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CLOSE TO THE FOOD BUT NOT FAR FROM FAMINE

Hodeidah governorate in crisis

By: Brett Scott | April 30, 2017



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ABOUT DEEPROOT

DeepRoot is a dynamic consultancy passionate about development in Yemen. We have a network of experts and specialists with deep knowledge of Yemen to ensure that the services we provide to our clients always stem from "on the ground" knowledge.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The humanitarian crisis unfolding in Yemen is being felt in all corners of the country, but considerable variation exists between governorates in terms of the severity of the suffering and the factors contributing to it. A better understanding of the local dynamics that help account for regional differences could assist decision makers to direct humanitarian assistance and sustainable development projects toward the most vulnerable populations. Perhaps nowhere is the need for such a localized understanding more important than Hodeidah, where a military incursion into the governorate by forces aligned to the internationally recognized government and the coalition is expected to occur in the near future. Compared to its neighbors, Hodeidah has a variety of socioeconomic differences extending back decades and it has followed a different trajectory during the course of the current conflict.

This paper seeks to explore these differences in order to encourage a more nuanced, localized approach to many of the crucial questions currently being asked. For example, why are the people of Hodeidah suffering from the highest rate of malnutrition nationwide, to the point of being on the verge of famine, when the port of Hodeidah brings in [80 percent](#) of the country's food imports and the governorate is endowed with relatively plentiful fishing and agricultural resources? Perhaps surprisingly, Hodeidah does not rank especially high in other indicators such as relative poverty, food insecurity, and number of humanitarian needs. The differences between governorates for the same indicator and within governorates across multiple indicators suggests that a variety of local factors are at play. This report will highlight the main contributors to the crisis in Hodeidah disproportionately affecting the governorate.

In accounting for governorate-level differences, it does not appear Hodeidah is disproportionately affected by high numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) or direct conflict. Rather, a combination of primarily pre-conflict factors are likely to have rendered it more vulnerable and less resilient to conflict-related shocks. The shift away from subsistence farming in the 1970s and 80s has left a legacy of wage laborers with low incomes growing cash crops largely for export. Hodeidah developed some of the most unequal landholding sizes in the country and the average resident has very low access to irrigation. As a result of the conflict, exports have plunged and the fishing, livestock and agricultural sectors have been hit hard. Meanwhile the relatively more resilient and valuable cash crop, qat, is consumed but not grown in significant quantities in Hodeidah. At the same time, the governorate's limited sanitation and health infrastructure has given rise to a range of illnesses that are associated with malnutrition.

HODEIDAH IN CONTEXT

The people of Hodeidah are by no means alone in their suffering. Nationwide, according to the [2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview](#), 18.8 million people are in need of some form of assistance, including 10.3 million in acute need. Many individuals are in need of more than one form of assistance, which may include nutrition, child protection, education, or shelter, for example. Altogether, for the year 2017 there are an estimated 67 million needs requiring assistance. Hodeidah comes second only to Sana'a in terms of the total number of people in each location who require assistance. However, when looking at the percentage of the governorate population in acute need (defined as "people who require immediate assistance to save and sustain their lives"), Hodeidah ranks below average. That is, 34 percent of people in Hodeidah require acute assistance, and the average across all governorates is 38 percent.

With its large population – now around 3.19 million inhabitants, or 11.5 percent of the country total – Hodeidah has often ranked high on various humanitarian indicators in terms of absolute numbers but not as a proportion of its population. According to a [Poverty Assessment](#) conducted in 2007 by the Government of Yemen, the World Bank, and the UNDP, rural areas account for 72.6 percent of Yemen's population and 84 percent of its poor, indicating a high concentration of poverty in rural areas. Hodeidah and its coastal neighbors Taiz and Hajjah account for around one-third of the country's rural poor. However, at the time of the assessment Amran governorate had the highest incidence of poverty, amounting to 71 percent of its rural population, followed by Shabwa and Al-Baydha. Rural parts of these governorates also had the highest rates of extreme poverty.

