

THEMATIC SERIES

# UnSettlement: Urban displacement in the 21st century

This thematic series explores the scale, nature and dynamics of internal displacement in towns and cities across the world



## YEMEN

Urban displacement in a rural society

OCTOBER 2019

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Cover photo: A man walks along destroyed buildings in Taiz city, Yemen. Credit: Akram Al-Sharjabi, August 2019

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# KEY MESSAGES

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**War and displacement in Yemen are not primarily urban in nature.** Despite the amount of media attention given to key urban battles such as the siege of Taiz and the battle for Hodeidah, the disaggregation of data on incidents of conflict and displacement by type of location shows that 68 per cent of the former and 69 per cent of the latter take place in rural areas. This is in line with the rural nature of the country's population.

**Rural to rural and urban to urban displacement are the dominant patterns of movement.** The importance of having social networks in areas of displacement and transferable education and skills cannot be overemphasised. The war has also rendered typical pull factors to cities, such as access to basic services and livelihood opportunities, all but irrelevant, meaning that rural to urban displacement is not as common as it might otherwise have been.

**Despite the impacts of war, internally displaced people (IDPs) in urban areas still have better access to basic services than their rural counterparts.**

Access to water and electricity was poor in urban areas before the war, and even worse in rural areas. The war has only widened such gaps across sectors and the country as a whole. Rural inhabitants, including IDPs, are forced to travel long distances to access markets and health and education services, a costly and time-consuming endeavour that urban IDPs do not face.

**Understanding pre-war trends, particularly the decline of rural life and the spread of informal settlements on urban peripheries, will be key in developing solutions to displacement.** Urban IDPs join the ranks of the broader urban poor, living in areas where water and electricity supplies and sanitation are all but absent. Deteriorating rural conditions led to rural to urban migration before the war, and this is certain to increase as the conflict aggravates rural decline and leaves IDPs from rural areas nowhere to return to. Developing tailored local solutions that include the integration of urban IDPs into the urban economy will help mitigate the impacts of displacement on individuals and the urban ecosystem as a whole.



*Eight residential apartments were destroyed in airstrikes in Sana'a, Yemen on 24 August 2017, killing 14 people. Photo: Nuha Mohammed/NRC, August 2017*

# INTRODUCTION

War broke out in Yemen in 2015 when Ansar Allah, also known widely as the Houthi movement, seized control of large swathes of territory and ousted the country's president, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, from the capital Sana'a. Ansar Allah, a Zaidi Shia political and armed group based in the northern province of Sa'ada, had been embroiled in an insurgency against the government since 2004. Around 300,000 people were still displaced by this conflict when the latest war began in 2015.<sup>1</sup>

The Arab spring swept through Yemen as it did through other countries in the region in early 2011. Months of protests eventually forced the resignation of the then president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was succeeded by Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi in early 2012.

During the two years that followed, the transitional government failed to make reforms that improved the

day to day lives of Yemenis. Ansar Allah took advantage of the security vacuum and people's discontent with the transition process to consolidate power in its northern heartland and begin spreading south. It eventually reached Sana'a in late 2014, and in February 2015 formalised its takeover of the capital. The following month, the group took control of Yemen's southern-most city of Aden.<sup>2</sup>

In response, a coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia launched a military campaign to reinstate the ousted government.<sup>3</sup> The offensive helped to push Ansar Allah back from Aden, but the coalition's land, air and sea blockades and its bombing of civilian areas have fuelled a significant deterioration in what was already a dire humanitarian situation in the country. Now, 80 per cent of the population are in need of protection and assistance in what has been described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.<sup>4</sup>

MAP 1: Control map as of June 2019.<sup>5</sup>





*Al Habbari informal settlement of displaced people, Sana'a. Photo: NRC/Becky Bakr Abdulla, August 2018*

Airstrikes, ground clashes, persecution, general lawlessness, food insecurity and a lack of livelihood opportunities and basic services have led civilians to flee their homes in droves across all areas of the country. At least 2.3 million people were thought to be internally displaced as of the end of 2018, with an additional 282,000 new displacements recorded in the first half of 2019 alone.<sup>6</sup> The figure is likely to be a gross underestimate given the extent of data collection challenges in the country.<sup>7</sup>

This paper examines the urban and rural characteristics of displacement in Yemen, including the push and pull factors in both areas. It provides an overview of historical urbanisation trends in the country, and a rural-urban disaggregation of large conflict and displacement datasets from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and International Organization for Migration (IOM), respectively.

It examines rural and urban displacement patterns and assesses host conditions and the status of basic services in urban centres. It looks specifically at conditions in the cities of Taiz and Aden as they create internal displacement and shelter IDPs. It also analyses future intentions and preferences for durable solutions along urban and rural lines.

# METHODOLOGY

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This study draws on information collected for a larger research project on internal displacement to cross border movement within IDMC's Invisible Majority thematic series, which included an extensive literature review, the analysis of large displacement and conflict datasets and qualitative data gleaned from interviews. More than 80 interviews were conducted with internally displaced families in Aden, Lahj, Sana'a and Taiz governorates in August and September 2019.

More than half of the interviewees were living in urban centres, particularly the cities of Taiz and Aden which are the focus of this study. It also draws on 40 interviews conducted with Yemeni refugees in Europe and Djibouti in May and June 2019, many of whom were also from Aden and Taiz. National and international service providers working in the two cities were interviewed for triangulation and clarification purposes.

IOM's nationwide geolocated dataset on IDPs from November 2018 and the EU's Global Human Settlement Layer (GHSL) were used to disaggregate displacement by urban and rural locations.<sup>8</sup> GHSL is a global dataset that assesses degrees of urbanisation using census data from national statistical institutes and satellite observations. It displays multi-temporal geospatial data in grids of one square kilometre, which enables a globally consistent and comparable classification of rural and urban areas.<sup>9</sup>

By overlaying information on displacement sites with GHSL, it was possible to disaggregate the data. The same process was used for incidents of conflict and violence recorded in ACLED's database.<sup>10</sup>

## SAMPLING STRATEGY

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Given the security and access challenges in conducting research in Yemen, a non-probability sampling technique was used. Respondents were identified through convenience sampling, based on the networks and access of

researchers and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), IDMC's key partner organisation on the ground.

