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YEARNING FOR A HOME THAT NO LONGER EXISTS: THE DILEMMA FACING PEOPLE FORCED TO FLEE IN YEMEN

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A REDUCTION IN VIOLENCE HAS CREATED A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR DIPLOMACY. ALONGSIDE IT, OPPORTUNITIES TO SECURE DURABLE SOLUTIONS FOR YEMEN'S DISPLACED PEOPLE MUST BE FOUND.

Yemen is at a crossroads. Although the formal truce the United Nations (UN) brokered lapsed in October 2022, “truce-like conditions” have continued. Fighting has diminished, there have been fewer civilian casualties and the conflict has been forcing fewer people to flee. There is increasing international support for political negotiations towards peace.

However, we still have a long way to go to find genuine and lasting alternatives to displacement [1] for the millions of people who have been forced to flee within Yemen (to whom we refer in this report as internally displaced people or IDPs). While hopes for a new era of calm have grown, the benefits of peace are not always balanced. The communities most severely affected by conflict are often left behind, and in Yemen the conditions facing them remain grim.

The country has no systematic framework for tracking people’s attempts to return to their areas of origin. Nor is there a Yemen-wide policy framework for supporting IDPs that has been incorporated into diplomatic channels or standardised across humanitarian and development programming. For these reasons, it is the lived experiences and realities of displaced people that must form the foundation of conversations about durable solutions.

This report aims to highlight these lived experiences. At a time when conversations about how best to achieve durable solutions have gained significant momentum, this research also seeks to inform those discussions by offering evidence and concrete recommendations to those who influence the lives of displaced people in Yemen.

TOP RECOMMENDATIONS

Yemen's internationally recognised government (IRG) and Ansar Allah should grant aid agencies full access to IDPs, host communities and the areas of origin that people are returning to. They should make sure both aid responses and strategies for durable solutions are based on the expressed needs and intentions of the communities they are designed to support.

The UN leadership should develop a Yemen-wide framework for tracking returns and attempted returns and coordinating a clear and consistent understanding of not only displaced people's intentions but also whether those intentions are informed by lived experiences (that is, attempts to integrate with host communities, relocate or return to their areas of origin). This requires ensuring consistency in the assessment approaches, questionnaires and tools it uses to research displaced people's intentions and the barriers they face in achieving durable solutions.

The Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY) should do more to base peace talks on the lived experiences of conflict-affected communities and specifically those living in displacement. It should note that a negotiated peace agreement or prolonged pause in conflict may have unintended negative consequences for displaced people. It should mitigate and monitor those consequences and raise them with parties to the conflict.

The Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement should ensure there continues to be space for providing humanitarian assistance and protection to populations that need them. It should support government and engage development agencies in seeking durable solutions.

International non-governmental organisations working in Yemen should embed a durable solutions lens in all programming. They should take into account people's lived experiences and intentions and make sure aid meets their needs and aspirations.

The donor community should ensure funding enables aid agencies to continue to support displacement-affected communities but is also flexible enough to respond to displaced people's intentions and movements. This should include flexible, multi-year funding streams that support nexus approaches.



Displaced person living in Jabal Habashi, Taiz. Communities here struggle to access adequate humanitarian aid due to the remote location, proximity to frontlines and harsh living conditions. Photo: Rufaida Al-Faqeeh/NRC

I was a manager in a school in the subdistrict [before displacement]. I left my home on 17 March 2020 because of the conflict. I tried to go home to get the rest of the house's furniture. It was my choice [to return] because of what we suffer here [in the location of displacement] in terms of hunger, thirst, disease and the lack of anything to live with dignity. I have tried to return four times. I thought the situation [back home] was not that bad but I wasn't able to go back. I reached my house but the gunmen threatened me and told me not to try again. My house was destroyed and looted. I felt it was unsafe. I travelled on foot for six hours and got a cut on my foot. As a diabetic, I suffered so much from this wound. All my attempts to return were unsuccessful as the gunmen ask for permits to enter and they shot at me. The area has mines and the house is destroyed. The furniture was stolen. The livestock died. The land was deserted. I plan to stay [in the location of displacement] until the conflict in the area ends because assistance is reaching this camp. No-one has ever asked me about [my attempted return] before.

FINDINGS

Across conflict-affected communities, internally displaced people are making uninformed decisions to attempt return

People's decisions to return are often driven by unsustainable or dangerous living conditions in the areas they have been displaced to. Meanwhile, they lack access to information on conditions in their areas of origin. If such decisions are to be truly voluntary and safe, the humanitarian response for IDPs in areas of displacement needs to improve. Displaced people also need more information about what safe and dignified alternatives to displacement do and do not exist, and why. This will enable them to take more informed decisions and, at a minimum, be aware of potential risks and think about how to mitigate them.