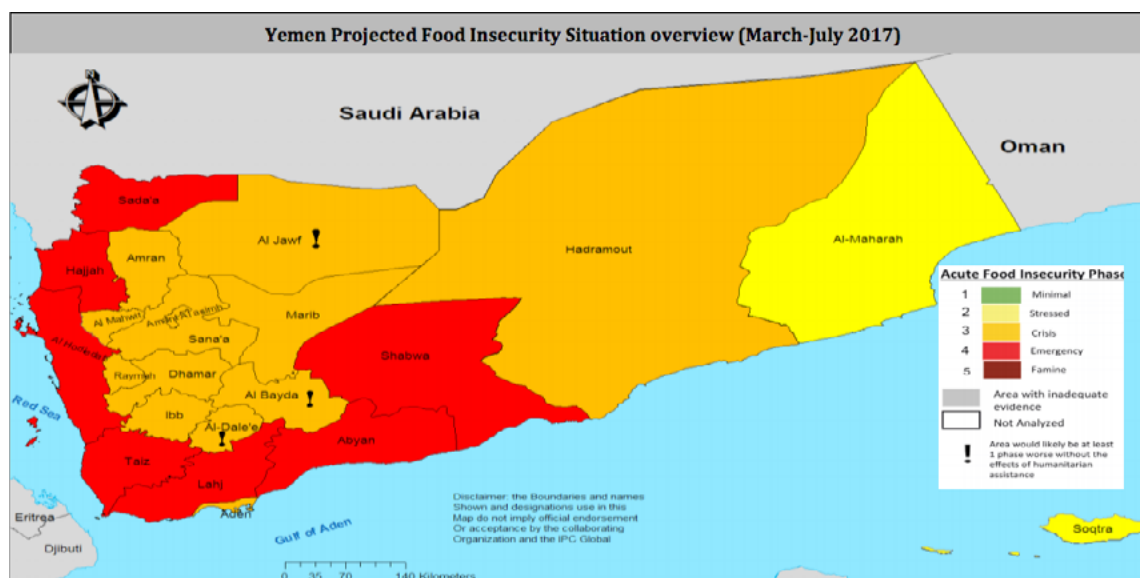


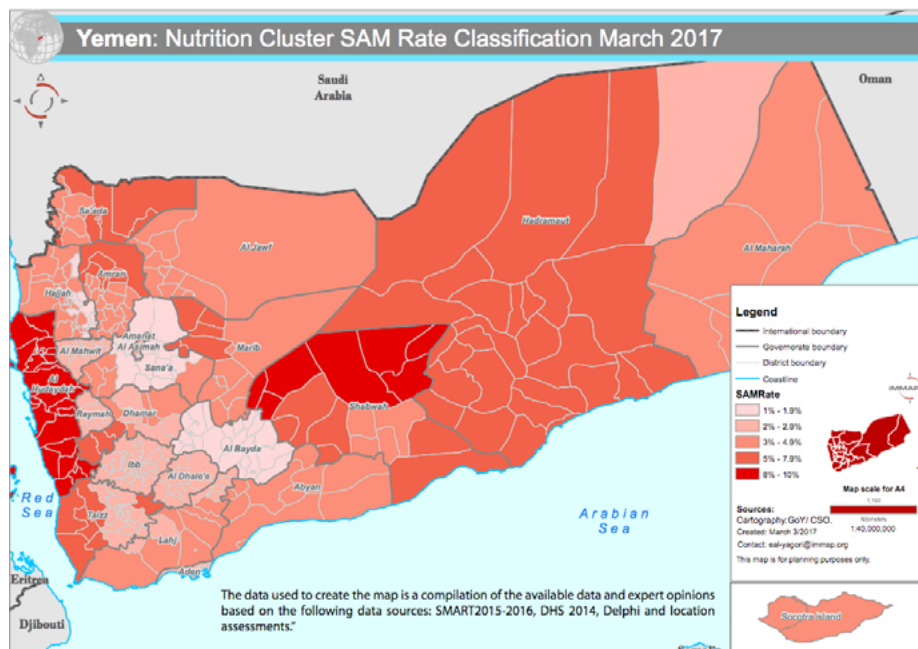
Image 1

Seventeen million people are food insecure in Yemen, 6.8 million of whom are classified as being one step from famine. This is according to the most recent Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) [report](#) for the period March – July 2017, which notes

a 20 percent increase in food insecurity compared to the 2017 Needs Overview. Food insecurity, measured by totaling the number of people in IPC phase 3 (Crisis) and 4 (Emergency), is not disproportionately high in Hodeidah, despite what might be assumed given its higher rate of malnutrition. The IPC report shows that 55 percent of people in Hodeidah are food insecure, compared to the national average of 60 percent.

Where Hodeidah stands out in both absolute and relative numbers is its malnutrition rate. Even before the civil war began in 2014 Hodeidah had the highest rate of malnutrition in the country. The governorate crossed the 30 percent global acute malnutrition (GAM) threshold – one of the main criteria for the official designation of Famine – in both 2011 and 2015. The March – July 2017 IPC report has Hodeidah currently at a GAM of 25.3 percent, which remains the highest in the country. Looking at severe acute malnutrition (SAM), a more severe form of malnutrition, Hodeidah is also hit the hardest.⁰¹

Image 2



The governorate-level comparisons of key indicators show that Hodeidah currently ranks roughly average in terms of severity of humanitarian needs and food insecurity but highest in terms of malnutrition rate. This leaves several gaps in knowledge, perhaps most intriguingly the disparity between malnutrition and food insecurity levels. Furthermore, such comparisons do not show the full picture. Hodeidah may be 'average' on certain indicators but this is despite its favorable status as the main import hub and one of the most important agricultural areas in Yemen, meaning the governorate must be disproportionately negatively affected by other factors. With this in mind, the following sections will examine what is – and is not – likely to be disproportionately contributing to the crisis in Hodeidah.

