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Cover image: Children carrying water containers in a neighbourhood of Hudaydah, Yemen. Despite years of conflict, communities continue to adapt to challenges related to basic services and daily survival. © Abdullah Halabi

Rethinking local peace and humanitarian leadership in Hudaydah, Yemen

A research paper by Basem Ganani

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Basem Ganani is a Yemeni journalist and human rights researcher with extensive field experience in Hudaydah, focusing on conflict dynamics, humanitarian impacts, and local peacebuilding.

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Abstract

This article examines the prospects for local peace in Hudaydah Governorate, Yemen, through the lens of humanitarian leadership and systems transformation. Located along the Red Sea and hosting Yemen's most vital ports, Hudaydah represents a critical intersection between humanitarian imperatives, military dynamics, and international political interests. As the primary gateway for commercial imports, fuel, and humanitarian assistance, the governorate remains central to the survival of millions of Yemenis (UNDP, 2020; United Nations, 2024).

Drawing on qualitative field research, including interviews with local political, military, and civil society actors, as well as a multi-stakeholder workshop, this article examines how internationally driven ceasefires—most notably the Stockholm Agreement of 2018 and subsequent humanitarian truces—have shaped governance structures and local peace dynamics in Hudaydah. While these interventions succeeded in preventing large-scale urban warfare, they failed to produce sustainable peace. Instead, their narrow focus on stability and humanitarian access, in the absence of accountability, inclusive governance, and local leadership, contributed to the consolidation of de facto authorities and the expansion of war economy structures (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2021).

The article argues that Hudaydah reflects broader limitations within humanitarian leadership frameworks when crisis management is not accompanied by systemic political and institutional transformation. It concludes that sustainable local peace requires moving beyond ceasefire-centred approaches toward leadership models grounded in local agency, accountable governance, civilian protection, and inclusive participation.

Leadership relevance

This article contributes to debates on humanitarian leadership by examining the limits of crisis-management approaches in protracted conflicts through the case of Hudaydah, Yemen. It demonstrates how internationally supported ceasefires may reduce immediate violence while simultaneously reinforcing fragmented governance and war economies when not accompanied by structural reform. The article highlights the importance of locally grounded leadership, accountable resource management, and integrating humanitarian action with peacebuilding and governance frameworks.

Author's note

The study was conducted for the Peace Track Initiative (PTI), which commissioned, funded, and supported the research and oversaw the publication process, including independent external review. I designed and conducted the research, including the fieldwork, interviews, workshop facilitation, and analysis, as part of the broader study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality measures were adopted throughout the research process given the sensitive political and security environment.

Introduction: Why Hudaydah matters for humanitarian leadership

Hudaydah Governorate occupies a central position in Yemen's protracted conflict, both in humanitarian and geopolitical terms. Its strategic location on the Red Sea and its control over key ports—Hudaydah, Salif, and Ras Issa—have made it the primary gateway for imports essential to the Yemeni population. More than 70 percent of Yemen's food and fuel imports pass through these ports, making their functionality a matter of national survival (UNDP, 2020; United Nations, 2024).

Hudaydah's strategic significance extends beyond Yemen itself. The governorate lies near the Bab al-Mandab Strait, one of the world's most critical maritime corridors, linking the Red Sea to international trade routes. Consequently, instability in Hudaydah has implications not only for Yemen's humanitarian situation but also for global shipping, energy security, and regional geopolitical competition.

Since the escalation of the Yemeni conflict in 2015, Hudaydah has emerged as a focal point where humanitarian imperatives intersect with military strategies and international political interests. Attempts to control the governorate have been driven not only by territorial considerations but also by the strategic importance of its economic infrastructure and maritime position.

The military escalation on Yemen's western coast reached its peak during the 2018 offensive toward Hudaydah city, when fears of large-scale urban warfare generated intense international pressure for a negotiated settlement. International humanitarian organisations warned that a prolonged battle around the ports could trigger famine conditions and disrupt supply chains for millions of civilians (OCHA, 2018).

The Stockholm Agreement, signed in December 2018 under United Nations auspices, emerged within this context as an emergency humanitarian intervention aimed at preventing catastrophic escalation. While the agreement succeeded in freezing front lines and preventing direct confrontation in the city, it did not resolve the structural drivers of conflict or establish sustainable governance arrangements.

