platforms further undermines trust. Because mosques are highly trusted, their messaging strongly shapes public opinion. When religious leaders frame women’s participation or travel as attempts to change cultural norms or promote feminist agendas, community distrust deepens. Political parties sometimes exploit this rhetoric to advance their own agendas.”

-Female interviewee, 21 November 2025

Funding reduction

Funding reductions and tightened security restrictions have forced many organisations to downsize or close, reducing their capacity to deliver a high-quality, holistic response to the complex and interconnected needs of households. As a result, support across health, food security, women’s economic empowerment, psychosocial support, protection, and WASH is often reduced in scope, implemented in a fragmented way, or discontinued altogether. These closures also undermine staff sustainability and institutional knowledge when experienced teams disperse, as relationships and contextual understanding built with communities are lost. Even when funding resumes, organisations may need to rebuild teams and systems from scratch, which can delay delivery and impede programme quality as new or temporary staff require time to learn the context, community dynamics, and operational approaches (KII 25/11/2025; KII 27/11/2025).

“Over the past two years, many organisations have been directly affected by the complex security situation in DFA areas and the sharp reduction in funding. Tightened security restrictions and the relocation of many international organisations to the IRG areas have led to the suspension of most

developmental and quality programmes implemented, including women’s economic empowerment, protection and psychosocial support, awareness-raising, education, and youth- and women-focused programmes.”

-Female interviewee, 25 November 2025

“Direct impacts of the challenges include reduced ability to maintain essential programmes. Many organisations have had to close or downsize, resulting in job losses that affect families dependent on humanitarian staff as primary breadwinners.”

-Male interviewee, 27 November 2025

Impact on programme quality

The earlier three points impede access, availability, and acceptability, but even where organisations can operate, these challenges also threaten programme quality. Yemeni organisations consistently report that lengthy approval procedures, repetitive documentation requests, and restrictions on activities in DFA- and IRG-controlled areas delay or prevent timely data collection and monitoring. This weakens the evidence base needed to design appropriate, contextualised interventions driven by accurate assessments of needs and capacities.

“The accuracy of surveys and qualitative data has declined, particularly for questions related to gender-based violence (GBV) and women-focused activities. This has limited our ability to collect comprehensive and reliable data on the most vulnerable groups, despite [likely] rising needs, especially among widows, divorced women, and female heads of households.”

Male interviewee, 27 November 2025

Administrative burdens further reduce programme effectiveness, as fragmented and inconsistent approval processes across multiple authorities divert staff time from activities. These challenges are particularly acute in IRG-controlled areas, where navigating multiple power centres and repeated documentation requests consumes significant organisational capacity.

Conversations with CSO indicated that women-led organisations in IRG areas face additional operational barriers given limited access to informal networking channels, such as qat sessions, which are often used to secure approvals. They are also required at times to liaise with security personnel for updates on movement permits and approvals. This can be problematic, as such calls may occur late at night or at inconvenient times, potentially exposing women to risks within their families. These delays in approvals and communication slow down activities and disrupt project timelines. When projects are delayed the compressed time frame often results in rushed programming, which can undermine the quality of assistance provided to people in need (KII 17/11/2025; KII 26/11/2025).

Male guardianship (Mahram) presents another significant challenge. In DFA-controlled areas, women cannot travel without a Mahram across governorates and this requirement is particularly restrictive for women working in the humanitarian sector, leading some to leave the field altogether (ACAPS 14/12/2023). Although the Mahram rule is not enforced in IRG areas, female humanitarians still face difficulties in accessing certain locations, such as Abyan and Ad Dali', where communities often disapprove of women travelling without a Mahram and may subject them to hurtful remarks or negative perceptions (KII 27/11/2025; KII 24/11/2025; UN Women 24/11/2025). These barriers are rooted in the traditional norms and conservative values that shape Yemen's historical and social context. Adherence to Mahram practices varies by geography, social class, tribal affiliation, education, profession, and family preference. Campaigns against local and international organisations in IRG and DFA areas have also fuelled mistrust, further complicating women's access (UN Women 24/11/2025). The implication is clear: if women cannot reach these areas, engaging with women in need and accurately understanding their priorities become extremely difficult. It also has negative implications on the ability to effectively conduct hygiene promotion or address sensitive issues such as GBV, leaving critical gaps in the humanitarian response.