01 - According to the Humanitarian Needs Overview, children suffering from SAM are ten times likelier to die than their healthy peers; children with moderate acute malnutrition are three times likelier to die.

SPARED FROM CLASHES, IDPS

Unlike Hajjah to its north and Taiz to its south, Hodeidah has not experienced ground fighting or relatively high levels of forced displacement during the current conflict. The Houthi/Saleh alliance took the city and port of Hodeidah under their control [without a fight](#) on October 14, 2014, less than a month after they captured Sana'a. Apart from when Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants took partial [control of Jabal Ras](#) district for two days in November 2014, major clashes have not occurred in the governorate. Coalition airstrikes on factories, bridges, markets, and the port since the beginning of the escalation in March 2015 have reduced the availability of food and restricted transport. However, Hodeidah has not been disproportionately targeted by airstrikes. Between March 26, 2015 and December 31, 2016, the [Yemen Data Project](#) recorded over 10,500 incidents nationwide, each of which contained between one and several dozen air raids on the same location. Organized by governorate, the data shows there were 554 aerial attacks on Hodeidah. This compares to 683 in Hajjah, 917 in Marib, 1,420 in Taiz, 1,562 in Sana'a, and 1,897 in Sa'ada, to name some of the heaviest hit.

At the same time, internal displacement does not appear to be disproportionately affecting Hodeidah. According to the Task Force on Population Movement's [13th Report – March 2017](#), there are 103,662 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Hodeidah, the eighth highest amount nationwide. Put another way, Hodeidah makes up 11.5 percent of Yemen's population but is host to only around 5 percent of its IDPs. Hodeidah appears even less proportionately impacted by refugees and migrants. The 2017 Needs Overview lists Hodeidah as having the ninth highest number of refugees and migrants in need of assistance, with just 8,700 – less than 2 percent of the nationwide total.