Humanitarian workers face barriers to understanding where displaced people are returning to and the situation there

Humanitarian workers do not fully understand where displaced families are returning to or know about conditions there. This is partly due to the absence of a systematic framework for tracking attempted returns, a lack of access to areas of origin, and limited funding. It restricts agencies' ability to assist IDPs who have attempted return. This report shows that many displaced people may be accessing areas that humanitarian workers cannot. They may have valuable information to share with humanitarian organisations and with others considering return. Aid organisations must figure out how to harness this information to better understand where people are returning to, what their needs are and what protection risks they face. They must then ensure sustained, principled access to these areas for humanitarian workers. Without access, aid agencies cannot collect data or engage with communities. This means they cannot come up with, let alone deliver, accountable and appropriate responses that will lead to durable solutions.

People clearly expressed an increased interest in return as a result of the truce

The unprecedented six-month truce signed on 2 April 2022 was a hugely significant step in Yemen's peace process. The parties to the conflict still observe some elements of this. As a result, levels of violence have diminished and political negotiations increased, which in turn has stoked an interest in returning to areas of origin. Some displaced people are clearly acting on this interest – often at great risk to themselves and their families. This is a negative unintended consequence of the truce. The OSESGY and the humanitarian community must do more to avoid a false sense of safety and opportunity among communities.

Those attempting return are still a minority within the displaced population

Despite the increased interest in returning home since the truce came into effect, the people attempting to do so remain a minority. However, without a systematic framework for tracking this kind of movement, aid organisations will not know:

- whether attempts to return increase as the “truce-like conditions” continue
- what percentage of the displaced population is attempting to return
- whether the attempts to return are forced or voluntary
- what their lived experiences are

This information would guide humanitarian, development and peace initiatives intended to support durable solutions. There is therefore a need to develop a Yemen-wide framework for tracking returns and attempted returns and collecting information from displaced people on their lived experiences.

People attempting return call for an end to conflict, clearing mines and support to rebuild homes

Those attempting return have almost unanimously called for:

- support to end the conflict
- demilitarised civilian spaces and communities
- help to clear mines and other contamination
- support to rebuild homes
- basic services and livelihoods

This clearly highlights the need for concurrent and coordinated humanitarian support and longer-term development and peace-building assistance.

The ongoing conflict requires a protection-centred and conflict-sensitive approach to solutions

While aid organisations must better understand the barriers to achieving durable solutions, they must also realise that the conflict is not over. The military elements of the conflict have slowed, but research participants attempting return clearly reported ongoing safety and protection risks in areas of origin. The conflict also has economic consequences (related to control over commodities, natural resources, trade flows, taxes and fuel revenues, currency manipulation and consequent volatility). These are clearly causing grave suffering, especially in IRG-controlled areas. Economic deterioration, divided monetary systems, failure to pay civil servants' salaries and rising prices continue to leave displaced people feeling exhausted.

These factors give rise to the need for a protection-centred, conflict-sensitive approach, especially where local authorities are involved. This research found that local authorities across IRG-controlled areas understand the lack of improvement in living conditions and the barriers to the achievement of durable solutions. Aid organisations should work with local authorities to support them in addressing those barriers where possible. There must be regular engagement between humanitarian, development and peace organisations and the OSESGY alongside cooperation with local authorities. This will ensure potential sensitivities around investments in durable solutions avoid undermining peace talks and initiatives. It will also protect the basic rights and wellbeing of conflict-affected communities.

