Taking a Stabilization Approach to Manage Conflict and Prevent Resurgence of Violence in Yemen

Introduction

Case Study // Yemen

Since 2014, Yemenis have experienced the effects of a multi-layered, multi-actor conflict that poses enormous challenges to a negotiated resolution. The resulting destruction of infrastructure, livelihoods and social services has weakened the resilience of Yemen's communities and uprooted their trust in the existing governance systems. Given this reality, strengthening social cohesion within communities and deepening trust between communities and local government agencies is one way to create conditions where credible local authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence.

Launched in 2018, Yemen Communities Stronger Together (YCST) is made possible with the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). YCST is implemented by Global Communities in partnership with the Field Medical Foundation (FMF), Build Up and Partners for Good (PfG). YCST supports local-level initiatives that mitigate conflict, strengthen social cohesion, and promote the peaceful resolution of differences. YCST is laying the foundation for a peaceful and effective transition process in Yemen by engaging communities, building capacity, and promoting peace.

YCST designed its interventions on the assumption that building and restoring communities' trust in local institutions would strengthen stabilization efforts. As part of its stabilization support, YCST assisted local legitimate authorities in delivering responsive governance, supported initiatives that contributed to the reduction of localized violent conflict and worked to improve citizen perceptions around the credibility and capability of their local authorities. Specifically, YCST implemented activities aimed at increasing community awareness of ways to engage with local government institutions.

This case study focuses on the Al-Azaez community, located in the Ash-Shamayatayn District of the Taiz Governorate, which is made up of six villages. The area is prone to heavy rainfalls, flash floods and landslides especially from May to September. This case study describes how YCST's stabilization approach helped the Al-Azaez community access better education services through the rehabilitation of the Abdulaziz School. It also describes the key elements of the approach, assesses the most significant changes identified by the community and explores the factors that contributed to the successful implementation of the school rehabilitation project.
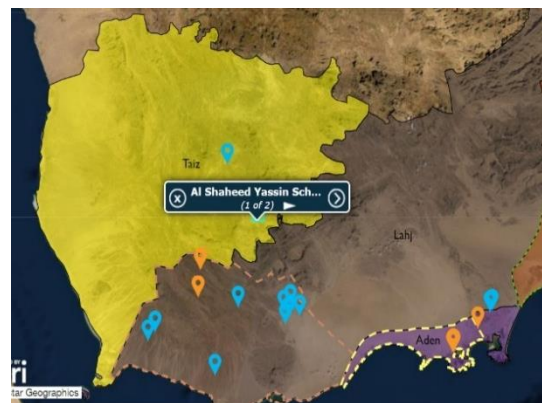

Image: Map showing Al-Azaez Community, Ash-Shamayatayn District, Taiz

Background

The Abdulaziz Primary School was established in 1998 and faced overcrowding issues for many years. This primary school provides education to students from grades one to nine, with six classrooms and three restrooms for 524 students (283 boys and 241 girls) and an average of 87 students per class. The school employs 18 teachers and three administrative staff for the entire student body and lacked the space for a principal's office, a teacher breakroom and an area to store supplies.

The community attempted to address this overcrowding issue by splitting students into morning and afternoon shifts. However, some parents were concerned about the safety of children attending the afternoon shift. As a result, some parents were forced to accompany their children to school after work which placed an additional burden on community families. Additionally, the road to the school runs through a flood-prone area, especially during episodes of heavy rains which makes travel after dark even more precarious.

> *"It was a nightmare for all of us when three small students from the afternoon shift were dragged by the torrents. We almost lost them but then all the people gathered and rescued those students, but still these students are brave and manage to fight for their education as they have no other option."*
> *—Head Principal of Abdulaziz School, Abdul Waheed Abdullah*

To address the long-running challenge, the Ministry of Education and School Management agreed to fund and construct an extra building to accommodate lower grade students to reduce challenges relating to overcrowding in late 2013. However, in 2014, construction of the new building was halted due to a lack of funding and the start of the civil war in Yemen. When construction was halted, only the foundation for the building was complete. Furthermore, due to the ongoing conflict, the Ministry of Education did not receive funding allocations to maintain the school building leaving school management to rely on meager resources that were not adequate to address pressing needs. This bleak situation was the main source of conflict between the school management and the community which affected relationships within the community itself and between the local authorities and the community.