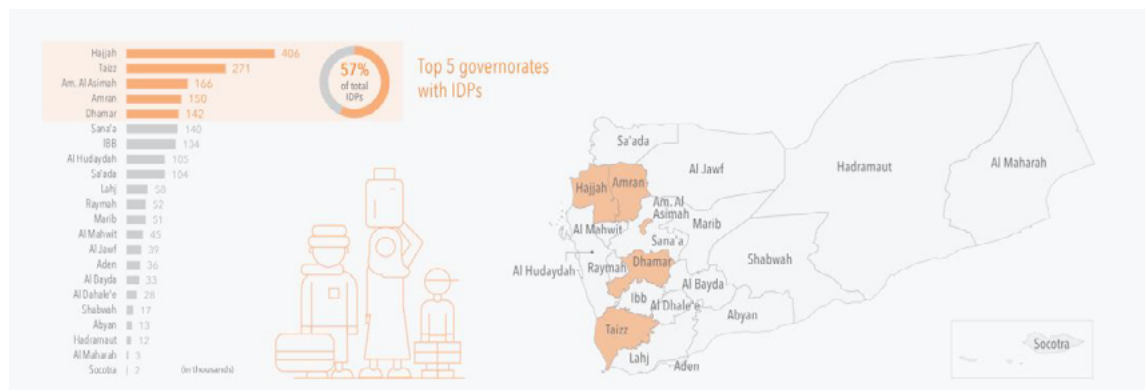


Image 3

Should the military offensive on Hodeidah proceed, the governorate will likely experience a sharp rise in the number of IDPs and, of course, direct conflict. Ahead of the planned offensive airstrikes have already stepped up across the governorate and the recent fighting on the coast of Taiz has pushed thousands of IDPs into Hodeidah. While these factors will be of immediate concern in dealing with the resulting humanitarian fallout, they should not mask the underlying factors detailed in the following sections.

CASH CROPS & RESOURCE INEQUALITY

Decades ago Yemen's rural population largely relied on subsistence farming. In the 1970s employment prospects in the Gulf increased due to the oil boom, and remittance payments back to Yemen allowed for considerable development, especially in the 1980s during Yemen's era of relative prosperity. Investment in irrigation technology to produce cash crops such as bananas, mangoes, onions and tomatoes, supported by government subsidies and cheaper transportation, resulted in greater consolidation of land and resources in the hands of fewer people. This caused rural farmers to rely more heavily on wage labor for income and purchase imported food staples.

Table 1 Main income source (Hodeidah 2015)

Casual worker	37.5
Own a small scale business	21.0
Remittances	11.5
Public/mix sector employee	11.0
Farmer working in his farm	5.0

An August 2015 survey by UNICEF and the Ministry of Public Health and Population, titled "[Nutrition and Mortality Survey in Hodeidah Lowland](#)," found in an area representing 95 percent of the governorate population that only around 5 percent of people work on their own farm (see table). The report notes that despite Hodeidah's relative wealth of resources, "much produce is exported from the region and salaries are low, leaving little net benefit for its population." With exports slowed almost to a halt and the costs of both farm inputs and basic foodstuff far above pre-conflict levels, wage laborers who long straddled the poverty line are now finding themselves unable to cope. Nationally, farmers reduced cultivated areas by a staggering 38 percent in 2016 due to the high costs of irrigation, transportation, and inputs.

Meanwhile, in a November 2015 [survey](#) on the impact of the conflict on private sector activity conducted by SMEPS and commissioned by the UNDP, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) were found to be most affected nationally by the conflict. "In terms of employees laid-off, SMEs were vulnerable, with 70 percent of small and 71 percent of medium enterprises laying off half of their workforce compared 67 percent of large firms releasing 32 percent of their staff," the survey found. These findings have particular relevance for the 21 percent of people in Hodeidah whose main income source comes from small-scale businesses.