Finding durable solutions will take time

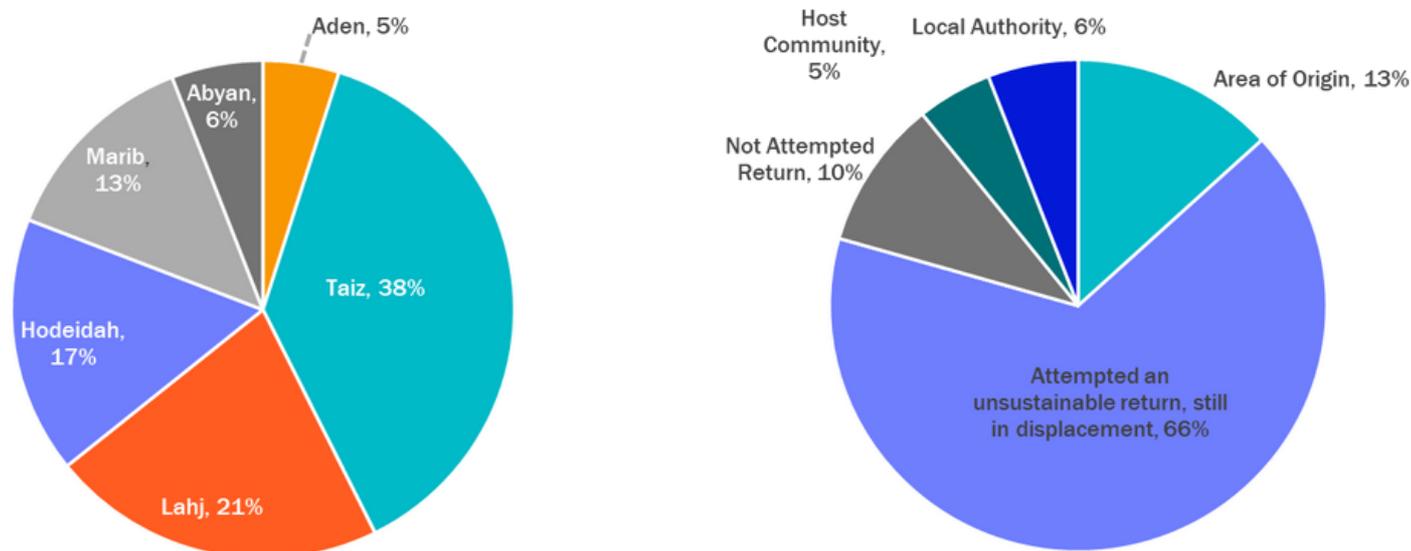
If the aid community intends to actively support people to find durable solutions to their displacement, it must be ready to make a long-term commitment – and plan accordingly. This must include recognition that there will be a period where both humanitarian and longer-term funding and responses are needed at the same time. In other words, in the first instance an increase in development and stabilisation funding will not mean an equivalent decrease in humanitarian funding. For instance, many of the people that the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) spoke to for this research cited livelihoods in their area of origin that cannot currently be resumed. The aid community must be ready to conduct the market assessments, rehabilitation and/or support for new livelihood options needed to help people resume viable livelihoods and self-sufficiency. Until those initiatives have effectively supported people to re-establish an income, they will still need humanitarian assistance to address their daily basic needs.



NRC staff visits damaged homes in Taiz city. Photo: Khalid Al-Banna/NRC

METHODOLOGY

We spoke to 204 people via 20 focus group discussions and 28 key informant interviews. Approximately 34% were women and 66% were men (see methodology on page 11).



Factors that influence the intentions of Yemen's internally displaced

Of our research participants, 162 had decided to attempt to return home. Of these, only 27 were still living in their area of origin. Many of those had yet to reintegrate fully and reported ongoing needs linked to their displacement.

All respondents who had attempted return cited push factors – challenges faced in displacement – as drivers for decisions to attempt return. These included insufficient or poor aid delivery and living conditions, high rent prices, a lack of livelihood opportunities and tensions with host communities. A few respondents also mentioned pull factors, including a recent change in control of areas of origin, the presence of relatives and an increased sense of dignity and ownership in home areas compared to areas of displacement.

This research identified two main areas that have affected both decisions to attempt return and the experience of doing so for IDPs in IRG-controlled areas. These were (i) safety and protection considerations and (ii) the standard of living, including access to services. These two areas are also three of the eight criteria[2] that, according to the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee, must be met in order for a durable solution to be achieved. Access to income-generating opportunities and livelihoods was also a common theme, but the findings on these were less abundant and detailed.

Our perception of our original area has changed as a result of the [return] endeavour, and the mental image we had of it has also undergone significant modification. We must start to consider resettlement as we begin to accept the possibility that we could stay IDPs for a very long time.

Research participant displaced to Marib City.

Physical safety

Issues relating to safety and ongoing violence in parts of Yemen came up in all the focus group discussions. These were also linked to protection risks. One such risk was the loss of civil documentation, which made it challenging and at times impossible for people to move through security checkpoints on their journey home.

