

How do we find the resources to address childhood malnutrition in a war zone? The case of Yemen.

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The challenge

Even in a fragile state experiencing civil war, where humanitarian aid dominates, there exists a broad range of untapped assets that can be activated to invest in long-term development of its children.

To build a resilient peace, a country needs human capital, with citizens who are mentally and physically able to contribute to the functioning of its economic, social, and political life. Yet, in Yemen, nearly 2.7 million children under the age of five years are suffering from persistent malnutrition¹ while the WHO estimates that 47% of children 6 to 59 months are experiencing stunting.² Unchecked, this will undermine the ability of an entire

generation to develop their human capital potential.

Research has consistently shown that providing a minimum acceptable diet (MAD), and early childhood development education (ECD) for children under five years of age is the foundation of a productive, healthy adult.^{3,4}

Continuing to neglect the provision of MAD and ECD, even during the war, risks raising a generation that will remain vulnerable to disease and disability, exposing them to a lack of economic opportunities and at risk of exploitation by violent non-state actors.

This is broadly recognised by the Government of Yemen (GOY) and the Sana'a based Houthi Administration (Ansar Allah)⁵ who see addressing the severe and chronic malnutrition of children under five years, through the provision of MAD, as key to building the future of a stable, secure Yemen, regardless of the outcome of the war.

People living in war zones are not just passive participants in their situation but can actively engage in long-term development projects in

¹ For more information see [UNICEF Yemen Country Office Humanitarian Situation Report, March 2022](#)

² See Yemen: [Nutrition Surveillance Feb 2022](#)

³ Keats, E. C., Das, J. K., Salam, R. A., Lassi, Z. S., Imdad, A., Black, R. E., & Bhutta, Z. A. (2021). Effective interventions to address maternal and child malnutrition: an update of the evidence. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 5(5), 367–384. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2352-4642\(20\)30274-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2352-4642(20)30274-1)

⁴ Baer, Edward, and Leah Marguiles. "Infant and Young Child Feeding: An Analysis of the WHO/UNICEF Meeting." *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 11, no. 2, Feb. 1980, p. 72, 10.2307/1965799. Accessed 4 Mar. 2019.

⁵ This terminology is taken from media releases by the United Nations Special Envoy to Yemen. e.g. <https://osesqy.unmissions.org/un-special-envoy-yemen-concludes-visit-riyadh-and-muscat>

the same way they serve the humanitarian effort - for example through 'food-for-work' programs. This type of human capital - available right now in Yemen - are *untapped assets* for Yemen to leverage as part of a long-term portfolio of projects to address child wellbeing.

Inherently it is very risky to consider investment during a war. However, long-term investments are the only way to de-risk the future for Yemen's children, without which no peace will be resilient. Yemen, therefore, needs to plan differentiated strategies to ensure that, regardless of the outcome of the current conflict, a healthy population - starting with improved nutritional status of children under five - is part of the country's future.

In partnership with the [EAT Foundation](#) and with funding support from the Rockefeller Foundation, the University of Cambridge [Centre for Resilience and Sustainable Development \(CRSD\)](#) was invited to investigate

How can Yemen scale-up national nutritional interventions to improve the minimum acceptable diet for children under five to ensure their early childhood development by 2030?

CSRD partnered with the Ministry Of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC) of the Internationally Recognised Government of Yemen (based in Aden) to identify strategies that activate untapped assets such as cultural and local knowledge, networks, local commitment and expertise within Yemen to promote MAD and ECD.

The result of this work is summarised in this Case Study.

The background

Yemeni children are often food insecure, with nearly 2.3 million children under the age of five suffering from acute malnutrition in 2021. Of these, 400,000 are estimated to suffer from severe acute malnutrition.⁶ As a result of chronic malnutrition, children are more vulnerable to illnesses, including diarrhoea, respiratory infections, and malaria, which are a major concern in Yemen. This situation is a vicious and often deadly cycle when linked with poor quality of early childhood development.