This article argues that Hudaydah represents a critical case for examining the limitations of humanitarian leadership when ceasefire agreements are implemented without accompanying systemic reforms. Although international interventions succeeded in preventing immediate collapse, they contributed to fragmented governance structures, weakened state institutions, and the consolidation of de facto authorities.

Hudaydah represents a critical case for examining the limitations of humanitarian leadership when ceasefire agreements are implemented without accompanying systemic reforms.

The experience of Hudaydah raises fundamental questions for humanitarian leadership. Can stability achieved through ceasefires be equated with peace? What are the consequences of prioritising humanitarian access over accountability and governance reform? And how does the marginalisation of local leadership affect long-term peacebuilding efforts?

Methodology and positionality

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach grounded in field-based research conducted in Hudaydah Governorate. Primary data were collected through structured and semi-structured interviews with 21 local stakeholders, including representatives of local authorities, civil society activists, military actors, journalists, and researchers specialising in Yemeni affairs.

Women constituted approximately 38 percent of participants, ensuring that gender perspectives were incorporated into the analysis. In addition to interviews, a multi-stakeholder workshop was organised in Hays District to facilitate dialogue among official, community, and military actors regarding local peacebuilding challenges and opportunities.

Given the sensitive political and security environment, confidentiality measures were adopted to protect participants, particularly those residing in areas under restrictive control. These measures included anonymising interviews and withholding identifying information.

This paper builds upon the broader research report *Prospects for Peace in Hudaydah*, commissioned by the Feminist Peace Track Initiative. While the organisation supported the field research process, the analysis and conclusions presented in this article remain solely those of the author. The author's positionality as a journalist and human rights researcher from Hudaydah provided important access to local perspectives and conflict dynamics, while also requiring continuous efforts to maintain analytical balance across politically divided environments.

Fragmented governance and the crisis of local leadership

Since 2017, Hudaydah has experienced deep political, economic, and security fragmentation. Governance structures are divided between the Houthi group, which controls most of the governorate, and the Joint Forces supported by the Arab Coalition, which maintain limited control in parts of the southwest.

In Houthi-controlled areas, governance is highly centralised and militarised. Strategic assets, including ports and fuel infrastructure, are managed within a war economy framework, with revenues redirected toward sustaining military operations rather than public service provision (UNDP, 2020; Al Arabiya, 2023). Civic space is heavily restricted through surveillance, repression, and arbitrary detention, limiting the ability of civil society organisations and independent actors to operate effectively (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Meanwhile, areas under Joint Forces control face different but equally significant governance challenges. Weak institutional capacity, fragmented authority structures, limited financial resources, and deteriorating public services have undermined public trust and weakened prospects for meaningful local recovery.

This dual governance failure—authoritarian control on one side and institutional weakness on the other—has significantly undermined local confidence in leadership structures and obstructed pathways toward inclusive peacebuilding.

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The fragmentation of authority has also weakened local political actors, including Tihama-based groups and civil society organisations, which have struggled to influence broader political negotiations dominated by military and regional actors. As a result, local communities often remain excluded from decisions directly affecting their security, livelihoods, and future governance arrangements.

At the same time, local actors have continued to play an essential role in maintaining social cohesion and mitigating the impact of conflict despite severe restrictions and limited resources. Community leaders, journalists, civil society activists, tribal mediators, and local humanitarian

workers have frequently acted as informal stabilising actors in areas where formal governance institutions have either collapsed or become politically polarised.

Local civil society organisations in Hudaydah have contributed to humanitarian coordination, dispute mediation, awareness campaigns, support for displaced populations, and documentation of human rights violations. However, their operational environment remains highly constrained by insecurity, political pressure, and the dominance of armed actors. Many organisations face difficulties accessing funding independently, forcing them into subcontracting relationships that limit local ownership and strategic influence (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2021).

Women's participation represents another important but often overlooked dimension of local peacebuilding in Hudaydah. Despite social restrictions, conflict conditions, and political marginalisation, women have played important roles in humanitarian response, community mediation, education initiatives, and local protection efforts. Female activists and humanitarian workers have often served as bridges between communities, displaced populations, and aid organisations, particularly in areas where social sensitivities restrict male-dominated engagement.

