

# Note on development effectiveness in Yemen with special reference to food production

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It is difficult to write about development effectiveness in the midst of what is recognized to be the world's worst humanitarian crisis.<sup>1</sup> De-development would be a more appropriate term.<sup>2</sup>

A 2019 report commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) notes that there are "...nearly a quarter of a million people killed directly by fighting and indirectly through lack of access to food, health services, and infrastructure. Of the dead, 60 per cent are children under the age of five."<sup>3</sup> It judges that the war has already set back human development by 21 years. Likewise, a 2019 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN emergency bulletin states: "More than 20 million Yemenis are food insecure, including nearly 10 million

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1 <http://www.fao.org/emergencies/countries/detail/en/c/161523/>

2 Compare A. Kadri, *Arab Development Denied: Dynamics of accumulation by wars of encroachment*, London, Anthem Press, 2014.

3 J.D. Moyer et al., *Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen*, UNDP Sanaa, 2019, p. 6. <http://www.ye.undp.org/content/yemen/en/home/library/assessing-the-impact-of-war-on-development-in-yemen.html>

who are on the brink of famine and starvation. Two-thirds of all districts in the country are already pre-famine.” It continues: “Agricultural production and fishing, employing nearly 70 percent of the workforce, have shrunk by a third. More than 80 percent of Yemenis now live below the poverty line, an increase of one-third since the conflict began.”<sup>4</sup>

Many analysts have argued that this catastrophe is a “man-made famine” given the targeting of the infrastructure of both water and food production and distribution.<sup>5</sup> This is surely true. Coalition bombing and economic war, backed by the US, UK, and France (to name only the permanent members of the UN Security Council or UNSC)

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4 <http://www.fao.org/emergencies/countries/detail/en/c/161523/>

5 J. Ferguson, “Is intentional starvation the future of war?” *The New Yorker*, 11 July 2018; E. Thornberry, “The famine facing Yemen is a war crime – it must be investigated” *The Guardian*, 22 November 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/22/famine-yemen-war-crime-civilians-saudi-coalition>; R. Hovring, *Yemen: The man-made disaster must end*, 25 February 2019. <https://www.nrc.no/news/2019/february/yementhe-man-made-disaster-must-end/>

have targeted the above sectors since the autumn of 2015, once it became clear that bombardment of military targets would fail to produce the surrender of the forces in Sanaa, Yemen’s capital.<sup>6</sup> Passed April 14 2015, over a fortnight after the Coalition had begun bombing, UNSC Resolution 2216 served to legitimize support for the Coalition as part of the unconditional restoration of the Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi government, which was overthrown in 2015.<sup>7</sup>

Development, it should go without saying, has to be first and foremost a matter of the policy of national governments, not of a quango of outside International NGOs and international agencies. At present, the internationally-recognized government of Yemen is based in al-Riyadh, in Saudi Arabia and as the

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6 See M. Mundy, *The Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial bombardment and food war*, World Peace Foundation, October 8 2018. <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpfiles/2018/10/Strategies-of-Coalition-in-Yemen-War-Final-20181005-1.pdf>

7 J Gordon, ‘Yemen: where is the UN Security Council?’ *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 6 November 2018. <https://mondediplo.com/outsidein/yemen-where-is-the-un-security-council>

war has played out over time, figures from within the al-Riyadh-based government (in Mareb, southern Tihama, Mahra) or from parties backed by the United Arab Emirates (in Aden, Hadramaut, Shabwa) loom large in the different zones carved out of a once-unitary Yemen. Since the autumn of 2016, when the Hadi government and its international supporters oversaw the move of the Central Bank to Aden, the de facto government power in Sanaa has not been able to pay government employees across all sectors. Today, the Hadi government banks on promises of reconstruction aid in any future planning; the de facto government in Sanaa struggles primarily to maintain the war effort and cooperates with foreign agencies, albeit with tensions. Only from 2018 has the de facto government in Sanaa begun to develop proposals for long-term development planning. We shall return to those in the conclusion of this paper.

