A NEW WAY OF WORKING IN YEMEN; HELPING YEMENIS SURVIVE THE CRISIS.

A UNDP / WB PARTNERSHIP
Food insecurity. Famine. Starvation. The dire reality facing the Yemeni people is caused by a war that has been devastating the country for over four years. The war has crippled an already-ailing economy, caused mass displacement, disrupted salary payments, hiked food and fuel prices, paralysed the delivery of key services, and led to a deadly cholera epidemic.

The loss of livelihood for 8 million Yemenis, coupled with the disruption of salary payments for 1.25 million civil servants, has further exacerbated the humanitarian situation and set the country back by decades. There is immense pressure to provide relief.

The limited access to key goods, coupled with the decreasing and fluctuating national currency, has caused food prices to skyrocket, making food inaccessible even to those with a steady income.

In 2016, amid a deteriorating crisis, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank partnered to prevent a full-blown famine in Yemen. This partnership was designed to restore basic services, sustain the resilience of local institutions and preserve human capital.

The ECRP is a US$ 400 million IDA funded project, implemented by UNDP through two key local service delivery institutions - the Social Fund for Development (SFD), and the Public Works Project (PWP). Despite the protracted conflict, these two institutions have been able to continue their community-based services while working in tandem with humanitarian partners across the country for the benefit of the people of Yemen.

Through the ECRP, the World Bank and the UNDP have developed a new way of working in Yemen and have merged humanitarian and development efforts to prevent local communities from falling further into poverty.

The extent of deterioration of basic services such as water, sanitation, agriculture and education had exhausted all available international humanitarian resources. The conflict has also exacerbated the country’s chronic poverty, resulting in a drastic increase in severe hunger and UNOCHA figures site 2 million children and 1.14 pregnant or lactating mothers suffer from acute malnutrition. The conflict has devastated the health care system, with 49 percent of health facilities not functioning or partially functioning. There are 10 health workers per 10,000 people in Yemen. Furthermore, the serious damage caused to the country’s water and sanitation infrastructure has exposed the population to water-borne diseases and other health risks.

To help Yemenis cope, ECRP has successfully created jobs by making use of existing capacities through the SFD and PWP. In 2018 alone, around 1,899 large-scale, cash-for-work sub-projects were implemented, benefiting nearly 3.4 million Yemenis.

These sub-projects created jobs for more than 344,550 people – 20 percent of whom are internally displaced and/or returnees. The jobs created are generally associated with the repair of key basic services for vulnerable people and communities, including the building of domestic water supply systems, protecting farmland to maintain optimal production, paving roads to provide safe access to healthcare and food, and rebuilding damaged schools for students to continue their education.

The project also works to ensure small businesses have an opportunity to stay afloat during the crisis, helping communities keep citizens employed and families fed. ECRP supported nine major national microfinance institutions so that more than 84,000 small business clients across Yemen – such as farmers, fishermen, midwives, grocers and pharmacists – can maintain access to financing and continue operating. Some 8,695 of these businesses were on the verge of collapse as a result of the conflict, but were revived with the project’s support.

The project has also approached the food crisis from new angles. Through joint interventions, 3,636 female community health promoters have been trained and contracted to work in health facilities. In 2018, they treated and educated nearly 300,000 mothers and children suffering from malnutrition.

The impact of ECRP across Yemen has been tremendous, helping the Yemeni people regain access to key services, earning wages to allow them to purchase basic necessities for themselves and their families, and – most importantly – restoring their dignity.
SAMIAH CAUGHT BETWEEN WAR AND DISPLACEMENT

“We had a happy life and felt safe at home before the war,” says Samiah, a mother of two young daughters and a son.

“Our life was a peaceful one. My family relied on fishing for both our food and income, getting up early in the morning to go fishing,” she says as her thoughts trail off. “I would prepare breakfast for my children before they would head off to school. Life was good.”

But armed clashes in Hodeidah stripped these memories of happiness and safety, instead forcing Samiah and her family to flee for their lives. The ongoing war in Yemen has taken a heavy toll on everyone, but particularly women and children – often leaving them vulnerable and at risk.

“My children and I went to bed hungry many nights. We couldn’t find enough food to eat. There were times I told them I wasn’t hungry so that whatever food I put on the table would be enough for them,” continues Samiah.

Even as her situation deteriorated, Samiah – and many others like her – were given the opportunity to work to improve their living conditions through the large cash-for-work projects implemented by the Yemen-based SFD, in partnership with the UNDP and the World Bank.

Samiah now works with the SFD and earns money for painting work in her community. She has painted schools, parks and street curbs. Making breakfast and then heading off to work has created a similar routine to the one she had in Hodeidah: this simple routine has brought stability to her and her children.

