

BUILDING RESILIENCE FOR FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CIVIL CONFLICT

EXPERIENCES FROM RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN YEMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Food and nutrition insecurity is a consequence and a driver of civil conflict.¹ War and civil unrest reduce household incomes and employment opportunities through economic recession; cause losses in people's purchasing power from price inflation; and restrict food availability, access, and utilization through disruption of infrastructure.² In turn, low per capita income and poverty,³ youth unemployment,⁴ and social and economic inequality⁵—often combined with poor governance, population pressure, and rough terrain⁶—are factors driving civil conflict. Recently, food and nutrition insecurity has been identified as another main driver of civil conflict globally⁷ and even more so in Arab countries.⁸ Specifically, rising international food prices were reported to have significantly increased the incidence of antigovernment demonstrations, riots, and civil conflict in low-income countries in the past.⁹

Events in more recent history seem to confirm the role of food and nutrition insecurity as a catalyst for political instability and conflict. Food protests and riots broke out in 48 countries as a result of record food price spikes during the global food price crisis in 2007–2008.¹⁰ Global food prices spiked again in 2010–2011. People's dissatisfaction about their governments' inaction to cope with rapidly increasing food insecurity, deteriorating living standards, growing inequality, and high unemployment—combined with general disaffection with state governance—led to mass protests and civil unrest in several Arab countries that cumulated in major political uprisings—known as the “Arab awakening.”¹¹ The civil disobedience and violent uprisings resulted in substantial policy reforms (Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco), government overthrow (Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen), or lasting civil war (Syria).

In the postrevolution Arab countries, extensive policy reforms and development programs that tackle the underlying causes of the current political crises—including food and nutrition insecurity—are urgently needed to regain stability and hence enable sustainable development. Indeed, experiences from other world regions suggest that countries in political transition are at particular risk of (re)entering civil conflict.¹² Conflict prevention and reduction requires tackling the factors that motivate people to participate in or support conflict-related activities. These factors can be classified into two categories, those relating to grievances and those relating to opportunities.¹³ Grievances include aspects of social and economic inequality; discrimination and repression of certain population groups due to social status, ethnicity, and religious affiliation; and lack of political rights. However, civil conflict can also offer new, atypical opportunities for the individual. A

growing body of evidence suggests that people's incentives to engage in conflict are mostly explained by economic behavior rather than by grievances.¹⁴ The deciding factor in an individual's behavior is his or her current socioeconomic condition relative to the expected gain or loss from conflict engagement (either directly as fighter or indirectly as supporter)—or, in economic terms, the opportunity costs of conflict participation.¹⁵ Such self-seeking behavior tends to be more distinct in the context of widespread poverty and food insecurity and to be amplified in times of unusual hardship—when experiencing serious purchasing power losses from economic shocks such as during food price crises, for example—and facilitated by absent state order.

FOOD AND NUTRITION INSECURITY AND THE RISK OF CIVIL CONFLICT IN YEMEN

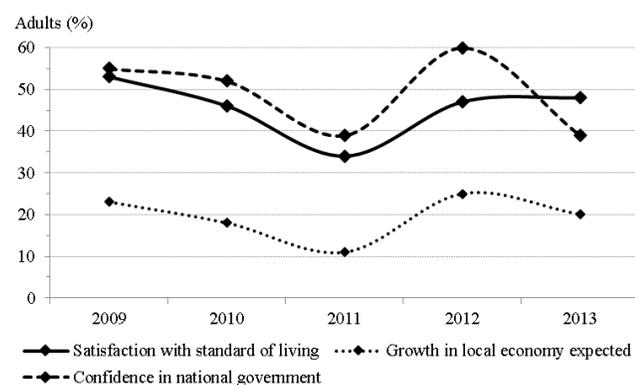
Yemen experienced a succession of economic and political crises in the recent past that led to a significant increase in poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition. Even before the 2007–2008 global food price crisis, Yemen had one of the highest poverty rates in the Arab world. Although high global fuel prices led to oil-driven economic growth in 2008, growth did not trickle down to the poor, and the following global financial crisis slowed growth sharply in 2009. The poverty rate increased from 34.8 percent in 2006 to an estimated 42.8 percent in 2009.¹⁶