Implementation of stabilization interventions

YCST's stabilization interventions were aimed at supporting and strengthening local legitimate authorities in delivering responsive governance. By placing local authorities at the forefront of the implementation of basic service projects, YCST sought to strengthen the trust between communities and legitimate local authorities. YCST's approach of implementing program activities through inclusive Authority Community Committees (ACCs) increased interactions between communities and local authorities – creating a consultative approach to identify community stressors and develop durable solutions. Specifically, for the implementation of the Abdulaziz School Rehabilitation Project, the YCST stabilization team opted for a systematic and sequenced approach.

> **Authority Community Committees** (ACCs) are committees established by YCST and district authorities as a steering committee for the stabilization support in their respective targeted districts. ACCs are comprised of district authorities, Civil Society Organizations (including women-led organizations), representatives of unions, representatives of marginalized groups and other community figures. In addition to playing leading role in the discussions of the prioritization of stabilization opportunities, ACCs also served as the link between the community and district authorities.

At the beginning of implementing the school rehabilitation project, the YCST stabilization team engaged local authorities at the national, governorate, district and local levels and the Al-Azaez community to introduce them to the YCST project objectives and activities. YCST then facilitated the formation of ACCs, the identification of conflict stressors and the prioritization of stabilization projects for implementation. YCST adopted the following processes in the implementation of the Abdulaziz School Rehabilitation Project.

Engagement with national, governorate and district level local authorities: YCST first approached the national level authority – the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC), the Taiz Governor and the Ash-Shamayatayn District Manager. These groups were engaged through several kick-off and coordination meetings to seek permission, introduce, and familiarize themselves with the project objectives, approach and planned stabilization activities. After the initial engagement, YCST signed agreements with these authorities to formalize the relationship and secure their support for the implementation of the school rehabilitation project.

Community engagement: With the support of the MoPIC, the Governor and the District Manager, YCST approached the Al-Azez community to introduce the project and present its implementation approach – the "ACC model." In July, YCST was able to form an inclusive ACC comprised of 40 members (26 male-14 female) that acted as a steering committee throughout the school rehabilitation. The ACC included ten members from the local authority and 30 community members.

Prioritization of the school project: Soon after the formation of the ACC, community members led by the ACC and with guidance from YCST conducted a stressor/needs analysis of the wider Al-Azaez community. The goal of the survey was to identify and prioritize the most pressing needs of the community through consultative and consensus-building meetings. The ACCs also explored ways to increase social cohesion and reduce conflict within and between communities during these meetings.

*Image: Girl students seated in one of the rehabilitated classrooms. **Credit:** Global Communities.*

After the wider stressor/needs analysis, the ACCs along with community members prioritized health care, water supply and education as the top three needs but settled on addressing the education needs first. This need was selected due to the cost and potential challenges of implementing health and water projects in the area. Following an in-depth consultation, the community agreed to prioritize the Abdulaziz School along with two other schools (Yaseen, and Al-Khair) for rehabilitation. Abdulaziz School is the only school that provides primary and elementary education to children from 25 nearby villages and the surrounding neighborhoods.

> *"Abdulaziz School was operating in morning and afternoon shifts, which was very risky for the small students, especially in the rainy seasons. We were not happy with this situation and used to complain to each other and to the school management. We selected Abdulaziz School Project to resolve the long going conflict between the students, parents, and school management."*
> *—Al-Azaez ACC member*

Abdulaziz School Rehabilitation Tasks

- Complete the construction of the roof and walls
- Plaster and paint walls and ceiling
- Install windows and door.
- Tile the classroom floors
- Install solar system with lighting in classrooms
- Supply whiteboards and markers
- Conduct general maintenance
- Provide maintenance tool kits, consumable supplies, and cleaning tools/equipment

Project implementation: A tri-party Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between YCST, the education office and the ACC to ensure smooth project implementation and to provide for the sustained operation of the rehabilitated facilities following project completion. On February 15, 2021, YCST awarded and subcontracted the project to a local contracting firm to implement the rehabilitation of three schools, including the Abdulaziz School, under the Al Azaez Schools Rehabilitation Project. The rehabilitation for Abdulaziz school included the construction of four additional classrooms, a latrine, a teacher's breakroom and storage space along with additional repair work. YCST negotiated with the sub-contractor to fix any damages that arose within three months of the work being completed. In addition, the local authority and ACC formally agreed that they

would provide any maintenance needs for two years. This "extended warranty" for the school contributed to a sense of ownership among all relevant stakeholders and enhances the sustainability of the project.

