

JOINT NGO RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SIXTH SENIOR OFFICIALS MEETING ON YEMEN

Co-chaired by ECHO and Sweden

April 2024

This year saw a military escalation in Yemen and the Red Sea which has underscored the risk of a wider confrontation that could undermine the fragile progress made to date. The stakes for Yemen are high, as funding continues to decline, while the politicisation of the crisis, and regional tensions are mounting. The barriers to a principled humanitarian response and significant needs in Yemen require coordinated advocacy and action among donors, national authorities, and the wider humanitarian community. The Sixth Senior Officials Meeting (SOM VI) on Yemen, taking place in Brussels on 7 May, and the pre-SOM technical discussion on 24 and 25 April are opportunities to collectively take stock of challenges, identify actions and galvanize funding and support.

This document highlights the collective priorities and recommendations of national and international non-governmental organisations operating in Yemen for the SOM process and outcomes. It includes actions to maximise the impact of the SOM and strengthen a principled, timely and accountable humanitarian response in Yemen while supporting efforts towards longer-term recovery and sustainable peace. The international community must renew efforts towards a political settlement and take concrete steps to avert a wider humanitarian catastrophe.

I. KEY PRIORITIES

PRINCIPLED RESPONSE AND COORDINATION

Ensuring a Principled Response and Momentum on Recalibration

A united and consistent front among humanitarians confronting the operational environment in Yemen is fundamentally needed. Any withdrawal of commitments to enforce the benchmarks, including freedom of movement of national female aid workers, assessments and monitoring, and interference with contracts and tendering processes, will embolden parties to wait out changes in humanitarian leadership rather than respond to demands to respect a principled humanitarian response. While adaptations in the framing of the recalibration strategy are feasible, the commitment to a united strategy and holding all parties accountable for progress must be maintained.

Suggested action: SOM participants should foster a conversation on ensuring commitment to a principled response and implementation of the recalibration strategy, with an honest and transparent discussion of the challenges. This should include:

- a) Updates on progress against the three benchmarks in the recalibration strategy.
- b) Building consensus on a unified advocacy approach and access strategy on a principled response to ensure momentum and leadership.
- c) Continued commitment to collectively strengthen information sharing regarding access restrictions to ensure that analysis and monitoring are accurate and timely. This should include regular updates on benchmarks at the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) level.
- d) Continued follow-up on the HCT action plan to implement the recommendations raised in the HERE Geneva research and Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Management Response Plan (IAHE MRP).

Joint Operating Principles

Severe access constraints and bureaucratic impediments continue to undermine the principled nature of the response across the country including delays in securing assessment permissions, project agreements, visas, and travel authorisations, as well as interference in assessments, bids, and tendering processes. While constraints in Ansar Allah (AA) - controlled areas continue to be significant, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) report an increase in bureaucratic impediments in Internationally Recognised Government (IRG) - controlled areas. When such demands are not jointly pushed back on, they are normalised as impediments that hinder the work of humanitarian organisations.

The humanitarian community in Yemen jointly designed the Joint Operating Principles (JOPs) to enable the response to uphold humanitarian principles with guidance on the policies and established practices for organisations, contractors,

and suppliers to follow. With the JOPs agreed, the humanitarian community must now focus on rollout through consistent communication with all stakeholders to mitigate pressure on individual agencies that risks fracturing our collective principled positioning.

Suggested action: The pre-SOM meeting should include a dedicated session on how the humanitarian community can effectively and consistently roll out the JOPs. Commitments to the rollout and implementation should be adopted as a key outcome of the SOM. This should include agreement on:

- a) Actions to communicate the JOPs to the highest levels of authorities at the national level, as well as at the governorate level across all parts of Yemen, at regular intervals.
- b) Commitments by all agencies to embed the JOPs within organisations to ensure they are known and implemented by all staff.
- c) Clarifying safe channels for self-reporting deviations from and non-compliance with the JOPs to strengthen monitoring and accountability.
- d) Ensuring dissemination and engagement with all working spaces, such as clusters and working groups, and publication of the JOPs online to improve accessibility.