"Approval processes vary across authorities and governorates in IRG areas, and each area has its own political affiliations and bureaucratic requirements. Organisations with connections to civic authorities can obtain approvals more easily, while others face lengthy, complicated procedures. Some organisations rely on qat-chewing sessions to build relationships and secure approvals, but this avenue is largely inaccessible to women. As a result, women-led organisations face greater operational barriers than men-led organisations."

-Female interviewee, 20 November 2025

"Women in IRG areas face limitations when travelling to conservative regions such as Abyan, Ad Dali', and Shabwah. I have heard many stories from female humanitarians who say that communities sometimes refuse to interact with us, asking, 'How come you are here without a Mahram?' Other times, they accuse us of trying to spoil women's minds."

-Female interviewee, 27 November 2025

Women-led and women's rights organisations delivering GBV services also face operational and safety barriers that directly undermine service quality and continuity (KII 20/11/2025; KII 27/11/2025). An International Rescue Committee report highlights cultural sensitivities around GBV, threats and intimidation linked to challenging harmful norms, approval delays linked to mistrust or limited understanding by authorities, and movement restrictions (IRC 25/06/2025). These constraints can reduce timely access to care, disrupt outreach and case management, and limit safe staffing models, particularly the ability to recruit, retain, and deploy trained female staff while increasing risks to confidentiality and survivor trust. The report also notes a perceived disconnect between some INGO frameworks and lived realities, with concepts such as feminism sometimes viewed suspiciously as a 'Western agenda', which can further weaken acceptance and partnership (IRC 25/06/2025). Together, these dynamics restrict women-led organisations' ability to deliver consistent, survivor-centred GBV services safely and effectively. They disproportionately impact on programmes addressing gender-based violence, women's economic empowerment, and reproductive health, which rely heavily on specialised local organisations and female staff.

"Gender-related topics remain highly sensitive across Yemen. In IRG areas, the level of sensitivity varies by education level, urban versus rural context, and the conservatism of the community. Mosques and religious actors frequently use social media to amplify hate speech against organizations and women, contributing to a hostile environment for gender-focused programming."

-Female interviewee, 26 November 2025

Beyond bureaucratic and funding challenges, women's public participation is often socially delegitimised. The aforementioned framing of women-led initiatives as unrepresentative of Yemeni culture or their dismissal as Western imports has undermined acceptance of women's civic and peacebuilding roles. This reduces the sustainability of gender-focused programming by marginalising women's

participation in public life (YPC 04/2024; SCSS 28/04/2023; IDS 20/10/2025). One interviewee shared an example of how these perceptions manifest in practice: *“In one case, authorities in IRG areas questioned an organisation’s intention to send women abroad for training, implying concerns about inappropriate details of participant need”* (KII 26/11/2025). Such interactions can deter organisations from investing in women’s capacity-building and limit access to specialised training, ultimately weakening programme quality by reducing the availability of skilled female staff and limiting women’s ability to design and deliver services that are trusted and accessible for women and girls.

These social delegitimising dynamics, together with bureaucratic and funding constraints, undermine programme quality by eroding the evidence base, staffing capacity, and community acceptance needed for timely, survivor-centred humanitarian programming.

Implications of reduced gender and protection programming especially in DFA controlled areas

Conversations with CSOs indicated three direct impacts of reduced gender and protection programming on women and girls, particularly in DFA-controlled areas.

Challenges in accessing GBV services

Insights from interviews suggest that challenges in GBV service provision—including reductions in shelters and psychosocial support—may leave women and girls more exposed to violence—while prevailing social norms that justify such violence often remain unchallenged (KII 27/11/2025; KII 21/11/2025). Funding cuts and restrictions on GBV programming have led some organisations to scale back or close programmes that previously provided case management, psychosocial support, and women’s safe spaces. In certain areas, respondents noted a reduction in vital case management services. As services contract, survivors appear to face fewer safe and confidential options for seeking support, and with shelters operating at limited capacity, many cannot be transferred to safety, leaving them vulnerable or forced to return to difficult situations (KII 27/11/2025; KII 21/11/2025; ACAPS 23/01/2025).