This said, it may be useful to underline the issues in “development effectiveness”

that placed Yemen well before the war on a red list for human development and contributed to the vast popular mobilisation during 2011-12 against the rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh, president for the previous three decades (1990-2012). This review should serve to highlight the need for a radical change in policy should the war ever come to an end.

### **Structural contradictions in the political economy of Yemen**

Yemen lies at a strategic geographical location along the Red Sea, the straits of Bab al-Mandab, and the Indian Ocean. The port of Aden had been a British base and colony from 1839 to 1967. With the rising rivalry between the US and China (Belt and Road, China too having a military base in Djibouti) and the US-driven alliances linking Gulf Cooperation Council states Israel, Jordan and Egypt, an independent sovereign Yemeni state would be the odd man out for the present world order.

Yemen was a country of farmers, fishers, artisans, learned families and traders. Yemeni farmers produced food in remarkably difficult ecological conditions (spring/summer rains, high coastal temperatures, mountain highlands, eastern desert plateaux). The knowledge that permitted such an achievement was viewed by international development policy as “traditional”.<sup>8</sup> Not being an industrialized country, nor rich in oil, from the 1970s onwards Yemen was almost universally described as “poor”.<sup>9</sup> Development agencies entered to provide knowledge and technology, not to learn from Yemeni farmers.

Yemen stands not only in a strategic corner for world trade but also along the border of what became from the 1970s onwards the world’s supreme

carbon oil-rentier state, Saudi Arabia. Yemen offered one great commodity – labour – in the eyes of Saudi Arabia. For twenty years, Yemeni labour built the modern infrastructure of its neighbour.<sup>1</sup> From the late-1970s, development agencies sought to develop a second commodity that Yemen could export to the oil-rich Kingdom: irrigated fresh fruit and vegetables drawing on subsoil or canalized water, the latter through engineer-designed irrigation structures to replace the labour-intensive, ecologically sustainable, socially more equitable weir-and-bund systems in the major wadi systems of Tihama.<sup>10</sup>

The absorption and ejection of Yemeni labour by Saudi Arabia was not the only factor disturbing the country’s political economy. The models

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8 World Bank. 1979. *Yemen Arab Republic - Development of a traditional economy* (English). The World Bank, Washington, D.C. 1979.

9 I. Blumi, *Destroying Yemen: What chaos in Arabia tells us about the world*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2018. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/818431468781149336/Yemen-Arab-Republic-Development-of-a-traditional-economy>.

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10 Frank van Steenberg et al. *Guidelines on Spate Irrigation*, FAO Irrigation and Drainage Paper No. 65, Rome, FAO, 2010. The authors single out for criticism the high-expense, upstream-engineering approach promoted by the World Bank in the Yemeni Tihama; they do this with restraint but on the basis of ample negative evidence, in terms of 1) economic return on investment, 2) social and economic equity, 3) integration of livestock with agricultural production, and 4) ecological impact in the former system as a whole.

of modern consumption, religion and politics espoused by Yemen's wealthy neighbour loomed large. Thus, the more pro-rural and national sovereign policies of President Ibrahim al-Hamdi of the Yemen Arab Republic (1974-1977, assassinated in November 10, 1977 on the eve of a visit for unity talks to Aden, capital of the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) were to give way to quite different visions of state government. Saudi Arabia became a major political financier of the Yemeni polity, both directly to the state and indirectly to officials, religious figures and major "tribal" leaders across the country. The Yemeni state itself opened an office registering shaykhs (tribal leaders) and awarding them subsidies to ensure allegiance and rural governance.

As Yemen itself began to produce and export oil and gas from the late 1970s, the structure of the formal economy came to be dominated by cartels wherein private business required a

link with members of the ruling family.<sup>11</sup> There emerged ten major cartels in the formal sector.<sup>12</sup>

Bound up with this political model was extensive monetary patronage of major rural shaykhs. In an era of complete financial mobility, such a concentration of wealth invited an out-flow of capital to other countries and, above all, to financial paradises: just under \$3 leaving for every \$1 of development aid received.<sup>13</sup>

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11 S. Phillips, *Developmental Disfunction and Division in a Crisis State*, Developmental Leadership Program, Research Paper 14, February 2011.