ACC members played an effective role during the project implementation. In line with the MOU, the ACC member from the education office remained engaged on an ongoing basis with the District Education Office on local educational issues (including school conditions and staff) and continued to work toward the peaceful resolution of education-related conflicts. The ACC monitored the implementation of the project in accordance with the work plan. Both the ACC and local authorities remained at the forefront of the project and routinely shared project progress, updates, and challenges, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Image: One of the rehabilitated classrooms at the Abdulaziz School. **Credit:** Global Communities*

To enhance transparency and accountability, YCST also set up a mechanism to acquire feedback on activity implementation from stakeholders including the wider Al-Azez community. YCST secured a toll-free number and conducted accountability orientation sessions to familiarize all involved stakeholders on the importance of the established feedback mechanism. The YCST Engineering team provided technical support, ensured quality of standards, and compliance with health, safety, and protection requirements throughout the process[1].

Project handover: The subcontractor completed the rehabilitation of Abdulaziz School on August 14, 2021. Five days later, the new building was officially handed over to the local authorities, the Ministry of Education and the school administration in the presence of community members, students and YCST staff. YCST also provided maintenance tool kits comprised of consumable supplies and cleaning equipment for school management to support sustainability measures.

*Image: Stakeholders at handover event of the Al-Shaheed Abdulaziz School. **Credit:** Global Communities*

Results

Through the Abdulaziz School Rehabilitation Project, YCST improved the learning conditions for 467[2] students (237 boys and 230 girls) and the working environment for 18 teachers and three administrative staff. The rehabilitation supported the local authorities of Al Azaez to deliver a project which helped communities address their education needs, manage conflict and prevent outbreaks of future violence. While system shifts take time and the project window was not long enough to observe large-scale change,

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[1] "Yemeni government standards and regulations," *USAID approved plan*, 2022.
[2] Abdulaziz School principal, "statistics".

there are some encouraging indications of sustained stabilization at the community level, and these include:

Increased level of trust between communities and local legitimate authorities: YCST implemented the Abdulaziz School Rehabilitation Project by placing the District Manager, Ministry of Education Officials, and school management at the forefront of all activities. The inclusion of local authorities as part of the ACC and their role in prioritizing needs and the implementation of the project helped repair eroded trust and strengthen the connection between the local authorities and the community. Over two-thirds (67%)[3] of community members surveyed during the stabilization lessons learned data collection activities agreed that there has been an increase in levels of trust between their community and local authorities.

Increased level of trust between community members: Active involvement of the community members in the identification, prioritization, designing and implementation of the Abdulaziz School Rehabilitation Project allowed men, women, youth, and marginalized groups from different social and political backgrounds to work together on joint solutions that meet their needs. The collaborative planning and implementation processes such as needs/stressors analysis, project prioritization, planning and implementation helped build trust between community members.

> *"The opinions of youths, women and marginalized groups in society were considered during the identification of basic service projects. The project was prioritized not for the one segment of the community members, but for all groups; the needs of youth, girls and marginalized ones were specifically considered".*
> *—FGD member, Ash-Shamayatan District, Al-Azaez community.*

Improved level of support to deliver responsive governance: YCST's technical and financial support to the district management and the education authorities enabled them to deliver better education services and enhance the creditability of authorities in the community. Through the formation of ACC, the project brought district authorities and community members together to implement and monitor the Abdulaziz School. After project implementation, local authorities were able to assume project maintenance roles and implementation of project sustainability plans. Data from the stabilization lessons learned activities indicate that 66 percent of community members agree that the responsiveness of local authorities to deliver has improved as compared to before the rehabilitation process.[4]

Community critical needs addressed: Rehabilitation of the Abdulaziz School addressed a critical need of the community and enabled access to improved levels of education services as classes were no longer crowded. The rehabilitation eliminated the need for afternoon shift classes thereby reducing concerns about student safety and environmental hazards. According to the school principal, the school management is now able to accommodate all students in morning shifts, overcrowding has been reduced and students can access a better learning experience.