Fieldwork locations were chosen based on accessibility, security considerations and the presence of IDPs. To improve the sample's diversity, respondents from different sexes, age groups, shelter types and those living in various settings –urban, rural and camps– were chosen.

## DATA COLLECTION

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Data collection in Yemen was done by local researchers in Aden, Lahj and Taiz governorates, provinces controlled by the Yemeni government and coalition forces. The researchers used KoboToolbox, which is designed for data collection in challenging environments, to gather quantitative information on the respondents. They supplemented the online survey with qualitative information gleaned from interviews on push and pull factors to cities, living conditions and future intentions.

The quantitative data was cleaned and analysed in Stata to provide descriptive statistics to supplement the qualitative information collected through the interviews.

## LIMITATIONS

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The study's sample was non-representative, and the security situation limited the geographical scope of the research. Northern governorates controlled by Ansar Allah were not accessible, but some interviews with IDPs living in these areas, in particular in the capital, were conducted by phone. As such, it is not possible to extrapolate the findings to all IDPs in Yemen.



# URBANISATION TRENDS IN YEMEN

Yemen is the least urbanised country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Its population is 36.6 per cent urban, compared with 65.4 per cent for the region as a whole.<sup>11</sup> Sana'a is the only city in Yemen with a population of more than a million. Six other cities are home to more than 100,000 people.<sup>12</sup>

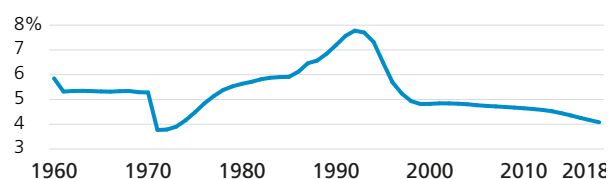
Yemen's overall population has grown rapidly since 1994, but the rural proportion has not declined significantly despite urban growth and expansion. This is in part because of high population growth in rural areas and the nature of the economy, in which 55 per cent of people rely on agriculture to make a living.<sup>13</sup>

The urbanisation rate grew quickly in the 1970s and 80s as a result of investments made by Yemeni expatriates working in Gulf countries, with the construction industry absorbing most of the capital. This, along with deteriorating conditions in rural areas, also led to an influx of rural workers to urban areas.<sup>14</sup>

Urban growth peaked in the early 90s because of two main factors that took hold in 1990 – the forced return of about one million Yemenis from the Gulf states in response to Yemen's support for Iraq in the Gulf war, and the unification of North and South Yemen.<sup>15</sup> The returnees from the Gulf settled in urban areas, particularly the outskirts of the city of Hodeidah, while unification led to very different fortunes for the major historic urban hubs of Sana'a and Aden.<sup>16</sup>

Growth in Sana'a was as high as nine per cent at one point as politicians and political exiles from the south flowed into the new capital of unified Yemen. Aden's economy meanwhile has stagnated, its population growth has been minimal, and regular social and political tensions have prevented it from becoming a major economic hub.<sup>17</sup>

FIGURE 1: Annual urban growth, peaking in the early 1990s after unification



Source: The World Bank

Rural to urban migration has generally been less definitive in Yemen than in other countries. Heads of household have tended to move to cities for work and leave their families at home, the result of high urban living costs, limited employment options for unskilled day labourers and the importance of agriculture to the economy. Men from rural areas often live together in small crowded apartments and return regularly to their families to take part in agricultural activities.<sup>18</sup>

## RURAL-URBAN DISAGGREGATION OF LARGE DATASETS

When ACLED's data is disaggregated by type of location, it reveals that, despite the headlines generated by the siege in Taiz and the battle for Hodeidah and the general sense that the conflict has played out in urban areas, the reality is rather different. In fact, about 68 per cent of the fighting and 78 per cent of reported fatalities have been in rural areas.

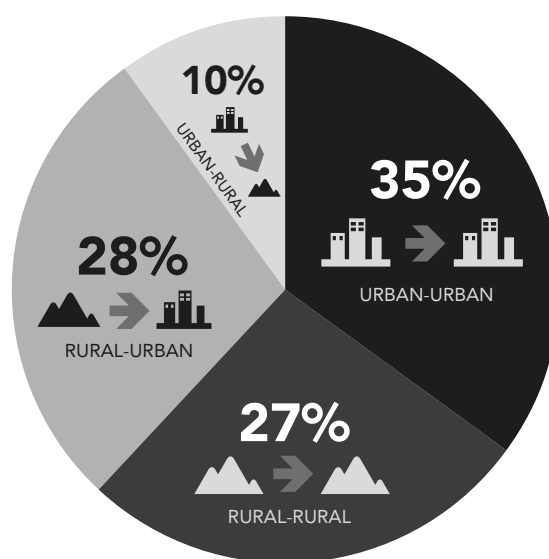
Likewise, geolocated data published by IOM's displacement tracking matrix for Yemen in November 2018 shows that 69 per cent of IDPs live in rural areas.<sup>19</sup> Thus both conflict and violence and displacement in Yemen's war remain a primarily rural phenomenon.