Yemen has experienced constant political instability since September

⁶ For more information see UNICEF Yemen Country Office Humanitarian Situation Report, July 2022

<https://www.unicef.org/media/130791/file/Yemen-Humanitarian-SitRep-July-2022.pdf>

2014. It is the poorest country in the Middle East and North Africa. The ongoing war has exacerbated the country's pre-existing social problems, including deepening poverty, spread of malnutrition, and shortages of necessities such as water, fuel, and medicine. Over 90% of wheat is imported and the current armed conflict repeatedly uses food as a weapon by blocking food transport. This has caused a food crisis. In addition, the global pandemic, financial crisis, the war in Ukraine and declining humanitarian aid are exacerbating the Yemeni situation.

The solution

There is no silver bullet nor one-size-fits all solution for Yemen. There is however room for policy systems innovation as the country aspires to rebuild itself for the future.

Yemen needs to secure and stabilise supplies of nutritional food for children under five to enable today's children to become Yemen's future citizens capable of addressing the country's uncertain and complex future.

Transforming food systems is important for Yemen, especially while at war. Long-term systemic investment in development needs to

be prioritised over short-term humanitarian effort. Any systems-based solutions need to be developed with clear and concise articulation of policies that match needs with resources. Every local and international entity working in Yemen needs to be part of the solution to provide or source minimum acceptable diet (MAD) for children under five in Yemen.

This research was guided by the Cambridge policy Boot Camp Method (CPBC), which is an innovative methodology that applies system thinking approaches to political economics to find transformative policy options. Focused on developing potential system level policy solutions that match needs with available resources, the CPBC co-create solutions that are needs sensitive, context specific and resource relevant.

The Cambridge Policy Boot Camp is a virtual action-research method developed by Dr Nazia M Habib at the University of Cambridge.

The approach

The Cambridge Policy Boot Camp (CPBC)

To prepare for the CPBC, the Cambridge team developed a

partnership with the Government of Yemen, led by the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Secretariat located within the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC), who served as both the national focal point for the project and the beneficiary institution for the project.

Drawing on the leadership of SUN/MOPIC, and interviews with national and international subject matter experts, a challenge area for

the country was identified and a question to guide the CPBC work was developed.

The question was structured around three elements: a boundary condition, a well-defined and recognised policy space, and a complex policy challenge within that space. CRSD worked closely with SUN/MOPIC to ensure that the policy challenge was relevant to their needs.



Image 1: Screenshot of presentation opening slide to CPBC workshop

Next, CRSD worked with the SUN/MOPIC to develop a concept note based on the policy challenge and research question. The Concept Note provided a background briefing for participants

and outlined the key policy systems challenges that need to be addressed by a specific stakeholder (in this case SUN/MOPIC) by a certain time. The challenge is primarily understood as a question

that the Yemen government identified:

How can Yemen scale-up national nutritional interventions to improve the minimum acceptable diet for children under five to ensure their early childhood development by 2030?

Together with the EAT Foundation, CRSD and SUN/MOPIC identified critical policy stakeholders to join the CPBC. Twenty six participants took part in a four-hour online session, made up of senior policy makers and advisers from multilateral and national agencies, including UNICEF, United Nations World Food Programme, WHO, the Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the UN, the Social Fund for Development, Nutrition for Development (N4D), the Building Foundation for Development (BFD) of Yemen, as well as representatives from the sponsoring organisations the EAT Foundation and The Rockefeller Foundation. In addition, representatives from the Sana'a based Houthi Administration (Ansar Allah) also attended.

To start the CPBC, three experts shared their initial insights in 'Lightning Talks'. Karima Al-Hada'a, a senior MOPIC Official, pointed to progress made in the national food systems pathways. Dr Lujain Alqodmani, Director of Global Action at the EAT Foundation

presented statistics showing that Yemen has the highest infant malnutrition rate in the world and suggested that this must be addressed through mobilising resources (public and private finance), sanitation, security, and economic development. Joel Munywoki, Food and Nutrition Security Expert from the FAO observed that where agriculture had been the focus of recent initiatives, a food system approach and especially nutrition was now required.

“A wonderful way of expanding the expert view”

A key task for the CPBC was identifying 'untapped assets' that could be used as a resource to support MAD for children under five. An 'untapped asset' refers to an undiscovered or unused resource, or one whose value for the particular policy objective is not recognised. Due to this, there is an under (or no) investment in the resource nor any institutional frameworks to utilise it for the particular purpose under consideration. For example, Yemen has a rich food culture, but, as a resource, this culture has not been previously used to promote MAD for children under five - it is an 'untapped asset' for the purposes of this exercise.