Mahram

The issue of mahram must not be forgotten by the humanitarian community in Yemen. This is too often perceived as a local issue for civil society to address. Yet mahram requirements are imposed specifically on female aid workers as a deliberate and politicized restriction on humanitarian work.

Mahram requirements restrict the Yemen response from reaching half the population in a quality and consistent manner, threatening aid impartiality. Women play an essential role in the humanitarian response. Yet mahram restrictions hinder freedom of movement for our female staff and reduce our ability to reach women and girls and monitor impact. Mahram may negatively impact the recruitment and retention of female staff, should organisations lean towards male candidates who can travel to field locations or be unable to retain female staff whose roles become redundant due to their inability to travel. Finally, there are signs of mahram being enforced in southern governorates. While not endorsed by the IRG, there are instances of female national staff being asked about mahram at checkpoints, highlighting the risk that mahram requirements are replicated in the South.

Normalisation of the current environment, where female humanitarian workers are subject to arbitrary regulation on their movements, entrenches a practice that is not aligned with the humanitarian community's efforts to promote a principled humanitarian response through the recalibration strategy. Limiting the access of humanitarian actors based on demographic characteristics, such as gender, is also not in line with the JOPs commitments.

The humanitarian community must jointly push back on mahram restrictions, as the lack of communication with authorities on this issue is increasing risks to female staff and undermining our ability to meet the needs of women and girls.

Suggested action: The pre-SOM meeting should include a dedicated discussion on mahram to take stock of the situation and collective efforts to date according to the following points:

- a) Take stock of collective advocacy actions taken by donors and humanitarian leadership to roll back mahram restrictions, including updates from humanitarian leadership on the status of negotiations.
- b) Collectively share analysis on the scale, scope, and impact of mahram restrictions on operations, while acknowledging that available data does not provide the full picture. This is due to a gap in data on how the mahram requirements may negatively impact female staff recruitment and retention, as well as travel permit applications.
- c) Donors to clarify their common positions and red lines that have been developed.
- d) Identify opportunities to strengthen collective advocacy on mahram. This should consider avenues to integrate advocacy as part of the United Nations (UN)-led peace process, actions by the UN Special Envoy, or international support instruments to Yemen, and joint evidence and research.
- e) Informed by these discussions, the humanitarian community should re-assert a common position on mahram, to be communicated in writing at the highest levels by the HCT.
- f) Ensure that humanitarian leadership and the humanitarian community remain committed to jointly addressing mahram and provide regular updates on joint efforts.

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS AND VULNERABILITIES

Food Security and Nutrition

Yemen's food crisis is on the verge of catastrophe as a growing portion of the population faces emergency levels of hunger. Countrywide, more than half of the population – around 17.6 million people – continue to suffer from acute food insecurity, including six million people who are just one step away from famine. Malnutrition levels are alarmingly high, with nearly half of all children under five suffering from moderate to severe stunting. Climate change is resulting in more frequent flooding and drought events, exacerbating issues including food security and access to livelihoods. The food security situation is likely to further deteriorate from June with the peak of the lean season, coupled with rising inflation and increased commodity prices.

9.5 million people in northern Yemen have been directly impacted by the pause in the World Food Programme (WFP) General Food Assistance (GFA) since November 2023. Due to the disruption of food supply chains, it will take at least a further two months for the resumption of food assistance in the North even if donor funding is released immediately, resulting in a minimum of a 10-month gap. Significant funding gaps also remain in the South, where thousands of beneficiaries are receiving reduced rations.

Newly released Food Security and Agriculture and Nutrition Cluster figures warn that more than half of households were unable to access adequate food across Yemen in January 2024, including 55 per cent in IRG and 51 per cent in AA-controlled areas. WFP food cuts are already impacting access to food. Among GFA beneficiary households, poor food consumption increased from 24-37 per cent between November 2023 and January 2024.

Failure to resume food distributions at scale will result in a humanitarian catastrophe, and place millions of more people at risk of starvation and death, with women, especially pregnant and lactating women, and children most at risk. recipients of WFP GFA have already been displaced due to conflict and the impact of the climate crisis, some multiple times, compounding their vulnerability. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has warned that the escalation in the Red Sea is poised to accelerate the increase in shipping costs and delay the delivery of essential food, further limiting access to food. While an agreement with authorities to retarget food assistance in the North has now been reached following months of negotiations, funding has yet to resume.