Beaming with pride and dignity, Samiah says: “I’ve worked for four months now and many things have improved in our lives, thanks to this project. This work makes me happy and hopeful for the future. I can pay the rent and provide my children with food. Everyone is happy and healthy.

“I want the war to be over. I want to be able to live safely with my kids. I don’t want to beg for help from anyone ever again. But I’ve learned a great lesson from the cash-for-work project: depend on myself only and work hard to earn money to provide for my children,” she concludes with a smile.
“These crops have allowed us to avoid borrowing money from our already vulnerable relatives. They have not received their salaries for over a year, and all of us have been affected by the conflict in my city, Taiz,” explains Samar, a widow. “The crops do not cost me money: I water them with the kitchen waste water, use locally-made organic fertilisers sent to me from my village and use garlic and orange peels as pesticides.”

The change that the World Bank-supported ECRP has brought Samar and her family through its cash-for-work programme, implemented by the SFD in partnership with the UNDP, is highlighted by her new peace of mind. The programme has supported vulnerable households caught in armed conflicts to help them start their own home gardens.

ECRP introduced the home gardens as a new activity that has helped several conflict-affected households in Taiz survive the hard access constraints into their city.

For Samar, the garden has alleviated one element of her struggle after her husband was killed during fighting in Taiz in 2016, leaving her as the only breadwinner for a family of three children in a city without job opportunities and where food prices continue to rise.

Having created her own home garden, Samar also bought – from the labour wage she earned under the cash-for-work programme – a sewing machine to make and sell clothes, generating income for her and her family.
MOHAMMED
A TEACHER WITH NO SALARY

Mohammed continued teaching his students even after his volunteer stipend was slashed.

Mohammed is one of hundreds of thousands of young Yemeni people struggling to find work. Besides being the poorest country in the Middle East, with an unemployment rate at 31 percent, the conflict has further worsened an already dire economic situation and pushed many young people into despair.

“I became hopeless when I couldn’t find a job so I decided to volunteer in return for only around US$ 30 a month,” he explains. “Despite this meagre amount, I was very happy in the beginning because I was in need of money for my family.”

But Mohammed says the US$ 30 that he received at the end of each month was not enough to meet the basic needs of his four daughters, wife and visually-impaired father, with currency fluctuations also having an impact on the amount he took home. “I had to borrow money from my friends to cover our needs. I kept looking for a fully paid job but I couldn’t find anything,” he says.

“I continued to struggle for the sake of my family but then the Education Office decided to reduce the monthly payments of volunteer teachers from YER 15,000 to YER 10,000 due to the unstable economic situation in the country.”

But a smile appears on Mohammed’s face as he continues: “A colleague of mine told me that the SFD has a youth-supported programme to pay salaries for volunteer teachers at Al-Ghafeqi School where I work.

“I was doubtful and didn’t really believe that volunteer teachers would receive real salaries,” he says. “But I went to school and found out that the SFD pays US$ 150 a month for each volunteer. I was so happy when I received my first salary as I’m now able to provide a decent life for my family.”
Along with her 17-strong family, Samira suffered from the bitterness of displacement, moving from one town to another, in search of safe refuge following the destruction of their home in the ongoing conflict in Yemen.

“We lost everything in a blink of an eye. Our house in Haradh was destroyed and we had to flee. We had to pass through five districts to reach Hajjah. Along the way we spent six months in the mountains without enough food or water,” Samira recalls, with a note of deep sadness in her voice.

“Conditions were harsh and we were pessimistic but eventually we reached Hajjah, where we feel safer. We relied mainly on humanitarian aid. It was our only source of food and usually we would eat half and sell the other half to buy other basic needs,” explains Samira.

Despite feeling safer in Hajjah, Samira remained upset and frustrated. She lost hope that things would get better until she received a phone call from the Yemen-based SFD.

“That was a turning point in my life,” says Samira, with a wide smile on her face. “I was over the moon. I never expected that they would remember us and even have our phone numbers.

“I went to the SFD and attended training courses for young people. Within a short period, the SFD contacted me again and I started working.”

Through field visits to local communities, Samira and other young people like her have contributed to the formation of cooperative councils in targeted villages to help them identify and work on local issues. In addition, Samira works to raise awareness among these local communities, motivate them through training, and contribute to the eradication of illiteracy.

“I have changed my perspective on life and the communities that I have served and influenced. I have also learned a lot from them. I feel very happy when I see the positive change that has occurred in other people’s lives, especially when I’ve contributed to solving complicated social and tribal problems; she says.

“When I arrived home with my first wages, my orphaned nephews ran to me and asked what I had bought for them. I used to feel heartbroken whenever they would ask me this but this time I told them that I bought them everything,” Samira says with a sigh of relief.
Samar was a 10-year-old girl from the village of Al-Hamrah in Ibb. One morning she was going about her normal routine of collecting water with her friends – they regularly visited the Manboosh spring in the nearby Qadeef Valley. But that day tragedy struck. As she bent to collect the water in her bucket, she fell in and drowned.