Conventional financial thinking focuses on the limited resources available to Yemen. This research flips this on its head to consider what assets Yemen already has that could be used to address childhood malnutrition. Research participants identified a rich list of untapped assets available in Yemen (see below). These untapped assets were then combined into specific policy concepts for addressing MAD for children under five.

The second task was to understand potential causes of policy failure. Policy makers tend to focus on what

is needed to make a policy work - and forget to consider what could undermine its success. Understanding these sources of failure can help refine a policy or identify where additional policy interventions are needed to ameliorate problems. Workshop participants explored sources of policy failure in their policy concepts by considering 1) what would cause the policy to fail completely? (deal breaker), 2) what would slow down implementation? (bottleneck) and 3) what may come along to surprise you? (blindspot).

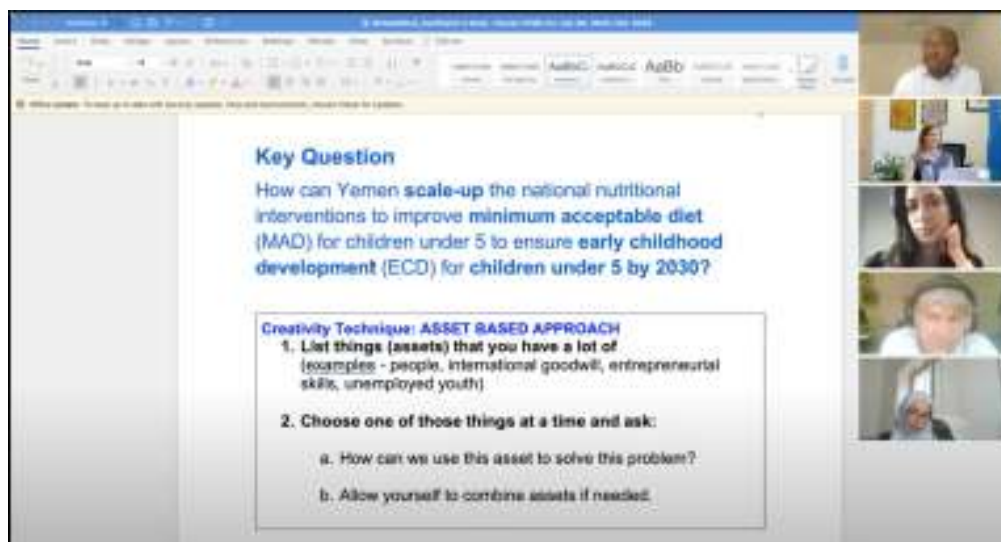


Image 2: Screenshot of small-group break out discussions via Zoom identifying untapped assets available to Yemen to address childhood malnutrition

Finally, the Cambridge research team undertook a meta-analysis of all the workshop materials, background research, expert views and academic literature to identify key policy concepts that could answer the research question. Each policy concept was developed into a visual representation of the policy system identifying the policy beneficiaries (ultimate and intermediate), the untapped assets that provide the resources for the policy, the policy levers (tools) required to implement the policy and the stakeholders that need to be incorporated into decision making (see results below).

The conclusions

Using the research based CPBC approach, SUN/MOPIC was provided with a basket of opportunities for addressing childhood nutrition.

Overall the project demonstrated that while Yemen was in a complex situation, there remained many viable options for them to address childhood nutrition (Table 1). In particular, social capital – networks, relationships – are just as valuable as finance in the implementation of policies.

All findings were presented to the Minister of Planning and International Cooperation.

The Government of Yemen already has in place a Multi-Sectoral Action Plan (MSNAP) to address childhood nutrition. Yemen also has multiple international and local NGOs active in supporting health and nutrition in the community - as set out in the Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan-2022 (YHRP). However 85% of the MSNAP remains unfunded and just 21% of the YHRP has been funded so far.⁶

The outcomes of the CPBC™ will help Yemen break the current cycle of underfunding and chronic need by engaging resources right across Yemen's food system.

Four specific policies were generated and refined for this purpose and are discussed in more detail below.

Sharing and partnering are key to these policy concepts as well as having an understanding of the relative power of institutions, and the willingness to share power. It was noted that some of the proposed actions would be easier to achieve when conflict in the country ceased, and that with a cease fire, now would be a good time.