Suggested action: The pre-SOM meeting should include a dedicated discussion on improving food security and nutrition across the country, including how to ensure the resumption of humanitarian food assistance in the North, in line with humanitarian principles.

- a) Donors must commit to additional funding for the resumption of humanitarian food assistance by the end of May. This should be done alongside scaling up good practices related to livelihood support to reduce reliance on food assistance and improve sustainability and complemented by multi-sectoral investments in areas such as WASH to prevent health-related challenges.
- b) Should the GFA pipeline not be secured by the end of May 2024, support must be scaled up through cash-based response modalities, informed by lessons from the implementation of cash-based interventions in both southern and northern governorates.
- c) Increased and targeted funding should be provided to food security, agriculture, WASH, and nutrition partners to promote integrated programming for the prevention of malnutrition.
- d) Considering the cholera resurgence since October and its rapid spread in northern Yemen since March, an immediate scale-up of the response is critical. Increased funding should be provided to support prevention and preparedness, and strengthen health, nutrition, safe water, sanitation, and hygiene services.

Funding

The Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Yemen was less than 40 per cent funded in 2023. This is the lowest funding rate committed by donors since the onset of the conflict in Yemen. This year, despite a decrease in the amount sought, over 90 per cent of the required humanitarian funding is still unmet. The 2024 HRP of \$2.7 billion must be fully funded to meet the urgent needs of approximately 11.2 million people that the humanitarian community aims to reach across the country. With no standalone pledging event currently scheduled, the SOM must be used to galvanize increased funding and support for the humanitarian response and longer-term recovery.

Suggested action: During the SOM, donors must commit additional funding for Yemen that reflects the severity of humanitarian needs, with a focus on food security and nutrition, as well as sectors that will contribute to reducing humanitarian needs, such as livelihoods, health, and education. Donors should ensure there is increased humanitarian funding for the response while not losing sight of the need for long-term recovery and development programming.

Humanitarian Targeting and Technical Alignment with Authorities

While funding shortfalls may force humanitarian actors to further prioritise who receives assistance, authorities must be sensitised to this approach. Humanitarian organisations have observed authorities adopting an “all-or-nothing” stance, which may increasingly become a major barrier to program implementation if funding continues to decline. Targeting strategies must be strictly based on need and consistent across the different areas of control and not be subject to politicization. Criteria must be clearly and consistently communicated with authorities in both AA and IRG-held areas. Jointly enforced positions and clear communication on the negotiation of the scale-down of support and potential exit must be coordinated, consistent and supported by donors and humanitarian leadership. Lack of engagement with authorities will place additional risk and scrutiny on NGOs who are not well placed to negotiate this issue with authorities.

Suggested action: The pre-SOM meeting should feature a dedicated discussion on how to jointly communicate and negotiate any scale-down of humanitarian aid. This should include the development of a joint communication action plan and commitment to ensure clear information sharing on scale-down and re-targeting with regular updates to humanitarian organisations.

HARD-TO-REACH COMMUNITIES

Mixed Movement

In a significant move to address the risks faced by the migrant population in Yemen and in a critical move away from a status-based response, refugees and migrants have been included as a population of concern in the HRP, increasing to 400,000 persons in need in 2024, with a funding requirement of \$78.3 million. However, the integration of migration responses within Yemen's humanitarian sector remains limited, with notable gaps in accessing humanitarian services, including specialized protection services, particularly Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Child Protection (CP) Case Management services for migrants on the move who face life-threatening risks due to border controls and anti-smuggling policies.

Suggested action: Using the opportunity of the pre-SOM meeting, participants should address the specific challenges in targeting and responding to migrants' needs and identify actions to overcome these barriers. Commitments to respond to these population groups should be reflected as a key outcome of the SOM.