Yet women remain significantly underrepresented in formal political and security structures, including local ceasefire arrangements and decision-making platforms. This exclusion reflects broader structural inequalities within both local governance systems and international peace processes (United Nations Women, 2022). The limited inclusion of women not only weakens representation but also reduces the effectiveness and sustainability of local peacebuilding initiatives.

Youth groups and independent journalists have similarly played critical roles in documenting local grievances, exposing violations, and maintaining public dialogue despite increasing restrictions on freedom of expression. In many cases, journalists and activists in Hudaydah operate under conditions of intimidation, censorship, and personal risk. Nevertheless, they remain among the few actors capable of connecting local realities with national and international discussions about peace and humanitarian response.

The fragmentation of authority has also weakened trust between communities and formal institutions. In many districts, residents increasingly rely on informal social networks, tribal mediation mechanisms, and local community leaders rather than state institutions to resolve disputes and access protection. While these informal structures have provided limited resilience, they cannot substitute for accountable and inclusive governance systems capable of supporting long-term recovery.

Economic governance has become particularly central to the conflict. Hudaydah's ports, customs revenues, fuel imports, and taxation systems have evolved into strategic instruments within the war economy. Rather than functioning as engines of local development, these economic structures increasingly serve military and political consolidation efforts (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2021).

This transformation has contributed to rising inequality, weakened accountability, and growing public frustration. For many residents, the conflict is no longer perceived solely as a military confrontation but also as a system through which power and resources are monopolised at the expense of civilian welfare.

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The humanitarian consequences of fragmented governance extend beyond institutional weakness. They affect daily access to healthcare, education, electricity, water, transportation, and livelihoods. In both areas of control, civilians continue to experience deteriorating living conditions despite repeated international discussions about stabilisation and humanitarian recovery.

From a humanitarian leadership perspective, Hudaydah demonstrates that local peace cannot be sustained through military containment alone. Sustainable stabilisation requires governance systems that are locally legitimate, economically accountable, socially inclusive, and capable of rebuilding public trust. Without addressing governance fragmentation and exclusionary power structures, humanitarian interventions risk managing symptoms of conflict while leaving its structural drivers intact.

The Stockholm Agreement: Humanitarian success, political failure

The Stockholm Agreement, signed in December 2018 under United Nations auspices, was widely regarded as a major humanitarian breakthrough. It successfully prevented a large-scale military offensive on Hudaydah city, which could have resulted in catastrophic civilian casualties and the disruption of critical supply chains (OCHA, 2018).

The agreement established a ceasefire, called for the redeployment of forces, and introduced United Nations monitoring mechanisms through the United Nations Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA) (United Nations Security Council, 2019).

From a humanitarian perspective, the agreement succeeded in preserving port operations and preventing urban warfare in one of Yemen's most densely populated cities. International humanitarian agencies viewed the agreement as essential for avoiding famine conditions and maintaining humanitarian access routes.

However, despite these initial achievements, the agreement failed to achieve its broader political objectives. The absence of binding enforcement mechanisms, combined with conflicting interpretations of its provisions, severely limited implementation. Redeployment arrangements remained contested, ceasefire violations continued, and the agreement gradually evolved into a mechanism for freezing the conflict rather than resolving it.

The Houthi group utilised the reduction in hostilities to consolidate territorial control, strengthen administrative structures, and expand economic networks linked to port revenues (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2021). Meanwhile, international actors prioritised maintaining relative stability over addressing deeper governance challenges, including accountability, resource management, and political inclusion.

In November 2021, the Joint Forces implemented a major redeployment from several areas south of Hudaydah city, altering front-line dynamics and effectively expanding Houthi territorial influence in parts of the governorate. Although the redeployment reduced direct military confrontation in some areas, it reinforced perceptions among local actors that military realities were being reshaped outside any comprehensive peace framework.

The limitations of the Stockholm Agreement became increasingly visible as regional tensions escalated and the Red Sea emerged as a zone of broader international confrontation. Rather than serving as a foundation for sustainable peacebuilding, the agreement evolved into a fragile containment mechanism dependent on temporary regional calculations and humanitarian priorities.