Table 1: Yemen's Untapped Assets for Childhood Nutrition

Culture - very strong traditional food culture, poetry, traditional know-how.

Mothers/carers, family, and communities - maternal and grand-maternal love as the central pillar of families, women's networks, volunteer networks.

Postnatal care services - breastfeeding support.

Religious leaders - Religious leaders are influential.

Locally produced food supplies - fisheries, fish processing, poultry, self-sufficiency in fruit/veg, farming, solar, fertile land.

Multi-sector National Action plan (MSNAP) - Nationally recognised multi sectoral Plan to unify national and international efforts for Yemen, Children are just a part of it.

International support/community goodwill - The UN, the international NGO community working to support local NGOs in supporting communities

Public health and education institutions - e.g., health clinics, schools, research institutes, universities, health volunteers

Technical experts - fishing, agriculture, education, health, maternal care, business, water, sanitation

Food entrepreneurs - often young entrepreneurs

Diaspora - Yemenis abroad sending money home

Media/Social Media - active young population

Tourism assets - e.g., Socotra Island

Military and Peacekeeping Forces - National and international

Outcome 1: Using focused funding and education materials to empower and enhance the role of mothers and carers.

This outcome recognises the knowledge and experience that mothers, and maternal carers have in nutrition matters. It proposes the creation of educational material by a collaboration of health experts, Yemeni community leaders, local food suppliers, health care providers and

government agencies, drawing on Yemen's rich traditional food cultures. Education material would be distributed to mothers and carers via community networks, broadcast media and through religious groups. Engagement with religious authorities prior to the roll out of material is considered critical to ensure social acceptability and access to materials for women. It also proposes a targeting of government and international funding towards this aim.

Figure 1: Policy System Mechanisms to empower mothers and carers



Figure Legend

- Policy System Articulation
- System Level Actions/Strategies
- Ultimate Beneficiary
- System Level Entities
- Untapped System Assets
- Intermediate Beneficiary
- System Levers
- Interconnected entries
- Feedback

Outcome 2: Visibly make minimum acceptable diet (MAD) a high priority for relevant sectors.

This outcome seeks to develop an advocacy and education strategy to raise the profile of what constitutes a minimum acceptable diet through a

two-fold approach. First, it suggests creating a Food Culture Awareness Programme for use in the educational system and by childcare professionals. Second, it proposes a training programme to help companies, local experts and professionals to lobby on behalf of child nutrition goals to education system stakeholders.

Figure 2: Make MAD visible to priority sectors



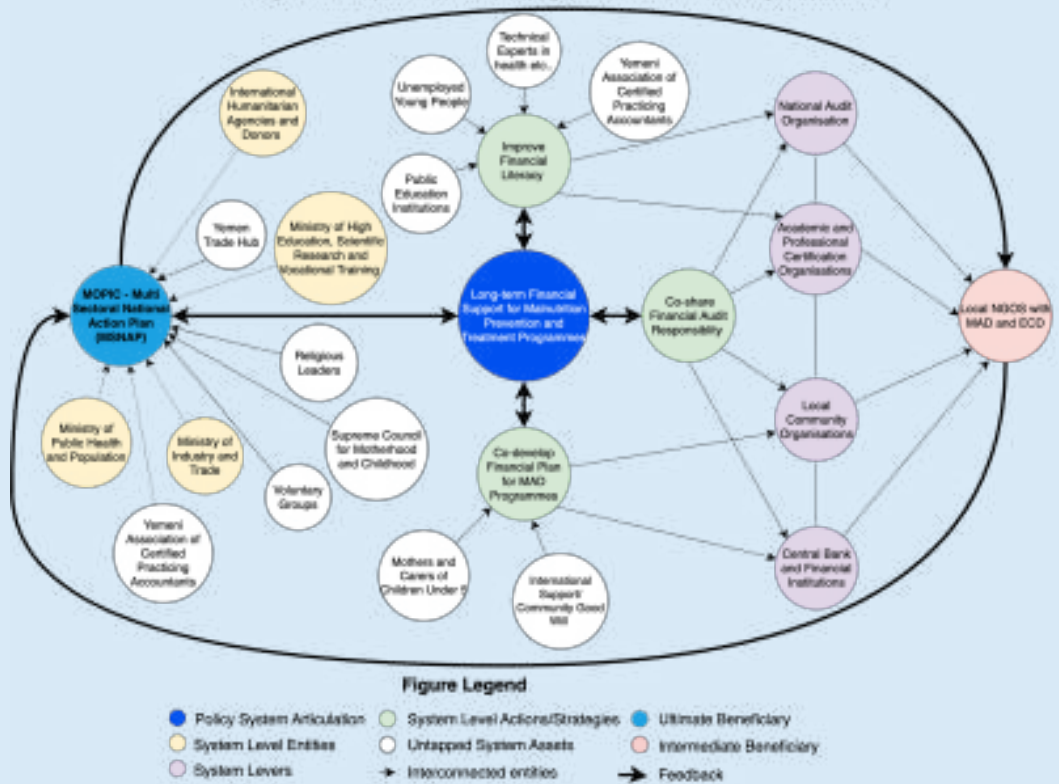
Source: [Centre for Resilience and Sustainable Development](#), Yemen Case Study