Ongoing drought results in the quick depletion of regular water sources in several villages around the Manboosh spring where Samar died. Many people travel long distances to collect water from the spring – often sending their young children to collect water a few times a day. Samar’s death was a tragic and chilling warning to those living in the area.

After Samar’s death, the UNDP and the World Bank – in partnership with the PWP – worked closely with women from the surrounding villages to quickly and urgently build a closer water-harvesting reservoir. This new water source provides them with easily accessible and clean drinking water and means that villagers no longer have to collect water from the distant valley. Most importantly though, the reservoir protects the lives of young girls and puts an end to the risks marked by Samar’s tragic death.
The armed conflict that broke out some four years ago caused severe damage to public infrastructure in Lahj, in the south of Yemen, with schools in the Al-Hawta district sustaining heavy damage, bringing education almost to a halt. Al-Faruq school was one of the schools that suffered serious damage during the armed clashes. Fadhl, an employee at the Al-Hawta Education Office, explains that "Al-Faruq Secondary School is the only secondary school in the Al-Hawta district. When this school was destroyed, students had to stop studying."

"It was renovated only eight years ago but then almost all classrooms were either partially or totally destroyed in the fighting," Fadhl adds.

During the period following the clashes, some classrooms in the area’s primary schools were allocated to students from the Al-Faruq School, but the schools soon became overcrowded.

In support of continuing education, the Yemen-based PWP – through the ECRP – rehabilitated Al-Faruq School: Twenty classrooms, eight laboratories, two offices and toilets were repaired.

“We’re very happy and relieved that local children can safely continue their education in the school,” Fadhl says.
GOING BACK TO PROPER SCHOOLS TO STUDY

The conflict in Yemen has had a heavy impact on public education in the country. Students, especially in rural areas, study in difficult conditions due to a shortage of classrooms and other necessary education services.

A year ago, students in Ajyal Al-Wehda School in the Al-Sabrah district of Ibb regularly studied outdoors or in other unsuitable locations, due to a lack of classrooms.

More than 200 male and female students come to this school from 14 villages to study. One of these students is the fifth-grader Asma. “Last year we studied under the stairs due to the insufficient number of classrooms,” she recalls. “We used to sit on the ground for more than four hours every day and many of us got sick in the cold weather.”

In addition to not having enough classrooms, the school lacked chairs, tables, whiteboards and bathrooms. Students had to relieve themselves in the open. “There was a lack of latrines in our school. Many students were infected with diseases such as cholera,” says Asma.

All that changed when the PWP rehabilitated the whole school, building new classrooms and three bathrooms as well as providing chairs and tables and even building a fence around the school.

“Now students are able to study in a safe and proper environment. They have new classrooms and enough chairs. Teachers can perform better too,” says Eltizam, a teacher at the school.
CONTRIBUTING TO THE CHOLERA RESPONSE

The impact of the conflict on infrastructure has been profound. And in the Dar Sa’ad area of Aden, raw sewage flooded the roads and back alleys after fighting destroyed the area’s sewer system.

Dar Sa’ad became a breeding ground for mosquitoes and diseases such as cholera, dengue fever, and reported cases of diphtheria.

Like many residents, Ali and his family felt the impact first hand when his wife was infected with a life-threatening bout of cholera.

“During the conflict in Aden, my pregnant wife was infected with cholera. I was able to take her to the hospital, but she was in a critical condition and barely survived. I was extremely anxious because cholera had already claimed the lives of many in the area,” Ali recalls. “The situation was absolutely miserable during the conflict. New diseases appeared in the community due to the destruction of the sewer network and the total lack of healthcare services,” he adds.

In response – and through the UNDP-World Bank partnership, under the ECRP – the Yemen-based PWP was able to successfully implement a project to rehabilitate the sewage network.

“The PWP repaired the sewage network and installed new pipes. Now, we have a proper sewage system and can continue with our lives as they once were,” Ali says happily.

The PWP removed old drains and established a new sewer network in accordance with more efficient and higher standards. “Our streets are clean again,” exclaims Emad, another local resident. “Sewage no longer seeps into our homes. There are fewer mosquitoes and diseases and I just hope this horrible suffering is over.”
The school bell rings to announce the end of the school day. On his own motorcycle, Abdulla, a teacher, leaves with three of his eight children, heading home along a paved road to the Al-Madad village in the Jahaf district of Al-Dhale’.

The road was paved only around a year ago by the Yemen-based PWP to ease the lives of villagers in the area, providing them with safe access to food, water, health and education services.

Before that, like many rural areas in Yemen, Al-Madad didn’t have access roads, making life much harder.

"Due to the mountainous and rugged nature of the road, we suffered a lot and weren’t able to easily transport what we needed to survive. We lived a hard life," says Abdulla.