Participants in several locations mentioned active, ongoing and even worsening conflict in their area of origin as a barrier to their return. For example, men in a focus group discussion in Marib mentioned the presence of snipers and “being shot at randomly” in their home areas. A key informant displaced to Jabal Habashi in Taiz highlighted indiscriminate shooting. Respondents displaced from Taiz to Tuban, Lahj, mentioned “ongoing clashes” in their area of origin as a barrier to their return. A respondent displaced from the border area between Taiz and Hodeidah to Hayes, Hodeidah, shared his experience of attempting to return home: “Conflict was still going on... Shells and mortars were hitting the house.” Some respondents displaced to Marib even highlighted a worsening conflict and security situation at home.

This research identified the prevalence of explosive remnants of war (ERWs) of many forms as a major safety barrier and a deadly legacy of the conflict in Yemen. People who have tried and failed to return and those who have returned and stayed in their areas of origin in all six governorates covered by the report mentioned ERWs as a barrier. ERWs contaminate homes, agricultural land and roads used for return. Many of those who could reach their homes and land still noted contamination across their area of origin that would limit access to services and pose a daily threat to physical safety. One participant who was living in his area of origin in Hayes, Hodeidah, spoke of many areas planted with mines: “Recently, a mine exploded in a playground next to the school, and some children were playing there.”

People displaced to Jabal Habashi, Taiz, had to present or pay for entry permits at security checkpoints on their way to their areas of origin. Others mentioned armed individuals at security checkpoints threatening and “shooting at us”, with personal belongings being “confiscated” from others while they were asked for entry permits. Three respondents displaced to Tuban, Lahj, shared experiences of “provocative searches” at security checkpoints. They also mentioned conscription risks. People displaced to Al-Mudhafa and Al-Kahera, Taiz, highlighted the risk of arrest for perceived political affiliation. These are clear indications of continued conflict. A host community member in Shadadi, Marib, said they were not aware of anyone having been displaced to their area and subsequently returning home, as “whoever attempts to reach home, they get arrested and investigated”.

Even when people do pass checkpoints and reach their areas of origin, they find safety and protection risks there. One respondent from Jabal Habashi, Taiz, explained: “once I reached my house the gunmen threatened me to not try again”. Others found their homes looted and even occupied by armed people. Respondents in two focus groups in Jabal Habashi, Taiz, said that, after getting the necessary permits to enter their areas of origin, they faced snipers “who kill anyone who tries to enter the area”. The majority of the research participants identified similar localised safety and/or protection risks. This reveals the vast scale of the challenge.

Participants also highlighted tensions with host communities as a safety risk and a push factor for return. This may become more significant if service levels remain low and host communities feel hosting displaced families is negatively affecting them while “truce-like conditions” persist. In Abyan governorate there has been a significant ongoing campaign against “northern” IDPs. This is largely due to messaging linked to southern separatist political groups and agendas aiming to push “northern” IDPs back to their area of origin on the grounds that the peace process has made these areas “safe” for return. This has resulted in the dismantling of IDP structures, military threats against displaced people and forced evictions.

It has also prevented international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) from providing camp-based services.

When considering safety and protection barriers to return, it is important to understand the psychological safety component. Many of those displaced by the conflict have traumatic memories associated with the presence and actions of armed people in their areas. Several respondents across Aden, Taiz and Lahj explicitly cited the removal of armed groups – or demilitarisation – as a pre-requisite for safe returns. Specifically, participants in five of 20 focus groups explicitly mentioned demilitarisation. A further four focus groups alluded to it, citing “liberation” and “removal of all remnants of war” from their home areas as necessary steps to enable their safe return.

For some, such as a group of participants displaced in Jabal Habashi, Taiz, return comes with specific individual safety and protection risks at the hands of armed groups in their area of origin. For others, the presence of armed individuals may simply be an indication of ongoing conflict, insecurity and risk, based on their earlier experiences of the impact of those armed actors, which is directly linked to their displacement.

We were able to reach our homes and land, but most of them were affected and destroyed. We need support with the rehabilitation of damaged housing.

Key informant in Hayes, Hodeidah.

Standard of living

While safety and protection issues dominated feedback, participants also mentioned issues related to an adequate standard of living in areas of origin. These included access to food, water, sanitation, housing, healthcare and basic education. Admittedly, these were mentioned less frequently and in less detail.

Those who had failed in an attempted return highlighted a lack of access to housing, water and healthcare as critical issues preventing return. They also mentioned limited access to food, education, sanitation and energy. Respondents often went into greater detail on the standard of housing than other basic services. This shows that that returning to one’s physical home is often considered paramount.