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[3] "YCST stabilization lesson learned," *Report 3*, 15.
[4] Respondents, "stabilization projects have supported legitimate authorities deliver responsive governance," *Stabilization Lessons Learned.*

In the post implementation monitoring activities (including the USAID commissioned third party monitoring and verification activities)[5] following the handover, all ACC members were found to be highly appreciative of the project. With members sharing that the project was implemented with the highest possible standards and that the subcontractor implemented additional work at no extra cost. All the respondents confirmed that the local authority's construction guidelines were followed. The school principal acknowledged the commitment, hard work and respectable behavior of the YCST stabilization and Engineering teams that contributed to the successful implementation of the project. However, ACC members and students still expressed the need for additional improvements, namely tables and chairs for students.[6]

Recommendations

YCST provides the following recommendations to USAID and other implementing partners for the effective implementation of similar projects—particularly in contexts like Yemen. These recommendations are based on YCST's experience and learning in Yemen and the findings derived from the Abdulaziz School Rehabilitation Project.

Set achievable project timelines to build and retain trust: YCST faced frequent delays due to inclement weather during the rainy season, labor shortages, short working hours during Ramadan and Eid breaks and lengthy USAID technical and subcontractor approval and vetting processes. For the school rehabilitation project, unexpected delays resulted in extending the project twice. Therefore, future projects should develop very reasonable timelines that take into consideration the National Holiday Calendar, the extended time required for the procurement and vetting process and known climate constraints. If not well managed, delays in achieving results within expected time frames can create discontent and damage trust between communities, authorities, and other implementing partners.

Engage stakeholders through multiple platforms: Consultative sessions between communities and local authorities helped rebuild community trust in local authorities, support a sense of local ownership, enhance transparency, and contribute to the successful implementation of stabilization projects through YCST. However, these sessions were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is suggested that future project teams consider and design complementary community communication strategies that take advantage of both in-person and digital platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups. These platforms can be used to share information, updates, challenges, and outcomes related to project activities and seek support from other development and humanitarian actors. Using digital platforms, in addition to in person sessions, should create an opportunity to reach a broader audience with project updates and ensure these updates are accessible –regardless of health, weather, or other barriers that may be faced.

Facilitate collaboration between the community and local authorities: When the community and local authorities actively worked together to rehabilitate the Abdulaziz School, they saw the impact of their collective efforts. Including both the community and local authorities in project implementation not only helped create a sense of local ownership of the project but also created the opportunity for increased trust between these two groups. Future projects should work to involve the community and local

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[5] USAID and Management Systems International (MSI), "implementation verification of activities and assess their relevance and effectiveness," *post implementation monitoring materials*.
[6] Al-Shaheed Abdulaziz School Rehabilitation Project, "Site Visit Report," 2021.

authorities in program implementation to foster local ownership, build trust and lay the foundation for future collaboration between these two groups.

Invest in community capacity strengthening activities to support sustained impact: YCST provided a solar electric system in Abdulaziz School to improve the learning environment for students and teachers, but, as this was a new technology, it was difficult for ACC members to oversee its operation and maintenance. Therefore, future projects should include technical training sessions and support for community members to develop the skills needed to locally manage new resources or systems that are introduced through projects.

Include capacity strengthening activities for local authorities: Even after project implementation, local authorities involved with the Abdulaziz School were able to assume project maintenance roles and implementation of project sustainability plans. Building on this, future projects should help strengthen the capacities of local authorities to lead, inclusively plan and implement stabilization activities. Local authorities should also be provided with trainings on community participatory approaches relevant for improving or maintaining stability. These trainings should include guidance to support community mobilization, planning, identification of community stressors/potential conflict triggers and the skills needed to engage with humanitarian and development actors to respond to critical community needs. Training approaches should be adopted by local authorities to prepare ACCs in effectively responding to community needs and lobbying for support from actors to help sustain stabilization efforts beyond short-term project or donor interventions.