12 P. Salisbury, *Yemen's Economy: Oil, Imports and Elites*, Chatham House, Middle East and North Africa Programme Paper 2011/02, October 2011, p. 17: "The importance of these elite commercial networks cannot be understated. A survey undertaken ... shows that less than ten major groups from the tribes, military and business elite control 80 percent plus of the country's import, manufacturing and processing businesses, local commercial banks (and hence credit), telecommunications firms, and most of Yemen's major transport companies. Most importantly ..., they control the commercial networks that import and supply basic goods crucial to households, while in many cases also controlling the state apparatus required to implement economic reforms."

13 G. Hill et al. *Yemen: Corruption, capital flight and global drivers of conflict*, Chatham House, London, September 2013, p. ix "For every dollar spent on aid in Yemen between 1990 and 2008, another \$2.70 left the country."



To sustain this structure in the face of mounting poverty and rural distress – the Houthi rebellion being, in part, fuelled by the same – the state became fundamentally a security state leaving much of social programmes and the making of economic policy to the development industry.<sup>14</sup> One estimate puts the real proportion of the state spending on the military and security at 40% in 2011, at a time when spending on agriculture was only 2.8% of the official state budget.<sup>15</sup>

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14 There were six 'wars' led by the central government, with field commander Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar presently a vice-president in the Hadi government in al-Riyadh, against the Houthi movement. There is no systematic documentation of the relative levels of rural poverty in different regions of the country known to the author, but Report No. PAD3419 dated 2017 of the World Bank/IDA, Project Appraisal on a proposed grant from the Global Agriculture and Food Security Fund to FAO for a Yemen Smallholder Agricultural Productivity and Enhancement Project, Table 1 on p. 50 gives figures for 2014 on rural poverty. In that Sa'adah Governorate is highest at 91% followed by al-Hudaidah at 72%, compared to a national average of 59%. (The source of these statistics is not clear in the table.)

15 On security: Al-Akhbar, "The Yemeni Revolution and the Future of the Country," April 4, 2011, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/8261>. On agriculture in the government budget: International Development Association and International Finance Corporation (IDA/IFC), "Country Assistance Strategy for the Republic of Yemen for the Period FY 2010-2013," Report No. 47562-YE, 2009; World Bank and Yemen Ministry of Planning and Inter-

In 2011 the largest of all popular Arab protest movements took over Yemen. During the protests, youth posed questions concerning the direction of the country's development. At the level of the government of Yemen, and as part of reform efforts post-2011, the Executive Bureau received support from the World Bank late 2013 to compile information concerning development interventions in Yemen and their budgets. It produced two important reports in 2014 and 2015, the first time that a full picture of development funding had been compiled in the country.<sup>16</sup> These show the overwhelming proportion of "aid" coming from GCC countries, led by Saudi Arabia.

Given the stakes should deep change have resulted from the protests, the cartels and associated major parties split, permitting the movement not

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national Cooperation, "Millennium Development Goals," p. 73, see Annex 2.

16 The Executive Bureau for the Acceleration of Aid Absorption and Implementation of the Mutual Accountability Framework (SEBAA) received support from the World Bank in November 2013. The project was closed June 30 2015. See <http://projects.worldbank.org/P145338?lang=en>.

to be physically crushed but also not to lead to structural change. International diplomacy stepped in; under pressure President Saleh stepped down but remained as head of the General Congress political party, and his deputy Hadi was elected in February 2012 as sole candidate for a mandate of two years (extended irregularly for a further year by agreement of the political parties). In the autumn of 2014, one of the two largely excluded political movements, the Ansarallah, seized power in Sanaa forming an alliance with large parts of the army and an agreement with Saleh that came to an end in early December 2017. Below we refer to the revolutionary committee established post-2015 in Sanaa by the legal term the *de facto* government.

