

# The role of cultural norms and local power structures in Yemen

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**Community power structures and attitudes in Yemen are key factors in how IDPs can gain protection and assistance.**

Humanitarian needs were already acute before the conflict in Yemen escalated in March 2015. Yemen has always suffered from weak governance and social services, high youth unemployment and high rates of poverty. Half of the population has no access to safe drinking water and three-quarters no access to safe sanitation. And approximately 3.1 million Yemenis have been internally displaced, of whom 2.2 remain displaced as of July 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Yemen's predominantly tribal social structure is based on the collective responsibility and accountability of tribal leaders (sheikhs) to their communities. Tribes have come to function as states, providing stability, protection and economic support for their members. Sheikhs have always held a considerable level of informal power, and this power has survived the conflict – and even increased.

In general, sheikhs gain legitimacy through their ability to resolve conflicts and

safeguard the tribe's interests. During the current conflict, some sheikhs have gained more legitimacy by aligning themselves with the armed groups who control the local area; such sheikhs are perceived as providing greater security for their people – and thereby enhance their own status. Furthermore, as people lose faith in government institutions, they increasingly turn to power structures such as the sheikhs. Almost 65% of IDPs have indicated that they rely on sheikhs for safety and would turn to them for conflict resolution. The intervention of humanitarian NGOs has also added to this legitimacy as NGOs will seek approval from sheikhs before working in their communities.

IDPs have tended to seek refuge in areas near communities that they trust – communities governed by a shared tribal code. These bonds have also manifested themselves in host communities helping IDPs during difficult times, and sharing whatever resources they have. However,

this social cohesion and the tendency towards community-based support can be adversely affected by humanitarian assistance that fails to cover all those in need. A strong message has emerged from a recent protection study conducted by Oxfam that assistance should not be based on IDP or host community status but rather on need. Current prioritisation for assistance is often status-based rather than needs-based, resulting in the urgent needs of the host communities going unaddressed.

In a recent study of 416 households (58% IDPs) undertaken by Oxfam and published by the Yemen Community Engagement Working Group,<sup>2</sup> 48% of respondents felt that humanitarian assistance was not necessarily reaching the most vulnerable populations. There are two important factors to consider here: firstly, access to information and, secondly, community attitudes within Yemeni society.

**Access to information:** The survey indicated that the elderly, people with intellectual disabilities, people who are illiterate and the most marginalised communities in Yemeni society have more difficulty than most in accessing information about the availability of humanitarian assistance, and therefore more difficulty in accessing the assistance. Interestingly, community leaders and sheikhs, while highly regarded in terms of usefulness and trustworthiness by affected communities, were not preferred as intermediaries to relay information from the humanitarian community to the affected population and vice versa. Cell phone calling (59%) and word of mouth (56%) are the most used channels of communication by the affected population. Community volunteers (32%), radio (25%) and WhatsApp (24%) were also reported as frequently used. (WhatsApp is used by 26% of the IDP population.) Television is also commonly used but less so than these other channels. Particular attention must be given to how agencies can disseminate pertinent information to reach more marginalised sectors of the population.

**Community attitudes:** More efforts might also be needed in understanding

how the community defines vulnerability. Al-Muhamasheen ('the marginalised') is a minority group within Yemen, which has suffered continual discrimination, persecution and exclusion from mainstream society, and has continued to be shunned by the rest of the society even during these times of conflict. For example, while 'Yemeni' IDPs will live in rented houses, with relatives, or in public or abandoned buildings, the majority of al-Muhamasheen IDPs will live in tents or on open land, always at risk of eviction and violence. They do the jobs that nobody else is willing to do – clear rubbish, sweep the streets and clean out the drains – but during the conflict, the majority of al-Muhamasheen IDPs have found themselves without work. The only solution for them is to live off the humanitarian assistance provided by NGOs but if NGOs only work through sheikhs and established communities, and as the al-Muhamasheen's vulnerability is not acknowledged by sheikhs, some of the most vulnerable IDPs will continue to be left out.

As the humanitarian community attempts to help IDPs in Yemen during the current conflict, policymakers and practitioners need to explore ways which ensure that delivering humanitarian assistance does not undermine culture and local power structures but rather utilises them to help **all** IDPs and host communities to better withstand the consequences of conflict.

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1. See Yemen Protection Cluster Task Force on Population Movement, 10th Report, July 2016  
<http://bit.ly/Yemen-TFPM-10thReport-July2016>

2. See De Santis F A and Carter S E (2016) *Enhancing Informed Engagement With Conflict Affected Communities in Yemen*  
<http://bit.ly/Yemen-Community-Engagement-August2016>

Findings from an Oxfam study of affected communities in Yemen (both IDPs and host communities in four governorates) will be available shortly.