Related to the shift toward growing cash crops and using more expensive irrigation techniques is the disparity in access to land. Yemen has one of the most [unequal distributions of land](#) in the world – with 12 percent of households controlling 80 percent of the land – and Hodeidah has some of the most unequal distributions of landholdings in the country. Indeed, of the nine districts with the largest average landholdings, four are in Hodeidah.

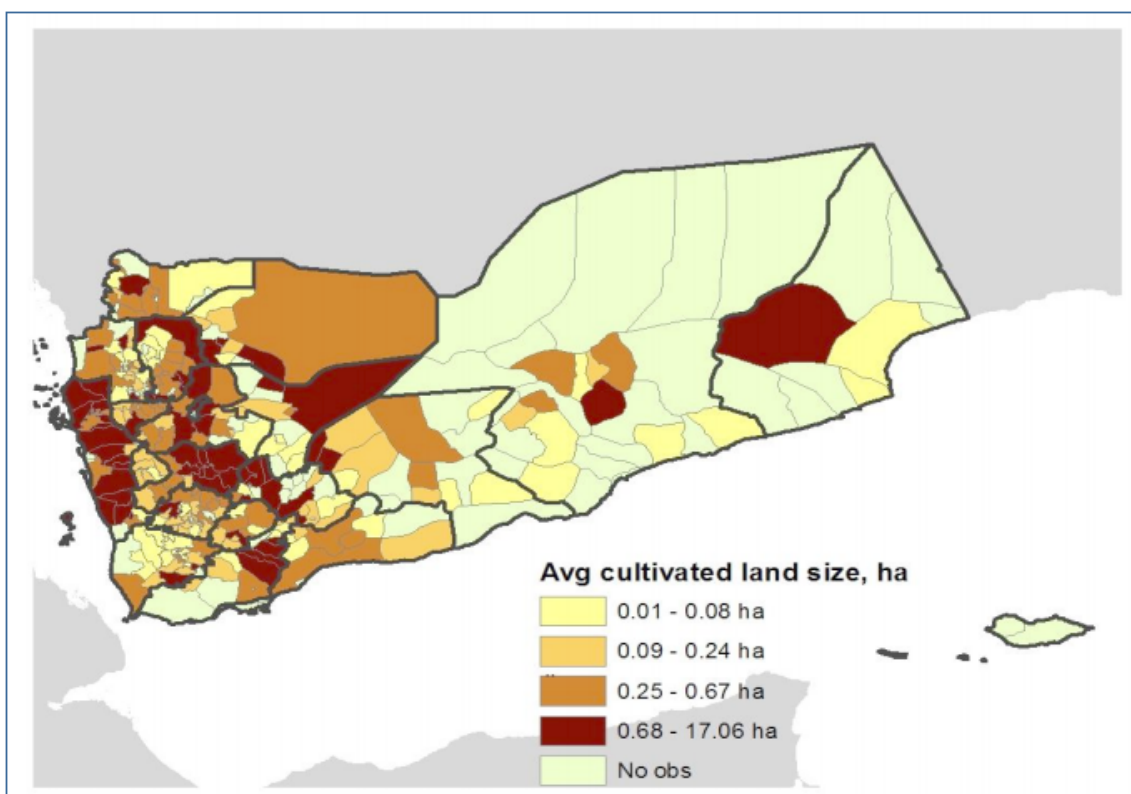


Image 4

Likewise, in Yemen as a whole and Hodeidah in particular, access to irrigation is very unequal. In the large majority of its districts, access to irrigation in Hodeidah is in the 0-21 percent bracket, according to a 2010 World Bank [report](#). The World Bank noted the high correlation between access to irrigation and income, which is considered to be even higher than the correlation between income and access to land. Limited access to irrigation is a problem that is expected to persist, as it has long been a trend. In 2006 it was [noted](#) that the expansion of tubewell irrigation in place of traditional rain-fed and runoff terraces, and the growth of water-intensive crops instead of cereals, has depleted water resources and caused severe erosion.