The long-term sustainability of these arrangements came further into question as implementation gaps widened and political progress stalled. The mandate and operational presence of UNMHA in Hudaydah effectively came to an end on 31 March 2026, underscoring the fragility of internationally supported monitoring mechanisms when not accompanied by durable local governance structures and inclusive political solutions.

The conclusion of the mission symbolised broader limitations within humanitarian and diplomatic

approaches that prioritised conflict containment over structural transformation. For many local observers, the experience of Stockholm demonstrated that ceasefires alone cannot create sustainable peace when fragmented governance, war economies, exclusionary power structures, and institutional weakness remain unresolved.

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Ceasefires without transformation: when stability becomes control

The humanitarian truce declared in April 2022 further illustrates the limitations of ceasefire-centred approaches when not accompanied by systemic transformation. While the truce led to a significant reduction in large-scale hostilities, it also enabled increased economic activity, particularly in Hudaydah's ports, without establishing effective oversight or accountability mechanisms.

Port revenues expanded substantially during the truce period, particularly through increased fuel imports and customs activities (UNDP, 2022;). However, these resources were not transparently directed toward public services, salary payments, or economic recovery. Instead, they became integrated into existing wartime governance structures. As a result, the truce reinforced the capacity of de facto authorities to consolidate control while leaving local populations with limited improvements in living conditions. In this context, stability became increasingly decoupled from peace.

The international focus on preserving calm—often framed as a humanitarian necessity—contributed to maintaining governance arrangements that lacked accountability, inclusivity, and meaningful civilian participation.

This raises critical questions for humanitarian leadership. When ceasefires stabilise conflict without transforming its underlying political and economic drivers, they risk becoming instruments of conflict management rather than pathways to sustainable peace.

Red Sea dynamics and the internationalisation of conflict

Hudaydah's strategic location on the Red Sea has increasingly linked local conflict dynamics to broader regional and international security concerns. Since the

beginning of the war, the western coast of Yemen has held major strategic importance for regional actors concerned with maritime security and trade routes.

Following the escalation of the Gaza war in October 2023, the Houthi group intensified attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, claiming solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza (Al Jazeera, 2024). These attacks transformed Hudaydah and Yemen's western coast into central arenas within a wider regional confrontation.

In response, the United States and its allies launched Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect international shipping routes and conducted military strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen. Israel also carried out strikes linked to maritime security concerns, including attacks associated with Hudaydah's infrastructure.

These developments demonstrated that local peace in Hudaydah cannot be separated from broader geopolitical dynamics in the Red Sea. The governorate increasingly functions as a space where humanitarian concerns intersect with military escalation, regional rivalries, and global trade security.

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The militarisation of the Red Sea has had consequences extending far beyond Yemen itself. Repeated attacks on commercial vessels disrupted shipping routes, increased insurance costs, and forced several international shipping companies to reroute vessels away from the Bab al-Mandab corridor toward the Cape of Good Hope. These disruptions affected global supply chains and increased transportation costs for goods moving between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

For Yemen, the consequences were particularly severe. Increased maritime insecurity threatened commercial imports and humanitarian shipments that millions of civilians depend upon for survival. Delays in fuel deliveries and higher transportation costs contributed to rising prices and further economic pressure on already vulnerable communities (United Nations, 2024).

The situation also complicated humanitarian operations in western Yemen. Humanitarian organisations working in Hudaydah increasingly operated within an environment shaped not only by local conflict dynamics but also by

international military calculations and maritime security operations. The overlap between humanitarian access routes and militarised maritime zones created additional operational risks and political sensitivities.

At the same time, Hudaydah itself underwent a strategic transformation in international political discourse. Whereas the governorate had previously been framed primarily as a humanitarian concern linked to famine prevention and civilian protection, it increasingly became viewed through the lens of international security and maritime deterrence.

This shift carried important implications for humanitarian leadership. As security-centred narratives gained prominence, local humanitarian priorities risked becoming secondary to broader geopolitical calculations. International engagement increasingly focused on deterrence, shipping security, and regional military balance, while structural humanitarian and governance challenges inside Hudaydah remained unresolved.

The growing regionalisation of the conflict also reflected broader geopolitical competition involving Iran, the Gulf States, the United States, and other international actors with interests in the Red Sea corridor. In this context, local communities in Hudaydah often found themselves trapped within confrontations shaped by regional power struggles beyond their control.