The rapidly worsening economic situation and deterioration in people's living standards, in combination with government inability to effectively address Yemen's economic and social challenges, sparked civil unrest. In the spring of 2011, mass protests demanding better governance, political voice, and fair economic opportunities evolved into deadly violent clashes.¹⁷ The revolution quickly spread throughout the country, adding to ongoing conflicts including the insurgency of the Houthi rebels in the northwest, a secessionist movement in the south, and the emergence of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The end of the revolution was initiated with a resolution of the government and the signature of a power transition agreement in November 2011,¹⁸ but political instability and insecurity remain, and terrorist attacks have continued since then. Nonetheless, Yemen has undergone an ambitious political transition process with the outcomes not yet in sight. There is a notion that the ongoing political transition has overshadowed the humanitarian crisis and diverted attention from addressing the socioeconomic causes underlying the current political instability.¹⁹

The 2011 political crisis sent shock waves through Yemen's already fragile economy and society that likely further reduced the opportunity costs of conflict participation. The national gross domestic product contracted by almost 11 percent in 2011, and the poverty rate increased to an estimated 54.4 percent.²⁰ Consumer price inflation—especially for food and fuel—was the foremost shock to household welfare in the revolution year.²¹ In October 2011, the year-on-year inflation of the consumer price index (CPI) stood at about 25 percent, again reaching its historical peak from 2008.²² The 2011 Comprehensive Food Security Survey (CFSS) of the World Food Programme (WFP) suggested that high food prices affected household welfare in 90.2 percent of all households, and high fuel prices affected 41.3 percent. As a result, 56.1 percent suffered from lack of food or money to purchase food, and 25.4 percent had to reduce the number of meals eaten per day. The proportion of food-insecure households (measured based on WFP's food consumption score) increased from 31.5 percent in late 2009 to 44.5 percent in late 2011. And the prevalence of child wasting—identifying acute child malnutrition—shot up by more than one-fifth within only one year, to an extreme of 15.9 percent in late 2012 (from 13.0 percent in late 2011).²³

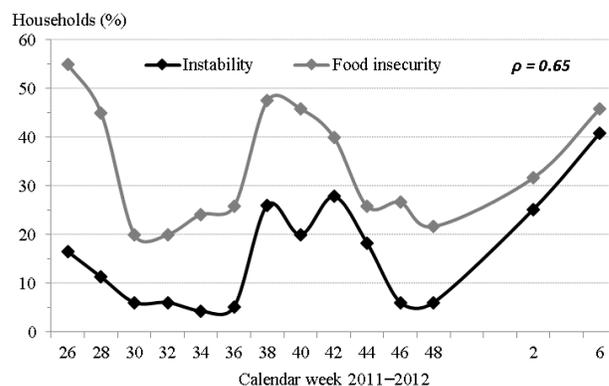
Perception-based survey data by Gallup reveal a close co-movement of people's confidence in the national government, expectations of economic recovery, and personal standard of living in Yemen, and strikingly reflect the country's political and economic instability over the past five years (Figure 1). The political and socioeconomic conditions deteriorated during the two years prior to the 2011 uprising and reached their low in that year. With new hopes after the transition of state power, optimism for improved governance and economic recovery became more common in 2012, but 2013 estimates indicated a tendency toward a drop back into recession and hence pointed to Yemen's current fragility. Moreover, data from a small-scale, high-frequency household panel survey by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) confirmed that political instability and household food insecurity are indeed closely associated, especially among vulnerable population groups (Figure 2).

Figure 1 People's perceptions of political and economic conditions in Yemen, 2009–2013



Source: Data from Gallup Analytics.²⁴

Figure 2 Association between political instability and household food insecurity in Yemen, 2011–2012



Source: Data from UNICEF's Pilot Social Protection Monitoring Survey (PSPMS).²⁵

EXPERIENCES OF BUILDING RESILIENCE FROM RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Development programs and projects can contribute to reducing the risk of civil conflict by increasing the opportunity costs of conflict participation and supporting the removal of social grievances. Reducing chronic food and nutrition insecurity, improving employment and income generation, and enhancing resilience to economic and natural shocks through the accumulation of productive assets, for example, seem critical. However, project implementation in times of political instability is often challenged by insecurity for project staff and beneficiaries, and possibly complicated by social tensions in the project area. Projects that have faced this dilemma and consistently continued on-the-ground operation can provide important lessons for building resilience to civil conflict and scaling up of development investments under unstable political conditions. Two examples of such projects are the Dhamar Participatory Rural Development Project (DPRDP) and the Al-Dhala Community Resource Management Project (ADCRMP), both funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (Table 1; Box 1). Both projects targeted poor, rural communities in Yemen's rugged mountains, which are among the most economically marginalized parts of the country and are directly affected by civil conflict (Table 2).