## **Development in Yemen**

Since the 1980s international agencies have come to play a decisive role in social and economic policy in Yemen. How they view the nature of the country, therefore, has far-reaching consequences. Thus let us start with how the

reports commissioned by the FAO and UNDP mentioned earlier present basic “facts” about Yemen:<sup>17</sup>

First fact, Yemen’s staple food is wheat.

Observation: Two generations ago, the staple or grain food of Yemen was not wheat but sorghum, millet, barley and maize (and finally wheat and rice) in declining order. At that time, 85% of the population lived in small villages across the land. Just before the outbreak of war in 2015, about 65% continued to do so.

Second fact, although Yemen produces only 20% of its food, some 50-70% of its population work, at least in part, in food production.

Observation: The figures for indigenous food consumption are rough assessments based on GDP accounting of the weighing of agriculture and fishing in national accounts. GDP accounting of the “value” of agricultural and livestock production is famously problematical: first,

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<sup>17</sup> See notes 3 and 4.

because much production and consumption occurs inside the household and outside market pricing, and second, because the total social “value” of such production, when it provides work and sustains rural infrastructure, is far greater than the monetary estimates of its food products in the market.

Third fact, Yemen is characterized by high population growth.

Observation: There was no government-led family-planning policy<sup>18</sup> under the Saleh regime and there is limited public health coverage in Yemen.<sup>19</sup>

Fourth fact, Yemen’s major export is oil and gas.

Observation: Oil production started in 1988, peaked in 2001, and has declined since 2005. In early 2020 none of the oil fields of Yemen are under the control of the de facto government in Sanaa.

And fifth fact, ‘capital flight’ has occurred for decades.

In the first place, there was not much capital to “flee” Yemen before the onset of gas and oil production. Oil production has been central to the restructuring of class-state relations in Yemen and to the contest over Yemen today more widely. The war since 2015 has led to the further exit of capital with Yemeni families of means, especially going to Istanbul, Amman and Cairo, where they have bought housing.<sup>20</sup>

## **‘Development intervention’ in Yemen today**

Just before the onset of active hostilities in late March

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<sup>18</sup> Reproductive health is a sector entirely led by development agencies, see Country Programme Action Plan 2012-2015 between UNFPA (The United Nations Population Fund) and the Government of Yemen [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/portal-document/Yemen%20\\_CPAP%202012-2015.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/portal-document/Yemen%20_CPAP%202012-2015.pdf). On availability of contraception in 2012, see USAID\Deliver Project, *Yemen: Mapping the Procurement Process for Family Planning and Reproductive Health Commodities*, 2015, p. 5: “...the supply of contraceptives is entirely donor funded.” See also <https://yemen.unfpa.org/en/about-yemen> and <http://www.emro.who.int/yem/programmes/reproductive-health.html>.

<sup>19</sup> See Aid report on health sector at <https://uhcpartnership.net/country-profile/yemen/>.

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<sup>20</sup> See the report by Rashid al-Haddad in *al-Akhbar* 3 January 2019 “The wealth of politicians and generals expand across the world: ‘merchants of war’, the other side of the siege on Yemen” [in Arabic].



2015, the major international agencies (World Bank, FAO, International Fund for Agriculture Development or IFAD) suspended their local operations following the closure of Western embassies in Sanaa. It was over a year later that they began selectively to re-engage on the political condition that operations be humanitarian in nature. Today development agencies are back at work on the ground but branding their programmes as “emergency” or “humanitarian”.<sup>21</sup>

What are their priorities today? Although Via Campesina was established in 1993, and the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform was launched in 2000, it was only from 2006 onwards, and more widely after the spike in world food prices in 2008, that support for small farmers re-entered

policy debate of the major international agencies. The UN declared 2014 as the “Year of Family Farming.” Prior to this, as described above, agriculture received a tiny proportion of Yemen’s state budget and the bulk of that went to irrigated agriculture. The criteria for agricultural production were market valuation and the promotion of higher cash-value agriculture, inevitably requiring more water than rain-fed crops.