# URBAN AND RURAL DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS: EVIDENCE FROM THE FIELD

The respondent sample was not representative, and interviews focused on IDPs in urban areas - as many as 65 per cent of IDPs interviewed were living in urban areas. Thus, statistics presented below cannot be extrapolated to the IDP population as a whole. However, the information gleaned from the qualitative interviews gives us some insight, even if anecdotal, about why people choose to move to a particular location. Conclusions that could be drawn from the data are as follows:

- | About 62 per cent of respondents moved to a location similar in nature to their area of origin. Those displaced in Yemen, like those on the move worldwide, prefer to move somewhere where their education, skills and life experiences are transferable and where some social networks exist so as to facilitate integration into the host community;
- | About 28 per cent of interviewees moved from a rural to an urban area, not necessarily due to traditional pull factors to cities. Reasons such as access to basic services or livelihood opportunities have been rendered all but irrelevant due to war-time conditions and were rarely stated as a reason to move to the urban location;
- | As few as 10 per cent of the surveyed IDPs moved from an urban to a rural area, usually as a last resort.

The following section looks in more detail at some of the factors behind inter and intra-urban, rural to rural, rural to urban and urban to rural displacement by drawing on examples from the field.



## INTER AND INTRA- URBAN DISPLACEMENT: SAFEGUARDING CAREERS AND LIVING STANDARDS

Of the interviewees living in urban areas, more than half had come from other urban areas. IDPs interviewed in Taiz were from Sana'a, many of those in Aden and Sana'a from Hodeidah and Taiz.

Many IDPs in both urban and rural areas highlighted what they felt was the importance of being able to transfer their skills and qualifications to obtain a job in a new location. Those who chose to move to a new urban location often did so based on a friend or family member telling them that there was work there. One family moved from Taiz to Hodeidah because the husband previously had a job in the city's market and a friend in Hodeidah owned a shop where he could work.<sup>20</sup>

A few urban professionals displaced initially to rural areas found it particularly difficult to find work that matched their qualifications and experience and quickly moved to another urban centre. One man who worked in the media in Sana'a left when Ansar Allah began to shut down television stations and arrest journalists. He decided to move to al-Turba, a small town in Taiz governorate, because one of his family members who was living abroad had a house there that he could use for free. He stayed there a while but, unable to find work in his field, he decided to forego the free housing to settle in Taiz city, where he soon got a media job.

*"I just couldn't be a burden on anyone, even if that someone was my wife. I'm able to work and I needed to work, and Taiz offered me that possibility."*<sup>21</sup>

Other urban families initially fled to rural areas, particularly villages where they had family members, but when it became clear that their displacement would not end soon, they sought refuge in urban areas instead. They said they were not used to rural life and found it difficult to live without electricity and running water, and that the distance to markets, schools and health facilities and differences in social life made it hard to adapt.

One university-educated mother of three from Taiz city interviewed in Djibouti said that, after initially seeking refuge in her husband's family home in a rural area of the governorate, she went straight back to the city she was displaced from. She then lived in Taiz, under siege, in forced immobility, for a year until she was able to find a safe route to the port to join her husband in Djibouti.

*"I just couldn't get used to rural life. I'm a city girl."*<sup>22</sup>

## RURAL TO RURAL DISPLACEMENT: FLEEING INSECURITY WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

Half of the interviewed IDPs of rural origin moved to another rural area, sometimes only a few kilometres away. They said poverty and their lack of the education and skills needed to find jobs in cities were the main factors that affected their decision. Of the 30 families who said they depended on assistance to meet their basic needs, only seven were in urban areas, making rural IDPs disproportionately reliant on humanitarian aid.

A number of factors led to a precipitous decline in agriculture, and with it the livelihoods of rural people, even before the war broke out. Irregular rainfall, a shift to planting high-value water-intensive export crops such as qat, the increased use of irrigation and water extraction by large landowners all led to a drastic lowering of the water table, which decimated local farming.<sup>23</sup> People in both rural and urban areas became dependent on food imports, which also aggravated rural poverty and food insecurity.

Families in such circumstances have little if anything to spend on displacement, as is the case for those from the rural communities of Qubeitah district in Lahj governorate. The district borders Taiz governorate and has been the scene of fighting for years. Many of the families affected only fled between 15 and 20 kilometres, but ongoing fighting and insecurity and the presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance prevent them from returning to their villages.



IDP homes in Kirsh, Qubeitah District. Photo: Mohammed Al-Shabi, August 2019

Instead they live in substandard shelters either in displacement sites or in abandoned and damaged homes with no access to electricity, water or basic services such as education, health and local markets. In Qubeitah district, IDPs interviewed were living in abandoned homes for free and had no access to livelihood opportunities. They previously raised livestock or worked in agriculture, but many now depend on humanitarian assistance to get by.<sup>24</sup>

## RURAL TO URBAN DISPLACEMENT: RESERVED FOR THOSE WITH HIGHER EDUCATION AND SKILLS

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People from rural areas with better education or transferable skills are more likely to make for urban areas when they are displaced. Among the surveyed IDPs of rural origin, those who had settled in urban areas had at least secondary education, while the majority who remained in rural areas had only primary education at best.

One teacher from the rural village of Rabi'i in Taiz governorate fled to Taiz city as Ansar Allah advanced through his home area, and his qualifications and experience meant he was able to find work fairly quickly. He still struggled, however, with the high cost of urban living and accommodation in particular, which led to repeated displacement within the city as landlords increased their rent.<sup>25</sup>

More than 50 per cent of interviewees also said social networks were instrumental in determining where they fled to, and some from rural areas moved to cities because they had family or friends there who could provide housing or might help in finding work. One family from rural Taiz moved to the city only to be displaced three times within it as the conflict spread, each time moving to another family member's home.

*"My wife's father was with us and spoke to his relatives in Bir Basha neighbourhood, hoping to find us a place to stay. By the time we arrived in the area, he had found us a home."*<sup>26</sup>

## URBAN TO RURAL DISPLACEMENT: WHEN RESOURCES ARE DEPLETED AND THERE'S NOWHERE LEFT TO GO

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Only about 10 per cent of interviewees had fled from an urban to a rural area, making it the least common type of movement. Those who did so had previously been displaced within or between cities before exhausting their resources, at which point they felt obliged to seek free shelter and the possibility of humanitarian aid at rural displacement sites. Such sites are relatively rare in urban areas.