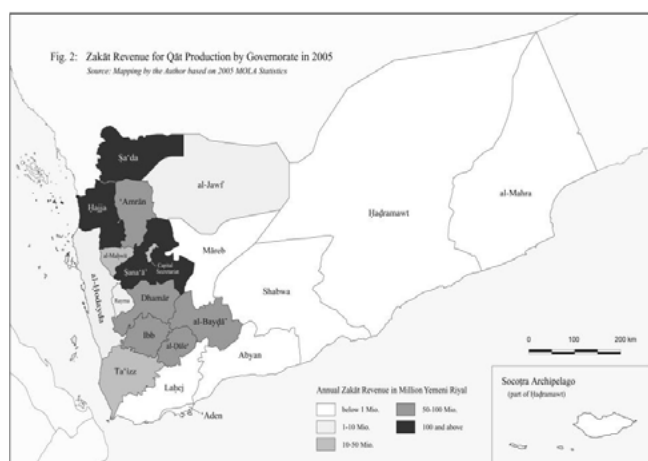
QAT CONSUMERS, NOT PRODUCERS

The agricultural sector in Hodeidah has historically been reliant on exporting cash crops and the governorate does not produce a significant amount of qat. Sold domestically and highly valuable as a cash crop, the leafy drug crosses nearly all social, gender, and income barriers and continues to be a staple of daily life in Yemen. Given qat is a major income-producing crop and has remained so despite the ongoing conflict due to its resiliency and highly efficient distribution chain, Hodeidah might be disadvantaged by not growing it.

A 2010 World Bank [report](#) found at the time that cereals accounted for 58 percent of all cultivated area in Yemen but made up only 4.32 percent of national agricultural income, and only 2.69 percent for the poorest quintile. Meanwhile, qat represented around half

of all agricultural income despite accounting for only 11 percent of cultivated area (which explains why qat production had been growing by about 7.3 percent per year since 2005). Even for the poorest quintile nationwide, qat production comprised 36.20 percent of agricultural income. Although similar data is lacking in recent years, news reports indicate qat production has expanded during the conflict, now taking up [15 percent](#) of agricultural land.

Image 5



Hodeidah appears to produce far less qat than its coastal neighbors and central governorates, as indicated by annual revenues of zakat – the production tax levied at the local farm level (see map). Because qat makes up a substantial portion of the agricultural income of farmers in all income brackets, is thought to transfer wealth from urban to rural areas, and is relatively more resistant to the shocks of war than many other crops, the plant

could be contributing to governorate-level differences in a substantial way.

At the same time, locals spend a sizable portion of their income on the drug. Historically it has been observed that people in Hodeidah have an average monthly per capita expenditure on qat [comparable](#) to other governorates, and more recently the World Food Program found the average national monthly household expenditure on qat was around [nine percent](#). Oxfam conducted an emergency food security and livelihoods (EFSL) [assessment](#) in Hodeidah in the midst of the uprising in July 2011 and compared its findings to before the crisis began. “While food consumption has decreased and income sources have been insufficient, qat consumption remained the second priority in the expenditure pattern of the households after food,” the assessment notes. This means that in the midst of a national crisis and in the same year that the governorate malnutrition rate crossed the famine threshold of 30 percent, people in Hodeidah continued to spend on average more on qat than healthcare or education.

SHEEP, FISH, & CONFLICT SHOCKS

In a nationwide [study](#) on rural Yemen, it was found that after qat, sheep and goats are second in terms of importance to rural agriculture. However, despite their importance most people were said to lack the knowledge of preventative measures and means to treat diseases that can in short order wipe out a household’s source of income. In Hodeidah specifically, the most recent [IPC report](#) said the average household sheep holding decreased by 35 percent in 2016 compared to before the conflict escalated in March 2015.