It was only in 2008 that the World Bank and the IFAD launched a first project in Yemen on rain-fed agriculture – the Rainfed Agriculture and Livestock Production (RALP) Project.<sup>22</sup> By that time ground water depletion, terrace and land erosion, rural unemployment and food insecurity had become major concerns. While the RALP project marks a shift, it made no mention of how the same agencies had earlier imposed

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<sup>21</sup> See *Humanitarian Response Plan 2020* at <http://www.fao.org/3/ca7801en/CA7801EN.pdf>. The World Bank brands its programmes *IDA Emergency and Crisis Response* see <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/893311552309524088/Yemen-IDA-Snapshot-March2019-English.pdf>. The project for smallholder support has been continued under that rubric; it appears to have been reopened in 2017. See <http://www.fao.org/resilience/news-events/detail/en/c/1041659/>

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of these projects see M. Mundy and F. Pelat, ‘The political economy of agriculture and agricultural policy in Yemen’ in N. Brehony & S. AlSarhan (eds.), *Rebuilding Yemen: Political, economic and social challenges*, Berlin, Gerlach Press, pp. 98-122, available in Arabic at <http://www.athimar.org/Article-74>.

the very policies that the project aimed to remedy.<sup>23</sup> In 2012 the first National Agriculture Sector Strategy was published and in 2013 the first Smallholder Agricultural Productivity Enhancement Project proposed for funding. Although even in these, the mantra whereby market prices fundamentally determine success continues to define policy for the major agencies. Cash payments to rural labourers, infrastructural repairs and financing of indigenous seed banks and small-scale water techniques began to form central planks of projects.<sup>24</sup> The major NGO Oxfam had led with cash-for-work programmes, collaborating with the government Social Fund for Development. In time, major international organisations followed.<sup>25</sup>

It would appear that several forces have allowed the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> World Bank, 2008, Report No. 43216-YEM, *Proposal for a Groundwater and Soil Conservation Project to the Republic of Yemen*;

<sup>25</sup> See the coordination body 2017: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/yemen/cash-and-marketing>

kinds of intervention in recent projects not present before. First, the scale of food insecurity, particularly in rural areas, forced a policy response even before 2015. Since then, the war emergency has provided the legitimization for agencies to offer more direct support for rural labour and household production than earlier neo-liberal market valuation policy permitted. Second, from before the war the pressures mounting on international organisations to respond to the world ecological crisis (and in this case Yemen's degraded rural ecologies) led to interventions purporting to support (the earlier dismissed) "traditional" techniques of smallholders.<sup>26</sup> Given the losses in knowledge, soil cover, and historical seed types, it would require detailed field reviews to see how much such projects have achieved their aims.

Where the lives of rural men, women and children came to be on the line, intervention in favour of small farmers

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<sup>26</sup> IDA Global Environment Facility, 2010 – closed 2015, *Agro-biodiversity and Climate Adaptation Project P103922*.

emerged in programmes deemed not developmental but humanitarian. Thus, while FAO ceased work following the “political decision” in 2015, it came back in humanitarian guise doing what it could not do in the name of development given the iron rule of prioritizing market value.<sup>27</sup> Not all of the humanitarian interventions in support of agriculture are without problems: the Yemeni agronomist Dr Amin al-Hakimi warns that NGOs and agencies are importing seeds without any national control or vetting today and that historical seed-banks have been lost for lack of electricity in the war years.

Not all the pressure for policy change is externally generated. Yemeni consultants writing for outside agencies have begun to call for support for small-farmer agriculture and fishing. In an important case, the World Bank merely filed the report.<sup>28</sup> In another case, penned by a Yemeni author trained in business schools outside

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27 See FAO 2018 *Emergency Livelihoods Response Plan: Support to agriculture-based livelihoods*; FAO's *Response in Yemen 2019* at <http://www.fao.org/3/ca3684en/ca3684en.pdf>.