Table 1 Overview of project examples

Descriptor	DPRDP	ADCRMP
Start (implementations)	2004 (2007)	2007 (2009)
Completion	2012	2014
Direct beneficiaries	26,000 households	15,600 households
Total cost	US\$24.4m	US\$22.8m
IFAD loan	US\$15.6m	US\$14.3m

Source: IFAD.²⁶

Notes: ADCRMP = Al-Dhala Community Resource Management Project; DPRDP = Dhamar Participatory Rural Development Project; IFAD = International Fund for Agricultural Development.

BOX 1 DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT EXAMPLES

Dhamar Participatory Rural Development Project

DPRDP aimed to improve the food security of subsistence farmers, to increase family incomes, and to improve the living conditions of small farm households and village communities in Dhamar governorate. The two main project components were (1) community development and (2) agriculture and rural livelihood development and environment. Activities under the first component included establishing and strengthening community organizations to engage in the project's participatory development processes; adult literacy classes and life-skills training predominantly for women; and construction of community infrastructure for safe drinking water, education, health, and transportation. Activities under the second component included forming natural resource user and agricultural producer associations, establishing village-based agricultural extension services, introducing improved agricultural inputs and techniques, construction and rehabilitation of water storage and irrigation systems, establishing rural financial services, and developing the coffee and honey value chains.

IFAD supervisors considered the implementation of all project components satisfactory, although only 64 percent of 2011 project targets were met, mostly because implementation in 2011 was seriously impeded by instability and insecurity in some parts of the project area (including road blocks, carjacking, and community disputes) and by lack of or high costs of fuel and materials. Comparisons between Results and Impact Management System (RIMS) survey data from 2006 (at baseline) and 2012 (at completion) suggest that household asset wealth and—against the national trend for rural Yemen—food and nutrition security significantly improved among the beneficiaries (all estimates based on RIMS survey data are own estimates). Household asset wealth (measured by a composite index) increased by 16.2 percent on average. The proportion of households who experienced chronic or seasonal hunger in the year prior to the survey dropped from 50.2 percent in 2006 to 9.0 percent in 2012, and the average length of the hunger season decreased from 6.1 to 3.5 months. The prevalence of child wasting declined at an average annual rate of 1.4 percentage points (from 20.3 percent to 11.7 percent), whereas it increased by 0.6 percentage points across all of rural Yemen (from 13.4 percent in 2005 to 17.5 percent in 2012) (own estimates from 2005–2006 Household Budget Survey data and IPC-IG et al. 2013). However, the data do not allow attribution of all of these positive changes to project activities because a suitable control group was not available for a rigorous impact study.

Yet the perceived successful implementation of the first component has attracted particular attention and made DPRDP an IFAD flagship model for community development in Yemen. According to IFAD's supervision report, the project introduced a participatory development approach in communities inexperienced with development assistance under politically unstable conditions, which enabled the beneficiaries—through their social organizations—to make decisions regarding the type and size of project interventions. This approach required that project implementers build strong working relationships with local communities and stakeholders for such purposes as selecting beneficiary communities and promoting community-based decisionmaking. According to the supervision report, the project gave top priority to vulnerable and marginalized groups (especially the poor and women) in targeting interventions and was deemed to be conducive in overcoming prevailing social constraints. The beneficiaries, particularly in remote areas, are reported to believe that the project made their voices heard and contributed to social cohesion and inclusion. This approach may have been a reason why on-the-ground activities could continue throughout the turmoil year of 2011.

Source: Based on IFAD. 2012. *Supervision Report: Dhamar Participatory Rural Development Project*. Sana'a, Yemen.

Al-Dhala Community Resource Management Project

ADCRMP aims to support sustainable and equitable growth of rural living standards and greater livelihood security for vulnerable households in remote and isolated communities in Al-Dhala governorate through better management of their resource base. The three main project components are (1) community development, (2) land and water resource management, and (3) agriculture and livelihood development. The community development component is designed following the perceived successful example of DPRDP and is believed to respond even more to the beneficiaries' needs, such as for female-supportive household assets and road infrastructure development. The second component gives top priority to water-related activities and construction of individual household-level water reservoirs, inasmuch as rain—the only source of water—has become scarce and irregular in recent years. Activities under the third component include technical and financial support for livestock development and rangeland improvement, apiculture, crop production improvement, community-based microfinance, and off-farm employment.