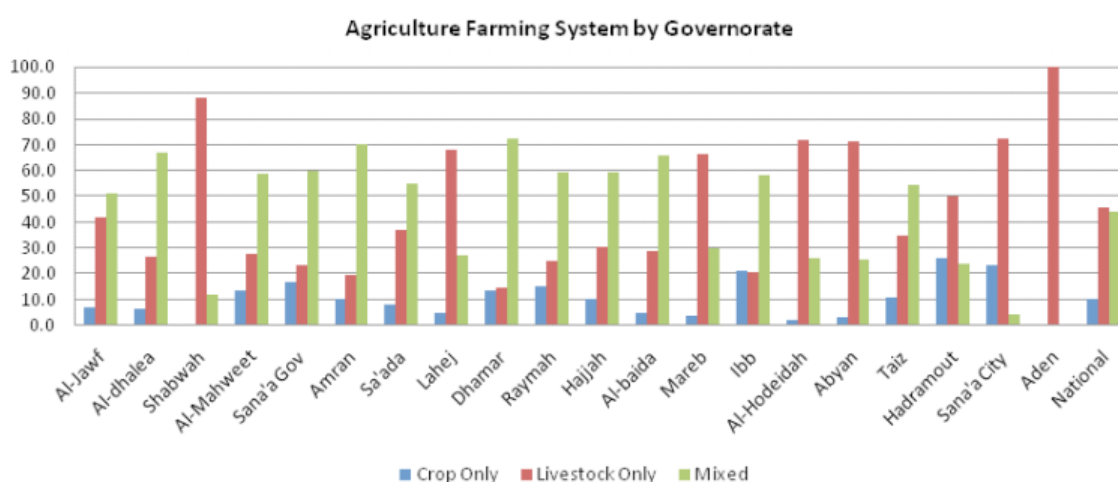


Image 6

The [preliminary findings](#) of the Yemen Emergency Food Security and Nutrition Assessment (EFSNA) 2016 show that the majority of households engaged in agriculture in Hodeidah rely on livestock only (over 70 percent), while less than 5 percent rely on crops only and about 25 percent are mixed. The EFSNA found that over 80 percent of the decrease of livestock in Hodeidah in 2016 was due to being sold to cover household needs.

Another important sector in Hodeidah that has been disrupted by the conflict is fishing. The [June 2016](#) IPC brief found a staggering 75 percent reduction in traditional fishing in Hodeidah and Taiz. The next IPC brief, issued in [March 2017](#), noted the majority of fishermen have lost their fishing capital, including boats, nets, and other gear, and in some areas of Hodeidah and Taiz fishing has completely stopped. Meanwhile, the export of fish has been [suspended](#) since March 2015 and prices of fish in Hodeidah rose between 40 to 60 percent. The damage to the livestock and fishing sectors in Hodeidah is troubling not just for the immediate implication but also for post-conflict recovery, given that both sectors have a barrier to entry difficult for the those without capital to surpass.

SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

Another factor that is important to consider is the social structure in Hodeidah, especially as it relates to the seat of power in Sana'a. While the tribal system in Hodeidah does play a role in facilitating access to limited public services, it is [relatively weak](#) compared to the more traditional tribal communities found in central Yemen.⁰² Hodeidah, as well as Taiz and parts of Ibb and Hajjah, has been described by Yemeni tribal expert Nadwa Al-Dawsari as having "distorted" or "retribalized" areas whereby the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh empowered social figures, elevating them to the status of sheikh with money and political influence, in an effort to exert control. "Those areas did not inherit the social contract between the tribes and the people that functions in areas of strong tribal structure and, as a result, some sheikhs enjoyed unchecked authority

02 - In addition to the explanation provided in the hyperlinked report, a World Bank [report](#) found that as of 2007 Hodeidah had only one registered sheikh per 28,439 people – many times more than all other governorates except for Al-Mahwit.

and often abused their power.”⁰³ It follows that these sheikhs would be less likely to be beholden to local residents and more likely to further their own interests or those of the Sana’a-based regime.