Frontline Populations

Significant populations are at extreme risk despite the extension of truce-like conditions across the majority of Yemen. This includes the 1.5 million Internal Displaced People (IDPs) exposed to hostilities in Marib and increasingly difficult to reach due to extensive security and bureaucratic constraints imposed on humanitarian organisations. The Hajjah enclave and pockets around the Saada/Saudi border are also without humanitarian support. Efforts to reach these populations of concern deserve dedicated consideration. As was suggested last year, we should be focusing on minimum standards for ensuring quality access to these areas. This includes avoiding handing assistance to authorities to distribute or transfer risk to partners, ensuring a sustainable response, and avoiding the ‘truck and dump’ approach in which project participants must travel to receive vital assistance.

Suggested action: At the pre-SOM, participants must take stock of current efforts to reach these populations and identify measures to improve access. A joint action plan must be developed to improve sustainable access to these locations. Commitment to respond to these frontline and hard-to-reach populations should be reflected as a key outcome of the SOM. In future, there should be an improved monitoring framework to assess areas and monitor areas where pockets of limited access may develop.

QUALITY OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN YEMEN

Locally Led Response

There is welcome momentum to expand the representation of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in strategic coordination and decision-making spaces, including the HCT and Advocacy Working Group which needs to continue. Meaningful CSO representation and engagement, particularly by women-led and focused organisations, must be expanded across all coordination mechanisms, clusters and working groups. In terms of funding, there have been efforts by the Yemen Humanitarian Fund to include Yemeni CSOs. However, in 2023, Yemeni CSOs received the same level of funding (43 per cent of the Yemen Humanitarian Fund) amounting to \$32 million, the same percentage allocated in 2022. Increasing the percentage of funding allocated to local organisations, as well as the quality and flexibility, is critical in improving the Yemen response.

Suggested action: Host a discussion at the pre-SOM led by CSOs with feedback from the donor community, UN agencies and INGOs about barriers and opportunities. Discussions should concretely consider steps to move to flexible quality funding for CSOs and strategic changes that strengthen their leadership in the response, including:

- a) The necessity of supporting resources for CSOs that enable them to act on their priorities and needs, such as covering overheads, indirect costs, and internal capacity development.
- b) Enabling CSO leadership and co-chairing of the cluster and other working group, engaging CSOs actively in the development of the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), as well as engaging and empowering the NNGO Forum.
- c) Providing an update on the progress of the localization strategy, developed, and endorsed under the HCT umbrella, and prioritizing the next steps to implement the strategy.
- d) Improving reporting in the Financial Tracking System to better track donors' and international actors' efforts in realising the Grand Bargain commitment.
- e) A commitment to developing Joint Principles or a Framework for Good Partnerships in Yemen with the NNGO forum with support from donors and humanitarian actors.
- f) Development of a clear action plan to improve accountabilities for all stakeholders in driving forward localization, in line with CSO priorities listed here.
- g) Supporting the engagement of NNGOs in peace negotiations and efforts to find a political resolution.

Humanitarian Mine Action

Since the withdrawal of humanitarian mine action funding from UNDP in July last year, national mine action authorities have been left with little to no support and are at risk of collapse. For humanitarian mine action (HMA) work to be effectively scaled up, Yemen's national mine action authorities must be able to take ownership of the mine action process. Collectively we must reach an agreement on a national coordination mechanism for the HMA response in Yemen. It is critical that the UN leadership, together with donors and HMA actors, identify timely solutions to this long-standing challenge. Furthermore, INGOs with HMA capacity face challenges in negotiating their presence and operations in AA-controlled areas. This results in a misalignment between HMA principles and guidelines and national mine action authorities.

Suggested action: The pre-SOM discussions and further engagement of the SOM should reflect collectively on how to support HMA in Yemen in reaching a timely decision on the prime UN agency responsible for mine action in Yemen, which will facilitate addressing governance issues in the HMA sector. There should also be discussion on how to support negotiating principled HMA operations across all of Yemen given the lack of formal coordination mechanisms.

Pathways to Durable Solutions

In 2023 there was increased focus and coordination on durable solutions. A Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG) which was created under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator, in line with the UN Secretary-General Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, has been meeting regularly. There is a lack of national-level data on durable solutions in Yemen to guide interventions, but efforts are underway to improve this. Coordination and analysis of durable solutions must be grounded in the lived experiences of IDPs, both in protracted displacement and those who may have tried to return.