This was the case for one family living in a makeshift shelter in rural Taiz. They had fled from Hodeidah city to Taiz city in 2017 before being forced to seek refuge at a displacement site set up in a former school building in rural Taiz.

*"Our economic and living conditions were very difficult in Taiz city, and the situation in the area where we settled was not that different from home. There were armed clashes there too."*<sup>27</sup>

They had tried to return home to Hodeidah various times because of the difficult conditions at the displacement site and the threat of eviction, but on their last attempt they found their home destroyed, leaving them no choice but to go back.<sup>28</sup>

One mother of five living at the same site fled her home in Taiz city when conflict broke out in 2015. She moved to Hodeidah, where her husband found work in the city's market and they were able to rent an apartment and cover their basic needs. Three years later, however, fighting also broke out in Hodeidah and they fled again, this time to the displacement site. They find the living conditions difficult, but the prevailing insecurity in Taiz and Hodeidah keeps them there.<sup>29</sup>

# HOST CONDITIONS IN CITIES

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Unregulated urban expansion in the years leading up to the war led to a visible and growing gap between rich and poor, as luxury housing was built in one part of a city while informal settlements grew in others. Access to water and electricity was poor, even in cities. In 2013, only about 29 per cent of households nationwide had access to water inside the home. In urban areas about 48 per cent of homes had access, while in rural areas only 23 per cent of homes had access.<sup>30</sup> Eighty-five per cent of urban inhabitants had access to electricity before 2015, but unannounced power cuts were common.<sup>31</sup>

Rural areas were considerably worse off. Only 20 per cent of the rural population had access to electricity before 2015 and less still to running water, making fetching firewood and water a time-consuming activity. Rural people's access to medical facilities, schools and markets has also always been difficult and costly, given the lack of state investment in rural areas and Yemen's mountainous topography.<sup>32</sup> The war has further aggravated the state of basic services in both rural and urban areas.

## ALTERNATIVE POWER SOURCES

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Yemen's main power plants, such as the one in Ma'rib governorate, went out of service in the early days of the war, plunging large parts of the country into darkness. Small individual generators were the initial alternative to the national grid, but the scarcity and high cost of fuel quickly made them impractical.<sup>33</sup>

Small solar panels became many families' source of power. An average system costs between \$250 and \$300 and provides enough power to light a home and allow a family to watch a few hours' television a day.

Some of the displaced families interviewed had been able to take their solar power system with them, but others had to sell theirs to pay for their transport. Others still never had access to an electricity source at all.<sup>34</sup>

## A COUNTRY RUNNING OUT OF WATER

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Sana'a is predicted to become the world's first capital to run out of water. Yemen's water supply before the war was estimated at 120 cubic metres per person a year, about two per cent of the World Health Organisation's global per capita average. Population growth, increased reliance on irrigated, water-intensive crops such as qat and poor water management all contributed to the dire situation.<sup>35</sup>

Water supplies have got significantly worse as a result of the war, which has left fewer wells working as a result of damage and a lack of maintenance and electricity or fuel for pumps.<sup>36</sup> Only 22 per cent of rural areas and 46 per cent of urban areas are connected to partially functioning public water networks. In 197 districts, or around two-thirds of the country, more than 55 per cent of the population has no access to an improved water source.<sup>37</sup> Seventy-six per cent of families in cities rely on trucked water, a service that has become increasingly expensive and inaccessible to many.<sup>38</sup>

Taiz was particularly affected by water issues before the war, and families had to buy trucked water and store it in tanks in their homes. Every displaced family interviewed in Taiz city said their lack of access to water was a major concern. The situation is better in Sana'a and even better still in Aden, where homes have running water, though supplies are not constant, and interruptions are frequent.<sup>39</sup>

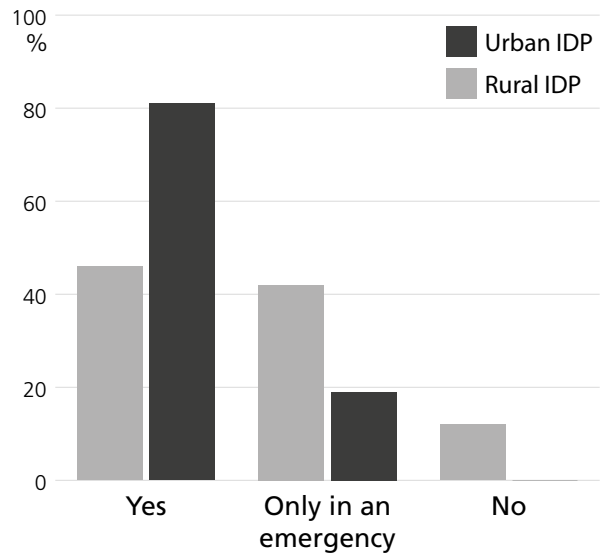
## HEALTHCARE (NOT) FOR ALL

Of almost 5,000 health facilities assessed nationwide by the Ministry of Health and Population, about 51 per cent are fully functional, 35 per cent partially functional and 14 per cent out of service because of damage or lack of supplies, staff and funds. The situation, however, varies considerably between governorates. Fewer than 40 per cent of facilities are fully functional in Taiz, which has suffered sustained conflict since 2015, compared with about 65 per cent in Sana'a and 70 per cent in Aden.<sup>40</sup>

The IDPs interviewed in cities generally felt that health-care services were available to them, with more than 80 per cent of urban IDPs saying they saw a doctor when they were ill, compared with less than half of IDPs in rural areas. For example, respondents in Aden spoke of the various options available nearby, including public hospitals and private clinics.

About 19 percent of interviewees from the cities said they visited doctors only in an emergency because health services were too expensive. In rural areas, the main barriers to health services were a lack of local doctors and high costs. Hospitals have had to increase their fees to cover the cost of generating their own electricity and paying staff.