Participants reported levels of damage ranging from complete destruction of the home to partial damage. They also referred to the looting of essential items from houses, including by parties to the conflict, as well as the loss of “all possessions”. One group in Taiz mentioned that their homes were being used as “barricades”.

In one focus group in Hayes, Hodeidah, a respondent said: “My house had been burned down, I could not find the house I used to live in.” Another reported: “We returned and found our homes destroyed and looted, without windows, doors or furniture.”

Given that most people no longer have savings, receiving support to repair and refurbish homes was often seen as critical to a viable return. Across almost all interviews, respondents had not received any support to return home. Only one group of people in Taiz City was receiving some NRC support to rebuild their homes.

The survey did not go into great depth on housing, land and property rights issues or documentation (aside from questions related to whether people were able to access their homes and land). However, the feedback made clear that no (agricultural, commercial or residential) land or property restitution or compensation mechanism is in place for people returning to areas of origin. Meanwhile, some people still cannot reside safely and securely in their areas of origin because their residences remain partially destroyed or lack necessary basic structures (windows, doors and roofs) or furnishings.

However, among the research participants who had attempted a return home and failed, the majority reported that they were unable to reach their home at all. In some cases, this was because armed people were still occupying their homes. This shows that hostilities will have to end, and housing, land and property rights will need to be upheld as critical components of durable solutions programming and advocacy.

In one instance, a person in Hayes, Hodeidah, reported that other IDPs were living in their home when they returned: “My house was not damaged due to the conflict. There were displaced people staying there during my absence.” Although only a few research participants mentioned this type of secondary occupation, our programmatic responses have identified this issue in communities across Yemen.[3] If and when spontaneous returns begin to increase, this could present other challenges for communities and local authorities alike.

Participants regularly highlighted access to essential services as a challenge, with water sources and healthcare services seen as distant for most communities. They also cited a lack of education, electricity, gas and food as negatively impacting quality of life in areas of origin.

Participants did not feel local authorities would be able to resolve these issues or provide increased access to services. Several people perceived local government as “weak”. Many expressed a need for international aid organisations to provide additional support, with some specifically mentioning the need to restore “state and public services [including] transportation, health, electricity and water”. The local authorities themselves also mentioned a lack of preparedness and their failure to actively support durable solutions (see “View of local authorities” below).

Until now, we do not have plans [to attempt return again] until security and stability are restored and what was destroyed by the war, including property, homes, farms, etc, are rebuilt. The steps we need in the future to do so are restoring social cohesion among the members of society through awareness, because of the division caused by the war. Clearance of mines located in places in rural villages, security and safety. Providing potable water and sanitation, as it was destroyed by the war.

A displaced person in Abyan who attempted return and failed

Livelihoods

Accessing livelihoods in areas of origin presented another formidable challenge for displaced people. None of the research participants said they had been able to return and resume their previous livelihoods. The most common livelihood activity was farming (agriculture and livestock), with a few participants working in daily wage labour, teaching, carpentry, blacksmithing and driving.

The conditions in areas of origin, including ongoing conflict, unexploded ordnance, livestock losses and financial constraints, loomed as major impediments. Furthermore, issues such as scarce opportunities, the limitations of local markets and the instability of currency and prices posed livelihood challenges in both displacement locations and areas of origin. To address these obstacles and help people resume their livelihoods, the IDPs interviewed stressed the pivotal importance of removing unexploded ordnance, rebuilding properties and reinstating social cohesion.

Impact on decision-making

Despite such significant ongoing safety and protection risks, people have attempted to return – sometimes repeatedly. Alarming, only one of the 10 key informants who attempted return – and the only one able to sustain his return (to Hayes, Hodeidah) – reported having obtained information that it was safe to do so. All others (displaced in Jabal Habashi, Taiz, Hayes, Hodeidah, and Tuban, Lahj) highlighted that they did not feel safe while attempting return, with one sharing that “the people who tried to return and stayed there died”.

The vast majority of participants said they had no intention of trying to return again until the safety and security situation significantly improved. Specifically, when asked about their future movement intentions, most respondents currently displaced to Taiz, Lahj and Marib cited no plans to return, explicitly tying prospects for return to the war ending. As summarised by one respondent displaced to Taiz after facing security barriers to previous return attempts: “we have no choice but to stay here until the war is over”. This means that the aid response and local government would need to prepare for people wishing to remain in displacement for the foreseeable future. Alternatively, they might support integration into areas of displacement while also preparing people for return once it becomes feasible and if they still want it.