Moving forward, data on durable solutions should be widely coordinated, using consistent approaches and standardized questions to ensure that data can be jointly collected and used. Greater engagement in longer-term interventions with area-based approaches that support durable solutions is needed, particularly considering the severe exposure of the Yemeni population to structural challenges like climate shocks and extreme water scarcity, which increase vulnerabilities and deplete resilience. Populations impacted by inequality and discrimination, including women and girls, children, people with disabilities, and Muhamasheen, must be targeted to ensure they are reached through longer-term, sustainable approaches. Most crucially, efforts and reflections on durable solutions must consider the whole of Yemen.

Suggested action: The discussions throughout the preparatory and pledging parts of the SOM should be informed by inputs from a range of humanitarian and development actors. They should consider how to lay the foundation for enhanced durable solutions programming, specifically addressing the following challenges:

- a) Durable solutions must be Yemen-wide and require strong engagement with authorities in both IRG and AA areas, including improving understanding of durable solutions.
- b) Continued reflection is needed on how the DSWG and efforts on durable solutions should integrate into the existing response coordination architecture and area-based approaches. Consideration should be given to establishing a working group on Nexus programming under UN leadership to develop a framework for transition.
- c) Ensure there is active engagement of NNGOs and space for them to participate in discussions and jointly agree on ways forward on durable solutions, area-based approaches, and longer-term development approaches.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SOM FORMAT

Last year NGOs provided suggestions on the logistics and format of the SOM to facilitate meaningful NGO participation. These recommendations on logistics and format are relevant again in 2024 and we encourage Co-Chairs and all participants to consider them to facilitate a productive SOM with meaningful participation of INGOs and Yemeni CSOs.

- I. Ensure dedicated efforts to secure financial pledges for Yemen. Given the lack of a standalone pledging conference for Yemen this year, the SOM should include a strong pledging element which Co-Chairs can support through outreach and peer-to-peer advocacy with donors in advance of the meeting.
- II. Focus the agenda for the pre-SOM Technical Working Groups (TWG) to drive a discussion around concrete outcomes or action points for immediate follow-up. Establish clear instructions and guidelines around the purpose of the TWG to enable chairs and co-chairs to facilitate a discussion around concrete action.
- III. Engage NGO co-chairs in the pre-SOM TWG to chair specific sessions, ensuring Yemeni CSOs are particularly engaged. A Yemeni CSO should lead the conversation on localisation and a Locally Led Response. The aim should be to facilitate a discussion around concrete action rather than a series of presentations and discussions.
- IV. Support online options in Sana'a and Aden for the pre-SOM and SOM to facilitate greater and meaningful inclusion of national and international NGOs, accompanied by support for simultaneous translation and a meeting format that is inclusive of online participants.
- V. Encourage OCHA to coordinate any position papers with Co-Chairs well in advance to enable meaningful participation of INGOs and CSOs and to ensure that the position accurately reflects the priorities and recommendations of the entire community.
- VI. Ensure that the concrete outcomes and actions agreed during the pre-SOM TWGs are reflected in the SOM plenary and co-chairs summary. We recommend identifying rapporteurs to document TWG sessions or consider INGOs and CSOs leading/co-leading sessions and then having the same people report back at the SOM.
- VII. Ahead of future SOM events for Yemen, take the opportunity to reflect on accomplishments and take stock of progress against the priorities reflected in the Sixth pre-SOM agenda and humanitarian agencies stated priorities during the SOM process. A report on the progress achieved in the sixth SOM will support the humanitarian community in taking accountability for collective actions ahead of future meetings.
- VIII. Ensure opportunities for continued collective engagement on discussions, recommendations, and action points between SOM events, to maintain momentum of sector-wide dialogue. This could include a mid-year 'stocktaking' online event to guide further action before the next SOM.