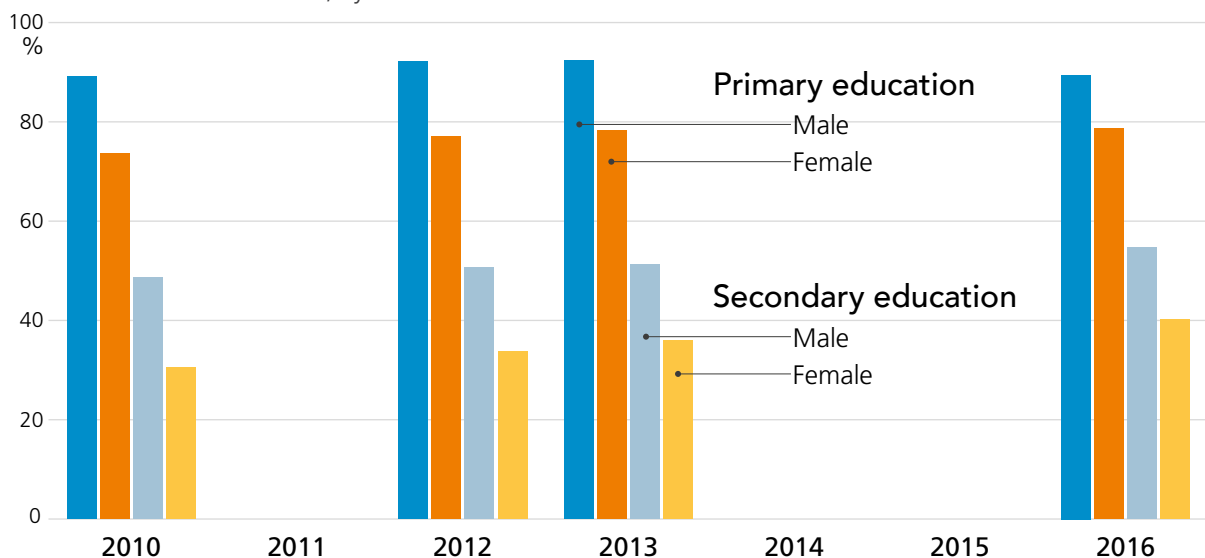
FIGURE 2: Interviewees, on whether they consult a doctor when they are sick



## CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND

Yemen had one of the lowest literacy and school enrolment rates in MENA before the war, and the largest gender gap.<sup>41</sup> Literacy rates grew rapidly in the region between 1960 and 1995, but the growth was primarily in urban areas, meaning that countries such as Yemen with a large rural population were left behind.<sup>42</sup> Around 80 per cent of school-age children live in rural areas.<sup>43</sup>

FIGURE 3: Net enrolment rate, by sex



Source: UNESCO

The war has only made the education sector's problems worse, and two million children are estimated to be out of schools, almost three times the pre-war number. Around 2,000 schools are unfit for use, of which 256 have been destroyed in airstrikes or shelling, 1,520 have been damaged, 167 are sheltering IDPs and 23 are occupied by armed groups. Only one in three children are thought to attend school in active conflict areas because of safety concerns, displacement, lack of teachers and damaged or destroyed facilities.<sup>44</sup>

As in other countries, urban families in Yemen have better access to education than their rural counterparts. Families interviewed in urban areas said their children attended schools less than a kilometre away, compared with distances of up to 15 kilometres in rural areas, often along mountain roads and with no public transportation. There was also a positive correlation between parents' education level, which tends to be higher in urban areas, and the likelihood of their children attending school.

Despite facing fewer barriers to education, some urban children are still unable to attend school. Two families said some of their children were working instead, and one said they were unable to convince their child to go back to school after a year out because of the conflict and displacement. Many children have missed at least a year of school as a result of fighting in their areas of origin and repeated displacement.

Across both urban and rural areas, the barrier to education most often cited was cost. With more than 80 per cent of the population living under the poverty line and 10 million people a step away from starvation, many families are clearly unable to meet even their most basic needs.<sup>45</sup>

One education worker said school uniforms were no longer mandatory, and that the education ministry provided textbooks free of charge. Annual fees for middle-school grades amounting to a few dollars have also been waived for some displaced families. Even so, one IDP living in a former school in Taiz city said:

*"It's true that education is free, but that's not enough for us. As a displaced person, I can't even afford basic school supplies for my kids, even though they're cheap."*

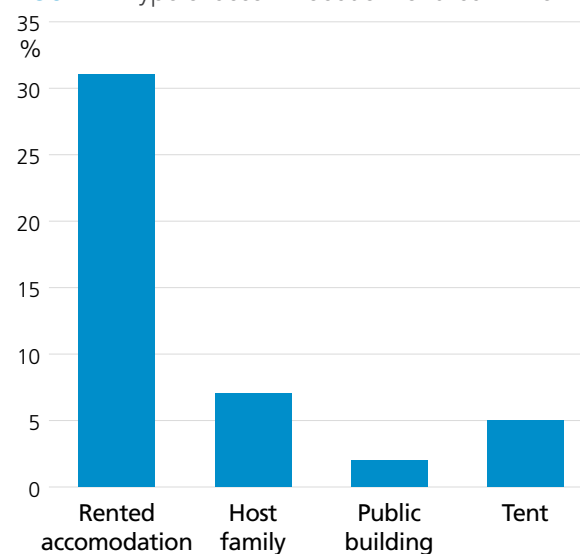
## SHELTER IN A 'NO-CAMP' POLICY ENVIRONMENT

IDPs live primarily in rented accommodation or with host families, rather than in displacement sites or camps. The most vulnerable IDPs, who account for about 300,000 of the estimated 2.3 million in the country, live in hosting sites. These are usually spontaneous settlements established as a last resort, and mostly in rural areas.<sup>46</sup>

A no-camp policy was adopted in Yemen in June 2015, so the camp coordination and camp management (CCCM) cluster has developed alternative shelter strategies that involve interventions such as repairs, rent subsidies in form of cash, helping people to find their own shelter solutions and potentially building transitional centres.<sup>47</sup>

Two displaced families interviewed in Taiz city were living in public buildings used to shelter IDPs, one family in Sana'a in a makeshift shelter and five on the outskirts of Sabr town in Lahj governorate were living in tents. The rest, 38 families, were living in rented accommodation or with host families.