These developments highlight the difficulty of maintaining principled humanitarian engagement within highly internationalised conflict environments. Humanitarian actors must navigate increasingly blurred boundaries between humanitarian operations, political negotiations, and military strategies.

The Red Sea crisis further demonstrated that humanitarian crises can no longer be understood purely through domestic political frameworks. Local conflicts are increasingly embedded within interconnected regional and global systems involving trade, energy security, migration, military competition, and geopolitical influence.

Hudaydah therefore represents more than a local case study. It illustrates how fragile local governance systems can become deeply entangled in global strategic competition, complicating efforts to build sustainable peace and increasing the limitations of conventional humanitarian approaches centred solely on emergency response and short-term stabilisation.

Mines, militarisation, and the human cost of leadership gaps

Landmines and unexploded ordnance remain among the most severe and enduring humanitarian challenges in Hudaydah. Large areas of agricultural land, transportation

routes, and coastal zones have been contaminated, posing continuous threats to civilian populations and restricting economic activity.

The widespread use of landmines has resulted in civilian casualties, displacement, and long-term socio-economic disruption, particularly among farming and fishing communities dependent on access to land and coastal resources.

Despite ongoing demining efforts by regional and international actors, progress remains constrained by insecurity, restricted access, and insufficient resources. The persistence of contamination reflects broader failures in civilian protection and post-conflict recovery planning.

The continued militarisation of civilian spaces also undermines trust between communities and governing authorities. Without addressing these structural challenges, local peace initiatives will remain fragile and vulnerable to renewed violence.

Rethinking humanitarian leadership in Hudaydah

The experience of Hudaydah reveals the limitations of humanitarian leadership models centred primarily on crisis containment rather than systemic transformation. While preventing immediate humanitarian collapse remains essential, it is insufficient for building sustainable peace.

Over the course of the conflict, international humanitarian engagement in Hudaydah has often prioritised operational continuity, access negotiations, and emergency stabilisation. Although these efforts succeeded in mitigating famine risks and preserving humanitarian corridors, they frequently operated within political and governance structures that remained fundamentally exclusionary and conflict-driven. As a result, humanitarian action sometimes contributed—intentionally or unintentionally—to sustaining fragile equilibrium rather than supporting long-term transformation.

This reflects a broader dilemma within humanitarian leadership in protracted conflicts: the tension between immediate humanitarian imperatives and the structural conditions that perpetuate violence. In Hudaydah, international actors often focused on preventing escalation and ensuring aid delivery while avoiding deeper engagement with issues such as accountability, governance reform, resource transparency, and local political inclusion.

A reimagined humanitarian leadership framework must therefore move beyond emergency response logic and engage more directly with the structural dimensions of conflict. This includes recognising that humanitarian

crises are not solely the result of armed confrontation, but also of governance failures, economic exclusion, institutional fragmentation, and unequal power relations.

A reimagined humanitarian leadership framework must therefore move beyond emergency response logic and engage more directly with the structural dimensions of conflict.

One of the clearest lessons from Hudaydah concerns the importance of localisation. Despite repeated international commitments to strengthening local ownership within humanitarian response frameworks, local actors in Yemen continue to face major structural barriers. Civil society organisations, local mediators, journalists, women-led initiatives, and community-based actors frequently possess deeper contextual understanding and stronger community legitimacy than many external actors. Yet they often remain confined to subordinate implementation roles rather than being treated as strategic partners in decision-making processes (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2021).

This imbalance reflects broader asymmetries within the humanitarian system itself. Funding structures, reporting mechanisms, and donor priorities are typically designed around international organisational models, limiting the ability of local organisations to shape priorities independently. In Hudaydah, many local actors operate under severe political and security constraints while simultaneously navigating donor-driven bureaucratic systems that frequently fail to account for local realities.

The result is a form of humanitarian dependency in which local actors remain operationally essential but politically marginalised. International organisations often rely heavily on local networks for access, implementation, and community engagement, yet strategic authority and financial control remain concentrated externally. This weakens local ownership and reduces the sustainability of peacebuilding efforts.

Hudaydah also highlights the dangers of donor-driven stabilisation approaches that prioritise short-term calm over long-term institutional legitimacy. In many cases, humanitarian success has been measured through indicators such as reduced violence levels, aid delivery continuity, or uninterrupted port operations. While these outcomes are important, they do not necessarily reflect improvements in governance, justice, accountability, or civilian trust.