Beyond immediate service gaps, interviewees highlighted concerns that the prioritisation of lifesaving aid over prevention work risks eroding gains made in shifting norms around women’s rights. The discontinuation of awareness raising and community outreach activities may weaken mechanisms for challenging honour based expectations and the culture of silence, allowing harmful norms such as the justification of domestic violence as discipline or the view of early marriage as protection to persist (KII 27/11/2025; KII 21/11/2025; ACAPS 23/01/2025). As one interviewee noted:

“The absence of protection services and psychosocial support left women and girls without any safety net, at a time when poverty and marginalization were rising. The lack of empowerment programs deprived women of opportunities to build a better future for themselves and their families, and many of the efforts that had been strengthening community resilience gave way to a widening void over time.”

-Male interviewee, 27 November 2025

Shifts in economic independence and access to care

Interviewees suggested that the closure of women’s economic empowerment (WEE) programmes may have deepened economic dependency, leaving some women with fewer options to leave abusive households and reducing a critical entry point through which they could build trust with service providers and eventually access GBV support (KII 27/11/2025; KII 21/11/2025; KII 20/11/2025). With WEE and livelihood activities suspended or scaled back, interviewees noted that many women and girls no longer have a socially acceptable reason to leave their homes or attend service centres, which can isolate them from psychosocial and case management support previously embedded within these programmes (KII 20/11/2025; KII 21/11/2025). Literature confirms that programs such as Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs)—serve as critical platforms for engaging women and providing support in Yemen. These structures offer a space for networking, learning, and accessing services that might otherwise be unavailable to women who are restricted by mobility norms (WB 12/12/2025).

Economic precarity was also described as heightening GBV risks directly, as the removal of livelihood support increases the likelihood that families resort to negative coping strategies. Because many organisations had integrated GBV awareness and prevention into WEE and training activities, the loss of these programmes appears to have stalled efforts to influence community norms, removing platforms used to discuss rights and safety and allowing harmful social norms to persist unchallenged (KII 20/11/ 2025; KII 21/11/2025; WB 12/12/2025). As one interviewee explained:

“The security and funding challenges faced by the organization across Yemen and especially in DFA areas have had a profound impact on its ability to deliver services and meet community needs, with both direct and indirect effects. At the direct level, many essential services relied upon by hundreds of women and children—such as awareness sessions, psychosocial support, and economic empowerment—were halted, depriving beneficiaries of safe and necessary spaces for guidance and assistance. With the suspension of these sessions, many women found themselves with no place to turn to, leading some to endure violence or harmful practices without protection”

- Female interviewee, 21 November 2025

Programme disruptions and reduced trust in services

Interviewees described how programme disruptions linked to funding shortfalls may have reduced women’s trust in humanitarian services, creating a sense of abandonment in communities where these centres had been highly valued. Interviewees suggested that this makes it less likely women will seek help from the remaining and often overstretched service points (KII 20/11/2025; KII 27/11/2025). As one interviewee noted:

“In DFA areas, all the organization’s programs were affected without exception, but the greatest damage fell on the specialized programs that formed the backbone of our work with women and vulnerable groups. Economic and social empowerment programs, which had been improving women’s livelihood opportunities and strengthening their role in society, were severely disrupted. In addition, women’s and protection programs—including activities addressing gender-based violence were harmed as well.

-Female interviewee, 20 November 2025

These findings were echoed by literature review, which documented that the absence of gender-responsive protection programming produces a cascade of serious consequences for women and girls (WRT 06/2025; WB 12/12/2025). With GBV services, legal aid, and psychosocial care reduced or limited, women are left exposed to higher rates of domestic violence, early and forced marriage, and other forms of GBV, while the social norms that justify such violence go unchallenged. Without gender-responsive livelihood support, women remain economically dependent, making early marriage more likely as a perceived protective strategy. The deficiency of health and reproductive health services results in untreated injuries and unaddressed trauma, while the absence of gender-sensitive school programmes leads to girls being withdrawn from education, limiting their longer-term prospects (WRT 06/2025; WB 12/12/2025).