However, the risk of increasing push factors, especially linked to tensions with host communities, may result in displaced people feeling that they can no longer wait for safety in their area of origin to return. Changing sentiments on the part of host communities and targeted language from local political groups may lead to more cases of involuntary return. These would be less likely than voluntary return to succeed. Many host community members that DRC and NRC spoke to recognised that people will likely remain in the location of displacement for quite some time, with return still being unsafe and unsustainable. However, they also expressed the great needs within the host community: “the support that my community need is the same support provided to the IDPs”.

View of local authorities

Speaking to 12 local authorities, the views on displaced people’s intentions were split almost evenly on whether they wanted to return home or integrate into areas of displacement. Five local authorities in Aden, Lahj, Taiz City and Abyan stated clearly that displaced people want to rebuild their lives in dignity in their area of origin. Six other local authorities in Lahj, Taiz City and Marib City referred to improving services and livelihoods for displaced people in areas of displacement and the need to increase host community awareness in a nod towards integration. The local authorities in Marib City outlined their belief that IDPs intend to integrate.

Despite these views on future intentions, local authorities almost unanimously recognised that, even though active conflict had diminished, the economic, political and security situation had still not evolved enough to make return possible. The deterioration in the economic situation was a key factor preventing people from finding alternatives to displacement.

The main message from local authorities was that return is not currently possible. This was due in part to the fact that people are still uncertain that the current “truce-like conditions” will prevail. The presence of ERW is another key factor. They felt that, in the meantime, both IDPs in locations of displacement and host communities needed more support. This includes:

- more awareness on the part of landowners and host communities to prevent forced evictions
- coordination across humanitarian agencies for support in achieving self-reliance, including through small grants and micro-businesses
- vocational training
- support to host communities

- strengthening and building the capacity of local authorities and civil society.

The only local authority making a full-throated argument that all displaced people wanted to return, and that positive changes in the political, security and economic situation in areas of origin are significant enough for this to happen, is based in Abyan governorate. As reported above, Abyan has witnessed an ongoing political campaign against “northern” IDPs. This has resulted in the dismantling of temporary shelters that IDPs live in, military threats against displaced people and forced evictions. It has also prevented INGOs from providing camp-based services.

This is a clear example of how political and security interests in this ongoing conflict can and will shape the narrative around durable solutions and the challenges the humanitarian community will face to ensure that returns are voluntary, safe and dignified. It also highlights the distinction between “truce-like conditions” or even an agreed ceasefire, and what displaced people consider sufficiently peaceful conditions to enable their safe return. This underscores the additional elements that need to be considered as part of the ongoing peace process, as well as the need to practically examine and support options for local integration. This must include recognising that the withdrawal of armed groups from some areas may take much longer than the signing of any peace agreement, and indeed it may not happen at all.

The key informant interviews with local authorities revealed important insights about their role in providing access to livelihoods for IDPs. While some local authorities acknowledged displaced people’s aspirations to rebuild their lives and access livelihood opportunities, overall the local authorities had taken limited concrete measures to help with this. The local authorities expressed the need for coordination with organisations, service provision, and solutions to safety and security issues to facilitate access to livelihoods. They saw support from humanitarian organisations as crucial in addressing the challenges faced by IDPs and transitioning from emergency assistance to sustainable livelihood projects.

Background, rationale and methodology

At the end of 2022, 4.5 million people in Yemen were living in internal displacement, with over 3 million of them identified as in need of humanitarian assistance.[4] Since a UN-brokered truce was agreed between parties to the conflict in April 2022, the country has experienced a period of relative calm, with some localised violence and some slight improvements in access to fuel, goods and services in parts of the country. However, while the military elements of the conflict slowed, the economic situation intensified, worsening people’s ability to access basic services, food and livelihoods. As the truce expired in October 2022, and with a drip-feed of information on progress towards an agreement to end the conflict, the people of Yemen existed in a state of limbo. They remained hopeful of a peaceful future but were keenly aware that a resumption of conflict might be just around the corner, or that a conflict of a different form and nature could take hold.

During the period of the truce, DRC and NRC spoke to internally displaced people across governorates controlled by the IRG to understand their perceptions of the truce and the impact it was having on their intentions. These conversations showed that, while the truce raised hopes of the possibility of return to areas of origin for Yemen’s displaced, those hopes were soon dashed.

The findings signalled an urgent need for the humanitarian community to better understand how the changing context in the country was affecting displaced people’s decision-making, host communities, push and pull factors related to attempted return, and progress towards achieving durable solutions to displacement. There was also a need to shed light on how international funding should be used to best support displaced people’s wishes.