FIGURE 4: Type of accommodation for urban IDPs



Data from the local authority in Taiz city paints a similar picture. It shows that about 130 displaced families registered with the authorities live in public buildings, compared with 4,000 living in homes, whether paying rent or staying for free with a host family.<sup>48</sup> The number of families living in rented accommodation is probably higher still, given that some IDPs prefer to remain anonymous and off radar so they do not register with the local authorities.

The cost of rent was the main concern for all families interviewed, and particularly for those in urban areas. Rent in city areas where IDPs settle ranges from \$60 to \$150, compared with \$20 to \$40 in rural areas. Eighty-six per cent of the urban IDPs interviewed were living in informal settlements in substandard houses, many of which had makeshift roofs, doors and windows.

All interviewees said they feared eviction if they were no longer able to afford their monthly payments or landlords raised their rent. A number of families said they had been forced to move a number of times within the city as rental costs soared.



IDP homes in Aden. Photo: Mohammed Al-Shabi, August 2019



Most families said they were sharing their homes with at least one other family, and cited lack of privacy, crowded conditions and heat as major sources of dissatisfaction with their living arrangements. Some large families living with hosts said they had left because they felt they had become a burden in the cramped quarters.

## LIVELIHOODS OR THE LACK THEREOF

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The conflict has caused Yemen's economy to contract by half over three years. The disruption of economic activity has been widespread and the poverty rate has increased dramatically. The depreciation of the Yemeni rial has drastically reduced people's purchasing power in a country that relies heavily on imports.<sup>49</sup> A quarter of the population are civil servants, some of whom have not been paid since 2016.

In rural areas, the conflict has taken a toll on both subsistence and commercial farming, which in turn has fuelled food insecurity. The oil and gas industry, which was a key driver of economic growth, has also been badly affected. The lack of economic opportunities has pushed many young men to join armed groups.<sup>50</sup>

Almost half of the urban IDPs interviewed said their families lived off irregular day labour, and the vast majority said the shortage of jobs and their lack of education and skills had been the main barriers to finding stable work that would allow them to make ends meet. Opportunities for unskilled day labourers in cities were minimal even before the war, the war has only exacerbated unemployment rates.<sup>51</sup> IDPs' lack of contacts or social networks in their areas of displacement makes it even more difficult for them to find a job.

Given the state of the economy and widespread food insecurity, as much as two-thirds of the population depends on some form of assistance to get by.<sup>52</sup> Over 40 per cent of the interviewees for this study said they relied on humanitarian aid to make ends meet. Over 70 per cent of rural IDPs depended on aid, while only 26 per cent of urban IDPs said they relied on aid.

None of the interviewees in Aden said they received aid, despite all of them being registered as IDPs with the local authorities. They said they thought those living in rural areas had better access to aid, a perception with

some basis in reality. Some IDPs interviewed who had first moved to urban areas said they were eventually forced to move to hosting sites in rural areas when they had exhausted their resources.

Interviews with international organisations working in Taiz and Aden paint a more complex picture. The UN's cluster system provides a coordination mechanism to ensure that the maximum number of areas and beneficiaries are reached, setting priorities and avoiding the duplication of work. Despite these efforts, limited funding and wartime insecurity play a major role in limiting where, when and to whom aid is distributed.

Limited funding means organisations have to prioritise certain groups and sectors. One organisation said rural areas were classified as hard to reach and thus were prioritised.<sup>53</sup> The emphasis on rural areas is unsurprising, given that they are home to almost 70 per cent of IDPs and the conflict-affected population as a whole. Urban IDPs living in informal settlements are also prioritised, given their precarious economic situation, with a focus on particularly vulnerable families such as those with disabled or chronically ill members, those who have lost their primary breadwinner and female-headed households.<sup>54</sup>

Urban IDPs receive support including rent subsidies in the form of cash and legal assistance, particularly in relation to rental agreements and insecure tenure. One other organisation interviewed said they work with IDPs and returnees to restore their livelihoods or assist them in developing the necessary skills and partnerships with employers to find jobs, in efforts to help them find a durable solution to their displacement in a volatile context.

# CITIES AS BOTH SHELTERS FROM AND DRIVERS OF DISPLACEMENT

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## TAIZ

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Taiz is Yemen's third most populous city, with a pre-war population of about 600,000. It has been the scene of intense fighting since the early days of the war and bore the brunt of the conflict between 2015 and 2017, which laid waste to its infrastructure and services. The city was also under varying degrees of siege during that period, and few international organisations had access.

A particularly tight siege was imposed in 2015 and 2016, during which civilians were trapped with little or no access to basic services or humanitarian aid.

An aid worker with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) described the situation in November in 2015 as devastating. "There is active fighting and daily airstrikes. The sense of fear is big. People are terrified that their children will get wounded or killed. And they have good reason to be frightened," she said.<sup>55</sup>



*Destroyed buildings in Taiz city, Yemen. Photo: Akram Al-Sharjabi, August 2019*

One refugee from Taiz living in Djibouti described the struggle to buy basic commodities during that year. She said Ansar Allah allowed people to leave their homes once a week to walk to market and water and fuel distribution points.