Life was made more difficult due to a lack of rain, which caused wells to become dry and forcing residents to rely mainly on trucks to bring water to the village.

“We don’t have a public water network and wells are dry due to the scarcity of rain,” Abdulla explains. “So, we depend on water trucks to bring us water – but prices are very high.”

As well as the high cost, the water trucks weren’t able to reach the village because of the rugged road, instead bringing water to an area around an hour’s walk from the village. "Then we would go with our women and children to bring water in jerry cans, carrying them on our heads or using donkeys to transport them,” continues Abdulla. “That was a real hardship.”

Following the paving of the road however, everything has changed and life in Al-Madad has become easier and safer.

“This road serves all the villagers and makes our lives easier. We no longer have to worry about bringing water and food to our homes. Cars and motorcycles can safely and easily access the village,” says Abdulla.
Adel comes from a poor family of villagers in Lahj that depend on agriculture as their main source of income. Before the war, Adel worked for a daily wage as a farmer in a number of agricultural fields, gaining a good reputation for his solid experience. The money Adel earned allowed him a decent living and enabled him to support his wife as she studied biology at college.

“I learned this work from my father, whose father passed it down to him,” Adel explains. “I love agriculture,” he adds. “It teaches a person to be patient and emphasises the importance of working to harvest the result of their work.”

But war changed that. “My income was stable and I was living a decent life but after the war began, the increase in the price of fuel and the depreciation of our national currency forced many landowners to abandon commercial cultivation.”

“But being jobless was hard for me. I was forced to borrow from friends and my brothers supported me financially during the toughest times. I also had to ask my wife to sell some of her jewellery so that we could keep putting food on the table,” explains Adel.

The Small and Micro Enterprise Promotion Service (SMEPS) provided Adel with a drip irrigation system, seeds, fertiliser and start-up capital to rent a patch of land near a water well. The support he received is worth US$ 1,500.

“The grant I received has created a sustainable income for me: I rented a patch of unused agricultural land and installed the drip irrigation system,” explains Adel. “I’ve been able to produce green pepper, rocket and parsley. I’ve made good profits, especially from the rocket and parsley.”

He’s even using a system he had little faith in before. “The misconceptions I used to have about drip irrigation systems are gone. Some of the farmers still think that drip irrigation stops plants from getting enough water, but this is not true. I’ve even noticed that the plants grown with this system have more vivid colours and a better shape than those sowed in the traditional way. Moreover, it saves water and time fourfold. Instead of taking 12 hours to water half an acre, now it takes me only six hours to water a whole acre of land,” he says.

Adel has now started packaging and transporting his own products for sale at a nearby wholesale market. He explains that he now makes more than US$ 250 a month, allowing him to pay back most of his debts and even buy back his wife’s jewellery.
Abdulwahab is a pharmacist with three children. He, his wife, two sons and a daughter live in a one-room house with a small yard that he uses as a kitchen. He opened his pharmacy in 2013 next to Al-Isra Hospital in Hodeidah and began his work by borrowing from pharmaceutical companies and taking loans until his capital reached approximately YER 14 million and he achieved a daily return up to YER 100,000. Abdulwahab was even thinking of opening a clinic and lab next to his pharmacy.

But the conflict in Yemen and the depreciation of its currency put a stop to his plans as pharmaceutical companies stopped issuing new debt due to the country’s currency fluctuations. The returns from his business decreased sharply and he could no longer repay existing loans – he even struggled to keep his shelves stocked, while power cuts and a lack of funds to pay for private electricity saw him lose medicines to the value of YER 300,000. Despite selling some of his property, including land and his wife’s jewellery, he continued to struggle.

After receiving a financial grant from the ECRP through the SFD however, Abdulwahab was able to pay his debts and buy medicines to revive his business as well as securing a commercial electricity supply to keep his stock cool. Reviving his business has meant he is now able to cover the house and pharmacy rents, his children’s school fees and his family’s living needs.
Asma started her own business seven years ago. She bought a sewing machine and began to make girl’s clothes from home, soon expanding with a friend and sewing school uniforms for two large schools in Yemen’s capital, Sana’a. After a while, she purchased more small sewing machines, hired workers and rented a building.

However, Asma’s business came to a halt because of the war. While shooting and repeated bombings made her afraid to go out, her business struggled as the national currency fell against the US dollar, pushing up the price of petrol and other raw materials used in producing clothes.

Although she was forced to close her small tailoring business, Asma didn’t lose hope and kept knocking doors and searching for support. Last year, with a grant from the National Microfinance Foundation (NMF) and the Yemen Microfinance Network (YMN), she was not only able to restart her business and get back on her feet, but to hire 17 employees who now benefit from the business too.

“I’m very happy with the success of my business and I dream of exporting some of our traditional clothes and trends abroad one day,” she says with a smile.