Outcome 3: Facilitate a shift towards long-term malnutrition prevention through improving trust in local NGO delivery through increased transparency and financial accounting.

set out in the MSNAP. This shift is achieved via improving trust between stakeholders, and trust to deliver on programs, facilitated through improvements in financial transparency, literacy and financial reporting across the system.

This initiative aims to shift the focus from short term humanitarian work by international and national NGOs to longer term financial support for malnutrition prevention programmes as

Figure 3: Shift towards long term malnutrition prevention



Source: [Centre for Resilience and Sustainable Development](#), Yemen Case Study

Outcome 4: Create a unified network for developing and sharing national technical knowledge and resources among experts, parents, and carers

This outcome involves the creation of a network whereby information resources can be provided to childcare professionals, parents, and carers of under-fives. A wide range of stakeholders (including volunteers, the

Yemeni diaspora, food processor and artists would create the information materials, and this would be communicated through a variety of channels. Physical communication would require improving transportation across rural roads.

Figure 4: Network for sharing knowledge and resources



Figure Legend

- Policy System Articulation
- System Level Actions/Strategies
- Ultimate Beneficiary
- System Level Entities
- Untapped System Assets
- Intermediate Beneficiary
- System Levers
- Interconnected entities
- Feedback

Source: [Centre for Resilience and Sustainable Development](#), Yemen Case Study

The impact

In concluding the sessions, guests had the opportunity to sum up their experiences. Here are some of their remarks.

“We welcome the outcome of this session so we can really take action to improve the lives of children and women in Yemen.”

Karima Al-Hada’a On behalf of the Yemen Deputy Minister

“This is a powerful and constructive approach to finding a way to address the challenges”, Professor Jenny Mander, Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Global Human Movement at the University of Cambridge. “It leaves criticism to one side and shows that listening is so vital to any cross-sectoral work. This is so important in creating the relationships on which implementing the process will depend. A wonderful way of expanding the expert view.”

“The openness <of delegates> was evident.”

“The session was so positive and generated diverse, ambitious, exciting and concrete

ideas in such a short amount of time.”

Nancy Aburto, Deputy Director from the Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the UN.

“This was an interesting discussion, and <the ideas> will be discussed in the coming weeks.”

Salem Muftah, Nutrition Specialist, WFP, Yemen

Dr Nazia M Habib drew out some other take-aways from the four-hour session: *“What became evident is that the financial needs of the agencies need to be prioritised. Finance is very much a catalyst in a functional sense. At the same time, the communications strategy should build on Yemen’s strong culture in poetry and art; the non-political aspect is also important.”*

The Cambridge Policy Boot Camp is a proven method of helping policy makers and multiple stakeholders to address even the most intractable problems in a non-confrontational manner and is available to other institutions looking to make a difference.

Appendix 1

Yemen's Front Lines

Territorial control and influence as of January 2022

- Government control
- Government influence
- Southern Transitional Council control
- Houthi control
- ▨ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) influence



Source: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/yemen-crisis>

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Disclaimer

The authors of this report have made every attempt to ensure that the information contained in this case study is accurate at the time of completion. This has included working in close collaboration with the Yemeni and international stakeholders. However, any errors that remain are with the authors.

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