The persistence of war economy structures in Hudaydah further demonstrates this challenge. Port revenues,

customs systems, taxation networks, and fuel imports became central instruments of political and military consolidation during periods that were internationally described as “stable” or “de-escalated” (UNDP, 2020; Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2021). This reveals how stabilisation without accountability can reinforce the structural foundations of conflict.

Another critical issue concerns humanitarian neutrality in politically fragmented environments. Humanitarian organisations operating in Hudaydah have faced constant pressure to negotiate with armed actors in order to secure access and maintain operations. While such negotiations are often unavoidable, they create difficult ethical and political dilemmas regarding legitimacy, power asymmetry, and operational compromise.

In practice, neutrality in such environments becomes increasingly complex when humanitarian systems operate within governance arrangements dominated by armed actors. Humanitarian leadership therefore requires not only technical coordination skills but also political awareness, ethical judgment, and long-term strategic thinking capable of balancing access with accountability.

Women's participation represents another important dimension of humanitarian leadership frequently overlooked in formal peace processes. In Hudaydah, women have played central roles in local mediation, humanitarian outreach, education support, and civilian protection efforts despite significant political and social marginalisation. However, women remain largely excluded from formal ceasefire structures, governance negotiations, and security discussions (UN Women, 2022).

In Hudaydah, women have played central roles in local mediation, humanitarian outreach, education support, and civilian protection efforts despite significant political and social marginalisation. However, women remain largely excluded from formal ceasefire structures, governance negotiations, and security discussions.

This exclusion weakens both representation and operational effectiveness. Sustainable peacebuilding requires broader participation frameworks capable of incorporating women, youth, journalists, civil society actors, and local communities into governance and recovery processes. Humanitarian leadership that fails to prioritise inclusive participation risks reproducing the same exclusionary systems that contributed to conflict escalation.

The experience of Hudaydah also demonstrates the need to integrate humanitarian action with development, governance reform, and local economic recovery. Humanitarian interventions alone cannot compensate for collapsed institutions, fragmented governance systems, destroyed infrastructure, and widespread economic decline.

Long-term stabilisation requires investments in local governance capacity, public service delivery, economic opportunity, infrastructure rehabilitation, and civilian protection. It also requires transparent and accountable management of strategic resources, particularly ports and customs revenues, which remain central to both conflict dynamics and recovery prospects.

Ultimately, sustainable peace in Hudaydah depends on shifting from externally managed crisis containment toward locally grounded systems transformation.

Humanitarian leadership must move beyond the narrow objective of preventing collapse and instead support conditions that enable accountability, participation, legitimacy, and resilience.

Without such transformation, ceasefires may continue to reduce immediate violence while leaving the structural foundations of conflict intact. Hudaydah therefore offers an important lesson not only for Yemen but also for the wider humanitarian system: stability without justice, accountability, and inclusive governance is unlikely to produce durable peace.

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Beyond subcontracting: Rethinking adaptive humanitarian leadership in Yemen

Commentary by Rdhwan Mathana

About the Author

Rdhwan Mathana is a seasoned humanitarian professional with over seven years of experience managing large-scale education and protection programs in Yemen. He has led strategic interventions in Al-Dhalea and Lahj in collaboration with international and local partners, including Helpcode and R-MENA. Currently an MBA candidate (2025), Radwan focuses on rethinking humanitarian leadership through the lens of localisation, adaptive management, and the integration of local contextual intelligence into global aid frameworks.

Leadership relevance

This article speaks directly to humanitarian decision-makers seeking to operationalise localisation beyond rhetoric. It offers practice-based insights from front-line education and protection programs in southern Yemen, showing how Yemeni professionals already perform complex leadership functions—negotiating access, balancing global standards with local expectations, and managing multi-million-dollar portfolios under extreme uncertainty. By reframing local actors from ‘implementing partners’ to co-leaders of strategy and risk, the piece invites senior leaders in UN agencies, INGOs, and donors to rethink how authority, accountability, and resources are shared in protracted crises.