*“The roundtrip would take hours and we would fear for our lives, because Ansar Allah fired shots to disperse crowds. They were a bit kinder to the women, but they beat men. I remember how they beat one man who was trying to help women carry their heavy water and fuel containers.”*<sup>56</sup>

The lack of food, water and fuel and soaring prices meant people began to go hungry. Only six of the city’s 20 hospitals were functional, and they were running on low supplies and capacity.<sup>57</sup> Schools also shut down. Snipers fired into the streets, and airstrikes and shelling would kill whole families.<sup>58</sup>

More than 250,000 people may have fled Taiz in the first two years of the war, and significant numbers of people continue to leave as the conflict ebbs and flows.<sup>59</sup> The city has, however, also been a refuge for IDPs, many of them from rural villages of Taiz governorate as conflict affected those areas. Others are from Sana’a and other northern governorates. More than 4,400 displaced households, or 26,700 IDPs, are currently thought to be living in the city.<sup>60</sup>

## ADEN

Aden, with a pre-war population of about 800,000, was until recently primarily a place of refuge for IDPs from neighbouring governorates. Ansar Allah established a brief presence in the city in 2015, during which time many people fled, including the majority of refugees interviewed in Djibouti. The Saudi-led coalition quickly regained control, however, and made Aden the government’s temporary capital, since when there have been no incidents of large-scale displacement.

Given its relative safety and some economic activity, Aden attracted IDPs from all over the country, but fighting that broke out in August 2019 between forces backed by Saudi Arabia and those backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has led to fears of a civil war within a civil war.<sup>61</sup>

The UAE-backed forces of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and Security Belt forces – which support the secession of the south – took control of key institutions in Aden and the south. This was not the first instance of fighting between the Yemeni government backed by Saudi Arabia and the forces backed by the UAE, but it has been some of the most destructive and worrisome.<sup>62</sup> They initially took over key military posts in Aden and have since moved east into Lahj, Abyan and Shabwa governorates. The STC wants southern Yemen to regain its independence within its pre-1990 borders. The fighting displaced civilians as well as trapped them in their homes with fears that they would run out of food and water.<sup>63</sup>

Before the political violence broke out following the funeral of Abu Al-Yamama, a leading commander of the UAE-backed Security Belt forces killed by an Ansar Allah missile a week earlier, a campaign of targeted displacement had been underway. Monitoring groups reported more than 1,000 deportations of Yemenis of northern origin from Aden.<sup>64</sup> The deportees said they had been harassed and detained by Security Belt forces.<sup>65</sup> The main targets were shop and restaurant owners and other male workers, but women and children, including female-headed households, were not spared.

Despite the deportations, most of the families interviewed in Aden who had been displaced from the northern governorates of Taiz and Hodeidah said they were comfortable in their host communities. They attributed their integration to the fact that they lived among people of similar socioeconomic background and origin. Some said racist comments had been directed at them, but that this was not widespread.

One man who fled to Taiz during the recent deportations, however, said he had been displaced in similar fashion in 2016 and that he believed it would happen again, but that it would not deter him from returning.

*“I’m a Yemeni citizen and so I’m allowed to live and work anywhere in the country, wherever I find work. I will go back to Aden as soon as the situation calms down a bit.”*<sup>66</sup>

Aden is currently thought to host about 2,000 displaced households, or around 12,000 IDPs.<sup>67</sup>

# DURABLE SOLUTIONS: LOCAL INTEGRATION OR RETURN

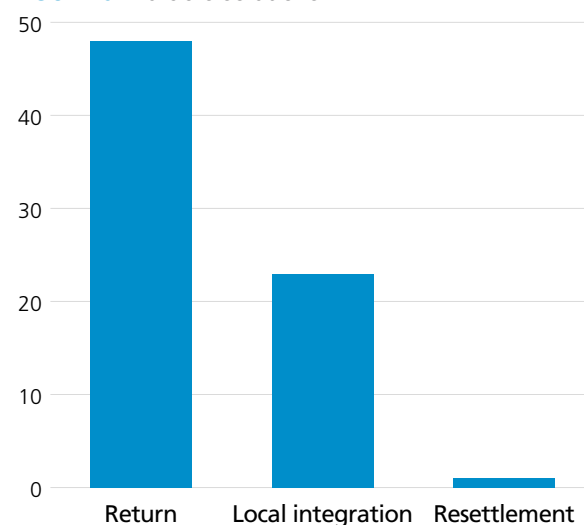
Given the current situation in Yemen, durable solutions are a distant prospect. Most humanitarian interventions are still in the form of emergency response and assistance. Many interviewees were stumped when asked about the future and the possibility of their returning to their places of origin, given the current context.

That said, more than a million returns had been recorded as of the end of 2018.<sup>68</sup> It is not possible to verify any progress returnees may have made toward achieving durable solutions, but given the conflict and economic conditions it is likely to be minimal and many may be displaced again.

Many IDPs try to seek out livelihood opportunities that will allow them to live as best they can in their areas of displacement. One organisation interviewed, which works in Taiz city, said it had begun to engage in livelihood restoration programming in response to demand from beneficiaries. It helps IDPs, returnees and others affected by the conflict to establish or re-establish livelihoods by rebuilding premises and providing grants to start businesses. It also provides training based on market demand and matches people with potential employers in their area of current residence.<sup>69</sup>

Two-thirds of the IDPs interviewed for this study said their preference would be to return to their homes when it is feasible and safe to do so. Some who wanted to integrate locally said they had no resources left for further movement or return, and that as long as the security situation permitted, they would remain in their area of displacement. Some had other reasons, such as access to medical services, for wanting to do so. Rural and urban IDPs had different reasons for favouring return or local integration, as described below.

FIGURE 5: Durable solutions



## RETURN

Almost all interviewees from rural areas who wanted to return said their main reasons were that they missed home or wanted to recover their property. Ownership of property is widespread among IDPs from rural areas, and many had livelihoods tied to their holdings. Among urban IDPs only 50 per cent own property. They said their main reason for wanting to return to their area of origin was to re-establish their livelihood.