28 The author shared the draft report confidentially with me.

Yemen, the report identifies market-valuation as central to future agricultural policy but at the same time calls for cutting back what has been the mountain farmers' refuge in the market-value storm: *qat*.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, this contradiction cannot resolve the problems recognized. More incisive is the chapter by the rights activist Mohamad Abdul Bari Thabet al-Ariqi titled “Right to food and food sovereignty in Yemen” published in the 2019 Arab NGO Network for Development's Report.<sup>30</sup>

In 2016, the de facto government in Sanaa announced policies that placed rural Yemen back at the centre of concern. It is with a brief look at these that we close. In 2016 The General Organisation

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29 A. Alkaff, *Agriculture: A primary pillar for reconstruction in post-conflict Yemen*, Deep Root, March 2019. *Qat is the major leisure 'drug' consumed in Yemen: it is an amphetamine with mildly hallucinogenic qualities, the consumption of which was encouraged under the Saleh regime; the expansion of its cultivation has brought about falling ground-water tables, chemical pollution, and land concentration.*

30 The Arab Watch Report on the Right to Food is available in Arabic at <http://www.annd.org/arabwatch2019/righttofood/ar/index.pdf> and the chapter on Yemen 'Yemen: Right to food and food sovereignty' at <http://www.annd.org/data/file/files/19%20Yemen%20.pdf>.

for the Production and Development of Grains, a new governmental body, was established. The priorities of this body are national and independent of those of the IFIs and international development organisations. The organisation gives prizes to successful farmers and supports grain production. It is not clear, however, to what extent the organization has a programme favouring small farmers or promoting grains other than wheat.

In a further move, in March 2019, the de facto government's Supreme Political Council set out its "National vision for the modern Yemeni state".<sup>31</sup> The document of 82 pages comprises sections on various aspects of Yemen, from governance system to social restructuring (including social justice, identity and culture, population policy, combating poverty, and humanitarian response), and from the

economy to foreign policy and national security, among others. The document is impressive for its commitment to legal freedoms and for adopting more sustained pro-poor and pro-rural policies.

Given that "development aid" presently takes the form of "emergency aid" in those parts of Yemen under the de facto Sanaa government, it is the subsection on social restructuring entitled "humanitarian response" that concerns us.<sup>32</sup> Here we can read that the Strategic Goals are three-fold: (1) supporting the effective management of humanitarian response, (2) diversifying humanitarian response programs to ensure sustainability in the provision of living needs, (3) developing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in dealing with humanitarian response. Point 2 touches on the initiatives proposed under this rubric: (a) developing a strategy to transfer part of Yemen's humanitarian support mechanism from food baskets and medicines to programs

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<sup>31</sup> Supreme Political Council, Republic of Yemen, *National Vision for the Modern Yemeni State*, 26 March 2019. The document is available on <https://yemenvision.gov.ye/en/> and/or <https://www.scribd.com/document/408676448/Yemen-National-Vision-2019>

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

that support development through microfinance and microenterprise and prepare a plan; and (b) providing a unified mechanism for dealing with international and local organizations and donors working in humanitarian response. The document makes clear that the de facto government in Sanaa hopes to regain governmental control over future “development” interventions funded from abroad lost during the years of President Saleh’s rule.

Such is a sine qua non for effective “development cooperation” the topic of the collection for which this essay has been written. The extent to which this will be possible depends on the military outcome of the war. Those

governments in the Coalition engaged militarily (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) or profiting as arms suppliers and political advisors (USA, UK, Germany) at the same time provide the funds for “development” intervention – or should one say “de-development” – in Yemen.<sup>33</sup>

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33 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/feb/26/more-than-half-of-26bn-aid-to-yemen-pledged-by-countries-involved-in-war>. A recent Saudi-British meeting expresses the relationship: <https://www.prnewswire.com/ae/news-releases/sdrpy-supervisor-and-saudi-ambassador-al-jaber-meets-political-and-diplomatic-figures-in-london-301004653.html>