As Yemen’s protracted crisis deepens, the traditional top-down humanitarian model increasingly falls short of achieving impact. This article argues for a shift from ‘risk transfer’ to shared leadership, emphasising how local professionals in governorates such as Al-Dhalea and Lahj bridge the gap between international standards and complex on-the-ground realities. Drawing on field experience, it illustrates adaptive leadership in education and emergency programs, highlights women’s pivotal but invisible roles, and concludes with practical steps toward a renewed social contract for humanitarian action in Yemen.

Reframing the competence narrative

For decades, international agencies have justified centralised control of aid delivery by citing the ‘lack of local capacity.’ This narrative has often been reinforced through compliance-heavy partnership frameworks that treat Yemeni NGOs as logistical extensions of international actors rather than strategic peers. At the same time, a significant portion of humanitarian funding is absorbed by international administrative, coordination, and security costs, while front-line staff shoulder the greatest personal and professional risks.

Field experience in Al-Dhalea, Aden, and Lahj reveals a different truth: contextual intelligence, not remote management, drives real efficiency. Local leaders navigate fuel shortages, rapidly shifting frontlines, tribal dynamics, and road blockades through community networks that no international manual can replicate. Their daily work involves negotiating with de-facto authorities, mediating

between host communities and internally displaced people (IDPs), and adapting implementation plans to local market fluctuations. These are leadership tasks, not merely ‘implementation’ details.

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When international systems overlook this locally embedded competence, they reinforce a subtle hierarchy of trust: expatriate expertise is assumed, while Yemeni leadership must constantly be proven through rigid reporting templates. Reframing this narrative means recognising that technical skills and humanitarian values are deeply intertwined with lived experience and social capital.

Adaptive leadership in a fragile context

Leadership in Yemen extends beyond project lifecycles—it is about humanitarian negotiation and trust-building in spaces where institutions are fragile. Project managers constantly balance competing demands: donor

requirements for visibility, community expectations for dignity, and operational constraints such as insecurity.

Leading education projects with R-MENA and Helpcode in southern Yemen required far more than robust logframes. Success depended on applying SPHERE and INEE standards while preserving community confidence amid high political volatility. Classroom rehabilitation and teacher incentives had to be calibrated to what communities perceived as legitimate and equitable, rather than simply what was ‘fundable.’

At the same time, many Yemeni professionals now pursue advanced studies, such as MBAs and specialised diplomas. They combine academic rigor with field-tempered flexibility. Their leadership practice integrates formal tools—risk matrices and theories of change—with tacit knowledge about local conflict dynamics. This hybrid expertise challenges the assumption that ‘strategic thinking’ must come from outside the country.

Women as silent pillars of response

Across Yemen, women’s leadership quietly ensures aid reaches those most in need. Their ability to mediate sensitive issues, such as family disputes and access for female-headed households, often determines whether humanitarian programs are perceived as safe at the local level.

In Al-Dhalea governorate, women’s leadership was a daily operational reality during the rehabilitation of Al-Thawrah Al-Haq and Al-Nasr Shaqran schools in Muris, Qa’atabah district. This project was implemented by the Abs Development Organisation for Woman and Child (Abs) with support from War Child Canada. Women staff and community volunteers played a central role in mobilising parents, negotiating with community figures regarding girls’ attendance, and ensuring that displaced children could re-enrol without facing social stigma.

Recognising women not only as community facilitators but as independent humanitarian actors remains

essential to localising aid. This recognition must translate into targeted leadership opportunities, equitable pay, and meaningful inclusion in decision-making spaces.

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Toward a new humanitarian social contract

To realign humanitarian practice with local ownership, three shifts are critical:

- **Direct Funding:** Stop treating local NGOs as mere subcontractors. Design partnership models where Yemeni organisations co-lead consortia and manage multi-year portfolios.
- **Shared Risk:** Extend legal and security protection to local staff in active conflict zones. Duty of care must apply equally to national and international personnel.
- **Data Sovereignty:** Empower local coordinators to lead monitoring and evaluation. When Yemeni teams drive the learning agenda, the resulting evidence is more contextually grounded.

Yemen is a living laboratory for redefining global leadership paradigms. The operational excellence demonstrated by Yemeni professionals—across multimillion-dollar programs—challenges the outdated notion of a ‘capacity gap.’ It is time for the global system to step back and let local leadership step forward as a precondition for effectiveness, accountability, and dignity.

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