Alongside these dynamics, conversations on durable solutions programming have become increasingly prominent within the aid response in Yemen. This includes the UN Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement[5] and the national-level Durable Solutions Working Group under the purview of the Humanitarian Coordinator. However, there is still a lack of clarity within the humanitarian response as to what the barriers to achieving durable solutions are. Nor are these discussions fully grounded in people's experiences and intentions, which could be counter-productive in a country that is still in a state of conflict.

When DRC and NRC conducted this research, few surveys on IDPs' intentions had been carried out in IRG-controlled areas. Most of those that had been done showed the majority of displaced people wanted to return home eventually but few felt they would be able to do so soon.[6]

Between April and June 2023, DRC and NRC spoke with 204 people to understand the reality or feasibility of returns in Yemen's evolving context. In total, we spoke with 27 people that had attempted to return home and remained in their area of origin at the time of research, 20 IDPs that had not yet attempted to return home, 135 IDPs that had attempted to return only to find this was not sustainable, 10 host community members and 12 local authorities. We spoke with 28 people via key informant interviews and 176 through a total of 20 focus group discussions.

Our inability to speak with more people remaining in areas of origin was partly due to a lack of any systematic mechanism for tracking returns in Yemen. This made it difficult to find out where people were returning to. Other barriers were our reliance on accessing communities in which we do programming, challenges in accessing areas of origin, and time constraints around the research due to the need to make it relevant to ongoing discussions on durable solutions.

Conversations took place across six governorates: Aden, Taiz, Lahj, Hodeidah, Abyan and Marib. Approximately 69 respondents (about 34 per cent) were women. Feedback from staff engaging in the discussions stated that the low level of female representation was likely due to a combination of factors. One possible explanation was that men are more likely in the first instance to attempt return while assessing sustainability. Others were: sociocultural issues, safety concerns related to attempted return and a lack of representation due to gender roles and gender-related expectations. However, it would be important to further understand the specific circumstances of both women and women-headed households in future assessments.

Displaced people are aware of what is needed to facilitate their return home in safety and dignity. When asked what kind of support they required to overcome the significant barriers they faced, the vast majority stated ending the conflict and removing armed groups and individuals, clearing mines and other contamination and providing support to rebuild homes as well as for basic services and livelihoods. However, the reality is that alternatives to return, including integration or relocation to another area of choice, must also be available in the shorter term.

CONCLUSION

The current “truce-like” conditions in Yemen have created an opportunity to find durable solutions for many displaced people. Yet for most displaced people, returning to their area of origin is not proving to be a durable solution at all. There is a need to engage more with displaced people in Yemen and better understand the issues affecting their decisions to move or stay – as well as the realistic options available to them.

Returning to areas of origin may become more viable for many displaced people in the next few years if the national and local authorities responsible for finding solutions to displacement invest significantly in this and humanitarian, peace and development organisations provide support. However, all three durable solutions – return, local integration and relocation – should remain up for discussion, taking into account displaced people’s aspirations, safety and other considerations. In some instances, a short- to medium-term solution may differ from a long-term one. For example, it may be more viable for a displaced person to integrate locally in the medium term even if in the long run it is safe for them, and they prefer, to return to their area of origin.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the IRG and Ansar Allah

- Grant aid agencies full access to IDPs, host communities and areas of origin that people are returning to. Make sure both aid responses and strategies for durable solutions are based on the expressed needs and intentions of the communities they are designed to support.
- Establish the conditions and provide the means to allow displaced people to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity. Continue to prioritise steps to end both military and economic elements of the conflict and reduce the presence of armed entities across the country.
- Facilitate dialogue that fosters cohesion among displaced and host communities and reinforces respect for and dignity of displaced people while eliminating rhetoric that could incite violence or act as a push factor for premature return or new displacement.
- Make essential public services equally accessible to IDPs and host communities.
- Establish (agricultural, commercial or residential) land and property restitution or compensation mechanism for people returning to areas of origin.
- Ensure the freedom of movement, protection, wellbeing and dignity of IDPs passing through checkpoints trying to return to areas of origin.

To the UN leadership in Yemen

- The UN leadership should develop a Yemen-wide framework for tracking returns and attempted returns and coordinating a clear and consistent understanding of not only displaced people’s intentions but also whether those intentions are informed by lived experiences (that is, attempts to integrate with host communities, relocate or return to their areas of origin). This requires ensuring consistency in the assessment approaches, questionnaires and tools it uses to research displaced people’s intentions and the barriers they face in achieving durable solutions.
- Make sure humanitarian and development response plans that include durable solutions to internal displacement are primarily informed by the views of displaced people themselves. Encourage national and local authorities to grant the full access needed to make displaced people’s voices heard. Consider the specific challenges faced by women, youth and people with disabilities as well as other marginalised groups.