FIGURE 1: ANALYSIS DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

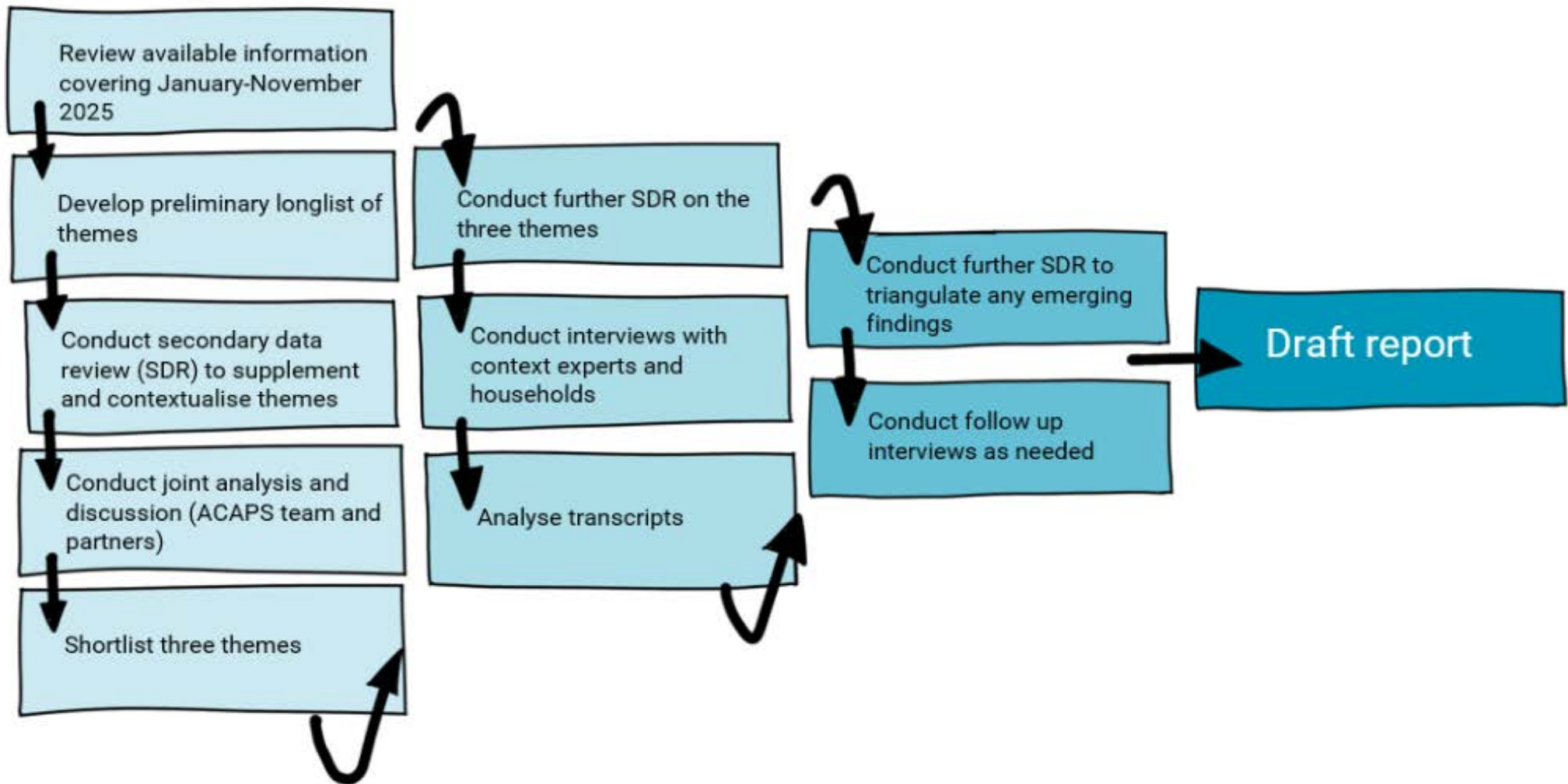