IFAD supervisors report that the project has exceeded its plans in all years since 2009—including during 2011, despite its location in a governorate characterized by extreme insecurity and political volatility. Comparisons between RIMS survey data from 2008 (at baseline) and 2013 suggest that household asset wealth and—as in DPRDP, against the national trend for rural Yemen—food and nutrition security significantly improved among the ADCRMP beneficiaries. Household asset wealth increased by 12.9 percent on average. The proportion of households who experienced chronic or seasonal hunger in the year prior to the survey declined from 25.2 percent in 2008 to 14.2 percent in 2013, and the average length of the hunger season decreased from 6.1 to 3.0 months. The prevalence of child wasting declined at an annual rate of 0.7 percentage points (from 20.7 percent to 17.2 percent). However, as in the case of DPRDP, the data do not allow attribution of all of these positive changes to project activities because a suitable control group was not available for a rigorous impact study.

BOX 1 (CONTINUED)

According to IFAD's supervision report, the beneficiaries perceive that the single most important achievement of the project has been the construction of rainwater harvesting tanks for drinking water, which have helped households obtain much-needed potable water and significantly reduced the burden on women and girls. IFAD project supervisors note that the beneficiary contribution has been particularly high for the domestic water systems (at an average of around 60 percent) and further increased in 2011, indicating the value of this investment to the beneficiaries and their fear of project suspension or cancellation. This and other investments in household assets are believed to have enhanced household resilience against drought-caused and conflict-related crises—considering that evidence from other countries points to drought as a driver of civil conflict (for example, Maystadt and Ecker 2014). Moreover, the IFAD supervision report suggests that—through the community development component—the participatory and demand-driven approach applied in planning and implementation of ADCRMP has created the project's positive reputation in and outside the beneficiary communities. IFAD officers believe that the project outcomes, in combination with the established strong and respect-based relationship with local communities and stakeholders, are key for being able to successfully operate under the difficult security conditions in the governorate.

Source: Based on IFAD. 2012. *Supervision Report: Al-Dhala Community Resource Management Project*. Sana'a, Yemen.

Table 2 Prevalence of conflict incidences in project areas (% of households)

Conflict status	DPRDP (2012)	ADCRMP (2013)
Peace in own and surrounding communities	80.8	53.4
Violent conflict in own and surrounding communities	13.6	32.2
Peace in own community but violent conflict in surrounding communities	1.2	13.8

Source: Data from Results and Impact Management System Survey module.²⁷

DISCUSSION

Development projects such as DPRDP and ADCRMP may contribute to reducing the risk of civil conflict in rural Yemen through increasing the opportunity cost of conflict participation. The projects may achieve this effect by improving food and nutrition security, enhancing farm and off-farm income opportunities, and investing in human capital formation, as well as through alleviating grievances within the project area by adopting a participatory, demand-driven approach and supporting social inclusion and cohesion. It is likely that strong relationships with local communities and stakeholders are important for enabling successful project operations on the ground, particularly under conditions of severe political instability and insecurity.

Certainly there are concerns that further escalation of civil conflict will disrupt already achieved development progress—such as in Al-Dhala governorate²⁸—and make interventions in

even more parts of Yemen impossible. And indeed, data on people's perceptions provide some evidence for growing dissatisfaction with the current political and economic conditions (Figure 1). However, this situation also calls for urgent economic policy reforms and large-scale development interventions that address the causes underlying the current crisis (in addition to the existing humanitarian emergency assistance essential for mitigating the crisis impact). At the policy level, more effort needs to be made in this direction without neglecting the ongoing political transition process. At the program level, successful interventions urgently need to be scaled up, utilizing the experiences from recently completed and ongoing projects. An encouraging example seems to be the IFAD-funded Rural Growth Program that is scheduled to start in 2014 and will have a strong community development component, following the DPRDP and ADCRMP approach.

In addition to the absence of control groups, which prevented a reliable attribution of social and economic benefits to the IFAD-funded project interventions, this study has at least two other shortcomings that are rooted in data limitations: First, the currently available data do not allow for establishing causality between recent civil conflict and food and nutrition insecurity in Yemen in a methodologically rigorous manner. Second, appropriate household survey data for analyzing which specific policies and program components are most effective to enhance resilience to civil conflict through improving food and nutrition security and other socioeconomic drivers are still inaccessible. Because more appropriate data are forthcoming, addressing these shortcomings is left for follow-up work.

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NOTES

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