III. NGO SIGNATURES

INGOs

1. Action for Humanity
2. Acted
3. CARE
4. Danish Refugee Council
5. DORCAS
6. Handicap International – Humanity & Inclusion
7. International Medical Corps (IMC)
8. International Rescue Committee
9. INTERSOS
10. Medair
11. Med Global
12. Mercy Corps
13. Norwegian Refugee Council
14. Oxfam
15. People in Need
16. READ
17. Relief International
18. Saferworld
19. Save the Children
20. Solidarités International
21. War Child Alliance
22. War Child Canada
23. Qatar Charity
24. Médecins du Monde
25. Concern Worldwide
26. ZOA

CSOs

The total number of CSO signatories was 82, however one organization chose to remain anonymous for security reasons.

1. Abyan Youth Foundation
2. Organization for the Protection and Care of Children
3. Aden Children Autism Association
4. Al Basma Foundation for People with Special Needs
5. Al Ghaith Foundation for Human Development
6. Al Mamoun Development Organization
7. Al-Akar Center for Peace and Development
8. Al-Aman Association for the Care of the Blind
9. Alaman Organization for Blind Women Care
10. Al-Ard Al-Taiba Social Foundation
11. Al-Ferdous Women's Growth Association
12. Al-Ghad Foundation for Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Relief (TFSD)
13. Al-Hayat Foundation for Early Intervention for People with Special Needs
14. All Girls Foundation for Development
15. Al-Sabeel Foundation for Social Development
16. Altwasul for Human Development
17. Al-Wad Development Foundation
18. Assistance For Response and Development
19. Badil Foundation for Development
20. Balqees Foundation for Development and Development
21. Basma of Life Foundation for Humanitarian Work
22. Bena Charity Foundation for Human Development
23. Bena Charity Association for Humanitarian Development
24. Bena Human Foundation for Development
25. Best Future Foundation
26. Building and Empowerment Foundation
27. Charitable Association for the Care of Students of Knowledge, Shabwa

28. Charitable Fund Foundation for Outstanding Students
29. Coordination Committee for Yemeni Non-Governmental Organizations for the Care of Children's Rights
30. Creativity Association for Women Development
31. Enjaz Foundation for Development
32. Enkad Foundation for Development
33. Eradajareeh Foundation for Development
34. Ewaa Social Foundation for Relief and Development
35. For Human Development Foundation
36. Future Pioneers Foundation for Training and Development
37. Ghadaq Development Organization
38. Gifted Academy
39. Happy Family Association
40. Hoor Foundation for Peace and Development
41. Humanitarian Action Library - Yemen
42. Humanitarian Development Programme
43. Humanitarian Solidarity Association
44. Jana Foundation for Family Development
45. Jannati Foundation for Development
46. Light Foundation for Development
47. Madala Development Foundation
48. Makom Development Foundation
49. Marib Dam Foundation for Social Development
50. Massa Hawa Foundation for Development
51. Maysara Development Foundation
52. Mercy Humanitarian Foundation
53. Millennium Development Foundation
54. Modern Social Enterprise
55. Nabd Development and Evolution Organization (NDEO)
56. Nahda Makers Organization
57. National Foundation for Development and Humanitarian Response
58. National Network for Advocacy for the Rights of People with Disabilities
59. Nidaa Foundation for Development and Development
60. Ola Al Majd Foundation for Development (OMD-Y)
61. Prince Foundation for Awareness and Human Development
62. Pulse of Life Charitable Development
63. Rawahel Foundation for Development
64. Room Foundation for Land Reconstruction
65. Sada Foundation for Building and Development (SFBD)
66. Salam Yemen Foundation for Relief and Humanitarian Development
67. Sana'a Coalition for Relief and Development
68. Shibam Social Association For Development
69. Sila Women's Development Foundation
70. Social Coexistence Foundation
71. Society for Humanitarian Solidarity (SHS)
72. Steps Foundation for Civil Development
73. Take My Hand Charitable Development Foundation
74. Tamdeen Youth Foundation
75. The Coalition of Humanitarian Relief
76. Transparency Foundation for Human Rights for Development and Studies
77. Women's Association for Development
78. Wounded Will for Development
79. Yamani Foundation for Development and Humanitarian Aid
80. Yanabia Al-khair Charity Foundation
81. Yemen Media Guide Center for Development