



# FACING THE CONFLICT-CLIMATE CHANGE NEXUS: THE CASE OF YEMEN'S RURAL COMMUNITIES

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The COP 28 declaration to strengthen climate resilience in fragile and conflict-affected states has attempted to bring much-needed donor focus and funding to the challenging interplay between climate and conflict. The vulnerability of Yemen's rural and farming communities, which at an estimated 19 million comprise the majority of the country's population, exemplifies the urgency to address the vicious cycle of conflict and climate change.

Nine years on, the present conflict has severely weakened the economy and the capacity of Yemen's governmental institutions to address, adapt to and mitigate the impacts of increasingly regular and intense climate disasters and environmental crises, all of which severely affect farmers. But the military conflict itself—including frontline fighting, armed recruitment, and the laying of landmines—has an outsized impact on Yemen's rural population. The direct and indirect effects of ongoing armed violence are driving

Yemenis to abandon farming as a profession and key livelihood source, which further exacerbates the country's already dire levels of food insecurity and the crisis of its ecosystems.

A recent survey conducted by ARK Group in southern governorates heavily reliant on farming, such as Lahj and Ad Dali', identified animal husbandry or animal trade (43%) and agricultural labour (36%) as the main sources of household income since the beginning of the conflict.

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The dependence on cash crop sales was also seen as crucial. However, the conflict continues to deprive farmers of their land and livestock. Respondents in the same survey said that the most severely affected or destroyed assets were livestock (32%), followed by crops (26%), farming equipment (25%), and vehicles (16%). These losses compound economic challenges, heighten food insecurity and malnutrition, and contribute to social tensions. Simultaneously, extreme weather events such as cyclones and flash floods, water scarcity, desertification, and environmental destruction compound the deterioration of Yemen's land and water resources.

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Reduced opportunities in the agricultural sector have prompted many Yemenis to move away from farming in favor of fighting on the frontlines. Qualitative interviews conducted by ARK Group in southern governorates over the past year highlight how poverty and economic hardship have led farmers to abandon their fields and join armed groups. Many farmers are also displaced by the fighting and resort to the often-unprofitable option of renting land in their host communities or seek out other sources of income. As one female farmer noted regarding the children of these families, "some are recruited by armed groups, while young girls are driven into early marriage." If they manage to return to their communities of origin, farmers often find that their land has been seized by armed groups and/or influential individuals and will be difficult to reclaim.

Yemen's various state, hybrid and non-state armed groups actively recruit from rural communities. ARK Group's research reveals both a high concern from rural communities about youth vulnerability to armed recruitment and the primacy of economic factors/need, namely poverty and unemployment, as key driver of recruitment into armed groups. In the north, Houthi authorities possess the institutional capacity to recruit thousands of men and children, often leveraging their access to tribal sheikhs in rural regions to recruit on their behalf. In the south, many young men and boys - often through their families - seek out recruitment opportunities due to poverty and financial incentives, alongside other factors.

Farmers who have remained in the field face a slew of challenges and threats that stem directly from years of warfare. Rural areas - especially in Taiz, Al-Hodeidah, Ad Dali and

Abyan - are situated along active frontlines between Yemen's warring parties. Ongoing fighting poses an immediate risk to farmers and their families who cannot work portions of their land due to the threat of gunfire and shelling. Unexploded ordnance (UXOs) is present in many rural areas and agricultural fields, preventing community access to farmlands and some roadways, hindering the delivery of crucial humanitarian aid, and obstructing the return of IDPs. Yemen is among the countries most affected by UXOs, alongside Iraq and Afghanistan, with statistics from 2022 indicating that an average of one person has been killed everyday day by UXOs. One organisation alone has reportedly removed 423,036 landmines since 2018 in territories under the control of the Republic of Yemen Government.



Despite centuries of agricultural tradition across present-day Yemen, the country has been unable to meet its population's food needs in recent decades. This has led Yemen to import over 90 percent of its food. Prior to the current conflict, the agricultural industry suffered from policy failures, the discovery of oil, growing water scarcity, dramatic changes to weather patterns and the mass production of qat (a mild stimulant whose cultivation consumes 30% of the water drawn from the Sanaa Basin). Externally imposed structural adjustment programs, including floating the currency and cutting subsidies, have impacted Yemen's investment in agriculture.

Nevertheless, agriculture still contributes to over 20% of Yemen's GDP, continues to employ about 30% of its working population (including a significant number of women) and about 70% of the total population directly or indirectly receive an income from agricultural activity. It is therefore urgent for the donor community to reduce the compounding pressure on Yemen's agricultural sector and support the resilience of farming communities to conflict and climate change.

Naturally, a critical enabling step would be a sustainable political solution to the main conflict, which would bring with it improvements in security and opportunities for reform in this area, with all its positive repercussions. But even in current circumstances, there is both a pressing need and ample space to provide the equipment, the knowledge/skills, and the capital/financial resources needed by farming communities. More specifically, donors and Yemen stakeholders should focus on the development of climate resilient resilient agribusiness and modernization of farming practices through technology and renewable energy sources; the reconstruction of critical infrastructure, such as roads and irrigation systems; the restoration and protection of the natural environment; and the strengthening of land and water rights, which would also ensure that small farmers are not pressured or forced to seek out other income sources.