Relatedly, Hodeidah’s port and its proximity to Africa made it more socially diverse than inland governorates. While reliable statistics are lacking, there is a notable presence of the social group referred to as the Muhamasheen (the marginalized ones) or akhdam (servants), as well as more recent African migrants. While the unofficial caste system in Yemen is complex and varied, it can generally be said that people perceived as descending from Africa are discriminated against in Yemen to the point of having fewer employment prospects and very little political representation.

MALNUTRITION ISN’T ONLY ABOUT FOOD

Poor access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is another core contributor to the catastrophic health situation in Hodeidah. Polluted water and other unsanitary conditions give rise to diarrhea and disease, which are associated with malnutrition. The [2016 Humanitarian Needs Overview](#) recorded Hodeidah as having the highest total number of people in need of assistance to meet their WASH needs, and these needs have been high for many years. According to a December 2011 [nutrition survey](#) of children under five in Hodeidah, “the prevalence of diarrhea (as well as ARI and fever) was found to be significantly higher than the national figures, with nearly one in two children reported to have had diarrhea in the two weeks preceding the survey. Diarrhea was significantly associated with malnutrition.”

The same survey found that almost three quarters of the children assessed in Hodeidah had been sick in the previous two weeks, a number that remained the same regardless of agro-ecological zone and urban/rural divide. Overall morbidity was found to be significantly associated with different types of malnutrition. Comparable data over time is unavailable, but a [survey](#) of Hodeidah and Amran governorates by Save the Children published in December 2016 indicates very high rates of illness continue to occur amongst young children. The survey found that 38 percent of children in sampled locations had contracted pneumonia in the two weeks prior to assessment, in contrast to the 12 percent prevalence before the war.

In 2013 local activists launched an [initiative](#) in Hodeidah city called “Together to save Hodeidah from drowning.” Despite their call for the streets to be cleared of sewage, months later the situation had not improved and protests broke out over the issue. Entire streets were said to be blocked by sewage. The governorate’s security chief at the time, Mohammed Al-Maqaleh, [said](#) part of the problem is sometimes people in rural areas place “stones and construction materials such as blocks, blankets, rugs and tires inside the sewage pipes” in an effort to get the government to support them.

03 - Al-Dawsari, Nadwa & Greenfield, Danya. “The role of the tribal system in developing a democratic, civil state in Yemen,” chapter in *Reconstructing the Middle East: Political and Economic Policy*.

MOVING FORWARD

This high-level overview described the various factors disproportionately contributing to the crisis in Hodeidah. Comprehensive studies are required to draw more definitive conclusions regarding the steps development and humanitarian organizations should take to best address food insecurity, malnutrition, and the host of other problems plaguing the governorate. However, given the historical importance of the livestock and fishing sectors in Hodeidah and the degree to which they have been disrupted as a result of the ongoing conflict, it may be suggested that livelihood intervention be prioritized in these sectors. Especially with regards to fishing, locals have the requisite skills to exploit the plentiful resources that have been replenishing during the conflict, but are prevented from doing so due to the costs of purchasing equipment and other capital lost in the conflict, and because fish exports from Hodeidah have been halted for over two years.

Beyond these more immediate interventions, longer-term policy making should consider ways of ameliorating the massive disparities in landholding sizes in Hodeidah and the similarly poor access to irrigation. The variation between governorates for indicators such as poverty, malnutrition, food insecurity, and humanitarian needs is indicative of the complexity of factors contributing to the many crises facing Yemen. This highlights the necessity of localizing interventions and adequately situating the current crisis in the wider socioeconomic and historical context of each governorate.



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