One man from Hodeidah fled to the outskirts of Taiz city where he lives with his family in an IDP shelter. He wants to return to Hodeidah and regain his livelihood, to be able to provide for his family, but he does not know when he might be able to do so. In the meantime, he remains in the shelter, depending on aid organisations and “good people” to help feed his family.<sup>70</sup>

FIGURE 6: Reasons for wanting to return

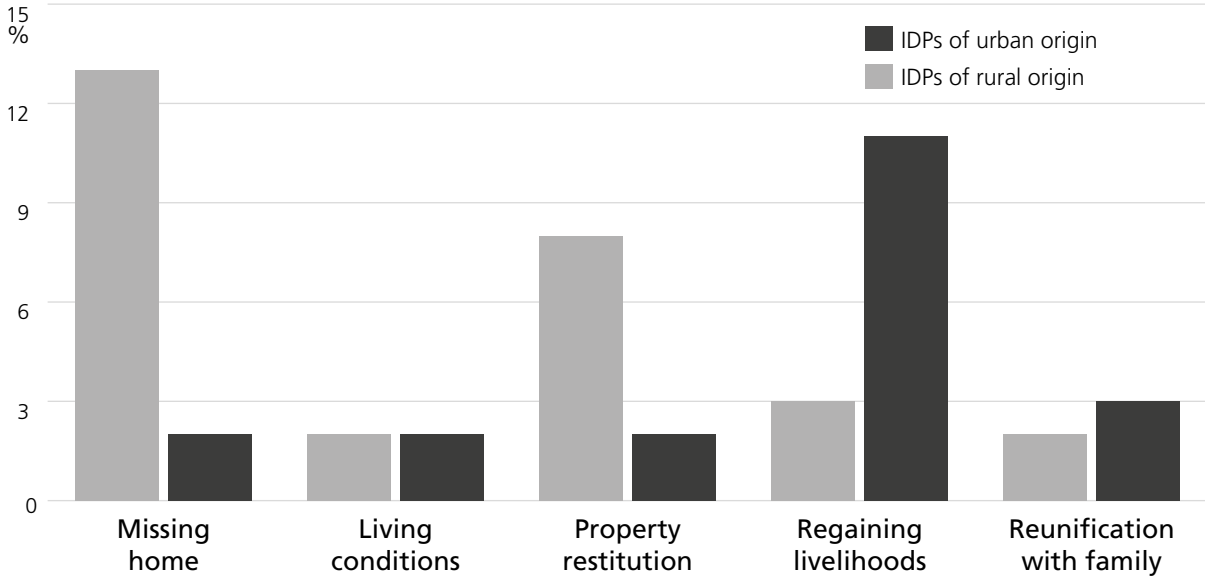
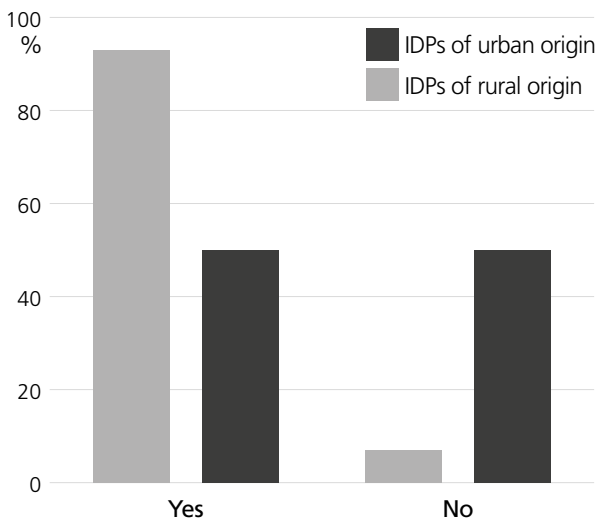


FIGURE 7: Interviewees, on whether they own property back home



*"I was satisfied with our life despite the lack of services. There was no electricity, no healthcare, poor education and water had to be drawn from a well."*

It is still impossible to return to Tabish'a. The area is an Ansar Allah stronghold and no civilians have been able to go back. This was not, however, the main reason for the family to stay in the city. Her son has cancer.

*"I will not return [to the village] because I need to have access to health services for my son."*

Those in rural areas cited improved security as their main reason for wanting to stay in their area of displacement. When questioned further, however, they said they would go back if security conditions improved in their area of origin, but that they were unable to imagine if or when that might happen.

## LOCAL INTEGRATION

Of the 32 per cent of interviewees who said they would prefer to integrate locally, those living in urban areas cited a better economic situation and access to basic services as their main reasons for wanting to do so. One mother of eight interviewed in Taiz city who had been displaced from Tabish'a, a rural area of Jabal Habshi district in Taiz governorate, spoke of life in her area of origin. She grew enough vegetables to feed her family and raised livestock for additional income.

# CONCLUSION

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Cities have played a key role in Yemen's conflict, and not only as theatres of war and power struggles from which hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced. Despite their limitations as a result of the conflict – including shrinking economic opportunities, the breaking down of basic services and soaring prices – they have also served as relatively safe havens for people displaced from both rural and other urban areas. They have also continued to provide better access to services and livelihood opportunities for skilled workers and professionals. As such, they will be pivotal to the country's recovery and future development.

Given the country's urbanisation trends and the steady decline of rural life before the war, increasing rural to urban migration and displacement is inevitable. However, the importance of improving rural conditions

through successful resource management and investment in public infrastructure cannot be overemphasized, given the high percentage of the country's population still residing in small towns and villages.

Despite the emergency context, IDPs, returnees and those affected by the conflict generally prefer interventions that support them in stabilising their situation in the midst of the chaos. Thus, approaches to assistance need to be rethought, particularly in recovering or establishing new livelihoods. Cities provide the opportunity to pilot new approaches in which IDPs, along with other poor people living on the peripheries, are integrated into the urban economy in a sustainable way, so as to reduce the impacts of displacement on future urbanisation and development.



*Khairy Hassain and her daughter Fawzia look over the city of Sana'a from the roof of their new home. Several IDP families, all of whom fled fighting in the northern part of the country, call this dilapidated building their home. Photo: Giles Clarke/OCHA, May 2017*

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