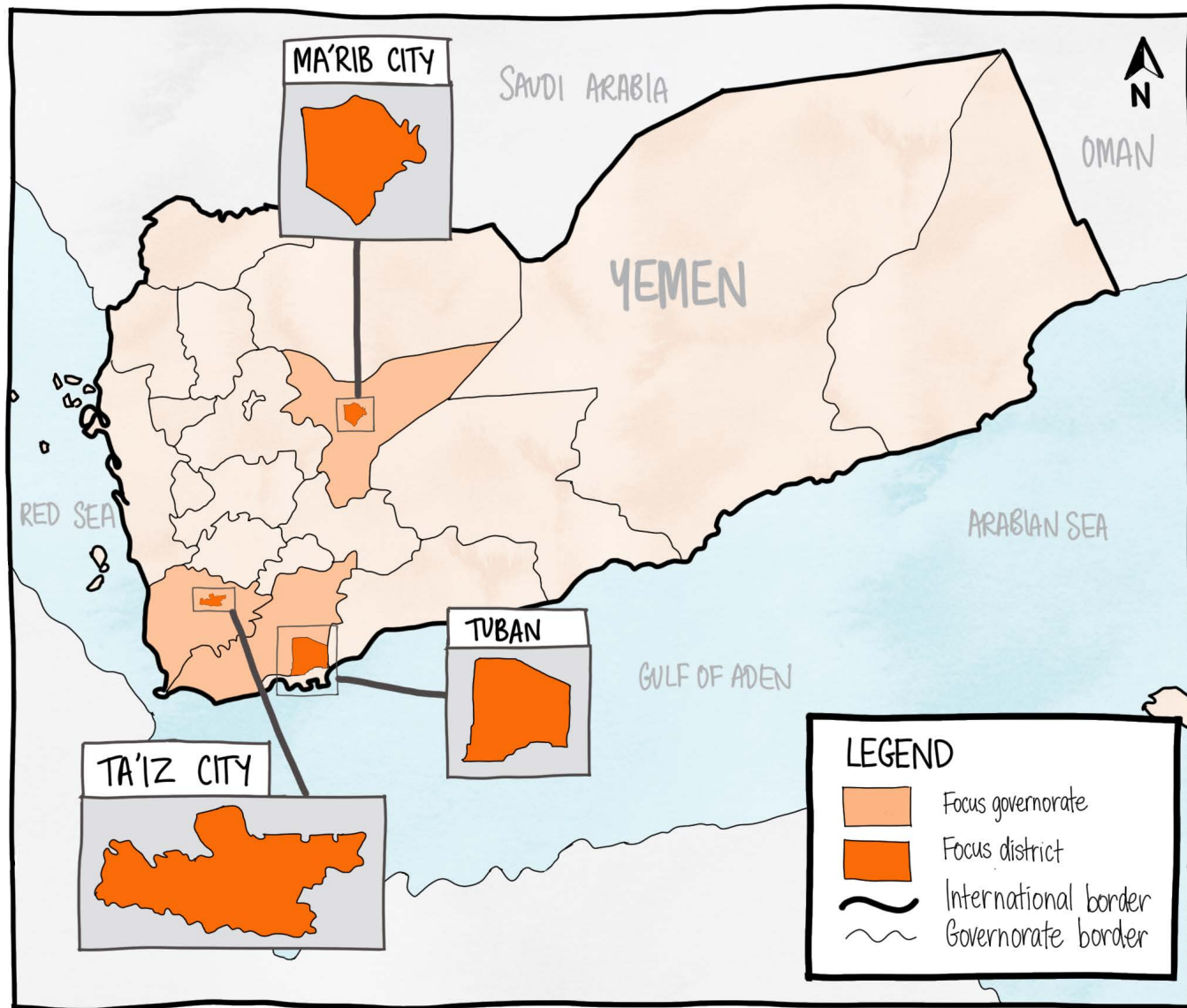
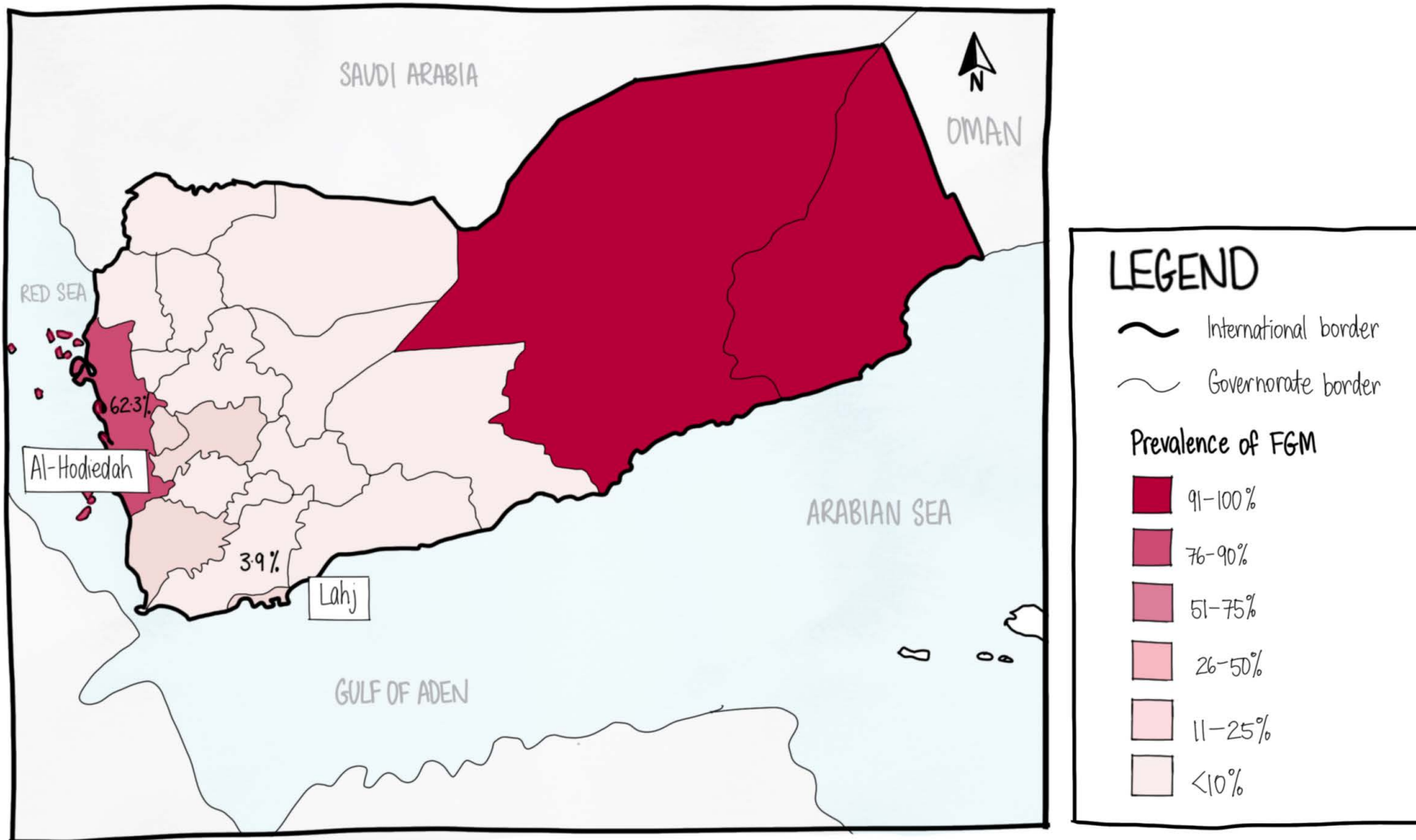


FIGURE 2: LOCATIONS OF FOCUS



(Source: ACAPS)

FIGURE 3: FGM PREVALENCE IN YEMEN BY GOVERNORATE (2013 DATA)



Source: FGMCRI (accessed 25/01/2026)



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