- Work towards enhanced communication with community initiatives that tackle the barriers and to return and the protection risks associated with return. Those initiatives should be geared towards enabling people that have attempted return to share their experiences with others considering return, which in turn can support informed decision-making.
- Explore opportunities for resettlement in other safe locations in collaboration with the government. Support local integration, livelihoods and psychosocial services for Yemen's displaced population. Where possible, facilitate safe and voluntary return.

To the OSESGY

- Do more to base peace talks on the lived experiences of conflict-affected communities and specifically those living in displacement. Note that a negotiated peace agreement or prolonged pause in conflict may have unintended negative consequences for displaced people. Take steps to mitigate and monitor those potential risks and raise them with parties to the conflict.
- Fund a full-time humanitarian liaison post to ensure the OSESGY's work is effectively linked with, and informed by, the humanitarian aid response in Yemen.
- Work with security authorities to increase their awareness of displacement and the rights of IDPs to move freely, including to return to their area of origin.
- Push for an end to the production and laying of explosive ordnance as an integral component of any ceasefire and broader peace agreement.

To the Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement

- Ensure principled humanitarian assistance continues for populations that need it. Continue offering protection in areas of active conflict. Support government leadership and engage development agencies.
- Encourage all relevant parties to consider and prioritise protection risks and dynamics on the ground as a basis for investments, strategies and operational plans when coordinating and making decisions about durable solutions.
- Prioritise advocacy on access as a precondition for improved knowledge of people's needs, experiences and intentions and therefore investments in durable solutions.

To INGOs working in Yemen

- Base all programming on durable solutions to enable humanitarian actors to move beyond perpetual emergency response and transition towards medium- to long-term solutions.
- Adhere to protection principles and guidance on durable solutions – for example, protection guidelines on voluntary return. Ensure that people's lived experiences and intentions are heard. Make sure programming is designed, implemented and evaluated in a way that seeks to support the intentions of affected populations.
- Actively engage in cluster approaches and durable solutions coordination to gather and share information on internal displacement and the achievement of durable solutions. One way to do this is to include agreed common questions in assessments and other monitoring and evaluation activities.
- Work with UN partners and Yemeni civil society organisations to improve information-sharing initiatives that will give communities access to information on safety and protection risks involved in attempted return so they may make better informed decisions.

To the donor community

- Ensure funding enables aid agencies to continue to support displacement-affected communities but is also flexible enough to respond to displaced people's intentions and movements. This should include flexible, multi-year funding streams that support nexus approaches.
- Encourage the IRG and Ansar Allah to expand access to communities to enable those working towards durable solutions to better assess needs and readiness for alternatives to displacement.
- Continue to make protection-specific funding available through integrated programming. Support efforts to mainstream protection across the humanitarian response and into discussions and coordination on durable solutions. This will help to address ongoing humanitarian needs and ensure that IDPs are not prematurely pushed to return to areas that remain unsafe. It will also facilitate engagement in discussions of all possible solutions.
- Encourage the IRG and Ansar Allah to give it a more active role in finding and supporting solutions to displacement.
- Dedicate funding to transitional activities that help bridge the gap between emergency and longer-term/development initiatives while continuing principled humanitarian work in areas where this is still necessary.
- Fund integrated programming around peacebuilding, such as community mediation and dialogue and social cohesion, to help IDPs integrate into host communities.

ENDNOTES

[1] A durable solution is achieved when displaced persons (internally displaced persons, refugees, or returnees) no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement.

[2] <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/iasc-framework-durable-solutions-internally-displaced-persons>

[3] <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2022/five-families-in-a-two-room-home/>

[4] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2023, January 2023. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-response-plan-2023-january-2023-enar>.

[5] United Nations, The United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, June 2022. Available at https://www.un.org/en/content/action-agenda-on-internal-displacement/assets/pdf/Action-Agenda-on-Internal-Displacement_EN.pdf.

[6] International Organisation for Migration and Danish Refugee Council, Reframing Durable Solutions Along the Red Sea Coast of Yemen: Challenges of Long-term Programming in Protracted Crises. Available at <https://yemen.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1176/files/documents/DRC%20IOM%20Durable%20Solutions%20research.pdf>.