How Yemen Rises

Reconstruction is never easy, and in Yemen the road will be longer than most. The first step is to pass on "best practice" in favor of a critical, reflexive approach

By Abdullah Hamidaddin

Previous experiences of post-war reconstruction (PWR) inform us that it will always fall short of the expectations of donors and recipients alike. There is not one experience of such reconstruction where things went according to plan. Experts and writers have to go all the way back to post-WWII reconstruction in Europe and Japan to find successful examples, only to discover that their contexts were fundamentally different from any subsequent post-war scenarios.

Recently, the concept of fragile states has been introduced to the field, not only to encapsulate the differences between post-WWII reconstruction and other subsequent situations, but also to highlight the challenges arising from rebuilding in countries where even peacetime governments were too weak or incompetent to manage the needs of the state. The most recent PWR regional examples in Iraq and Afghanistan did not live up to expectations, to put it mildly. When this happens there is always the pointing of fingers—blame directed at donors for not providing enough resources; at governments for not having absorption or deployment capacities, or for being corrupt; at international and local NGOs for manipulating the situation to acquire wealth at the expense of human tragedy; or at local communities and local political actors for not getting their act together in time to benefit from the short-lived focus of the international community.

Considering the realities of post-war reconstruction, instead of calling out failure, it may be more useful to focus on what was achieved given a catastrophic situation, limited capacities, and meager resources. After all, PWR is supposed to come to a place struck by the tragic destruction of livelihoods, market networks, health, sanitation, and education infrastructures, and turn all of those around. It must do so through processes implemented in an environment of insecurity, instability, fragile negotiated settlements, post-conflict competition between actors, rearrangement of power structures, existing war economies, new reconstruction economies, weak central governments, multiple donor priorities, and local perceptions of favoritism. It is hardly surprising that this usually leads to a limited capacity for implementation, waste of resources

△ A blacksmith sits in his shop in the old quarter of Sanaa, Yemen, Jan. 9, 2019. *Khaled Abdullah/Reuters*

due to corruption or lack of coordination, concentration of wealth among those with existing deployment capacity, and most seriously, the sowing of new seeds for future conflict or a breakdown of peace. Yemen, or any other country for that matter, such as Syria, is no different.

The Tragedy of Yemen

It is widely acknowledged that the conflict in Yemen has led to one of the greatest preventable disasters facing humanity. The extent of the tragedy is difficult to measure due to the scarcity of reliable data, but the estimates are staggering. Deaths due to direct violence reach up to seventy thousand and indirect deaths from disease, hunger, or simply lack of medical resources are in the hundreds of thousands, of which some eighty thousand are children. Millions have been either internally displaced from their homes and sources of livelihood, or were lucky enough to find a way to flee the country. The educational system is as good as broken and nearly five years of schooling or university education have simply been wiped out from the futures of millions of children and youths.

Up to fifteen million Yemenis, including millions of malnourished children, are close to famine and most will suffer long-lasting consequences to their health and wellbeing. As a consequence of the breakdown of the country's health system, Yemen has witnessed the worst cholera outbreak in recent human history. The economic system has also collapsed, leaving about 50 percent of the population

living in extreme poverty. The political order has been reduced to a situation where there is no vision or leadership.

The conflict will eventually come to an end. But of course, no one expects that a negotiated settlement will bring immediate security or stability to the country. One may even expect a rise in insecurity due to the transfer of power from local militias to a central government and the transition from a war-based security arrangement to a state-based one. The current security order in Yemen—if one can call it that—is based on militia enforcement under the guise of wartime logic. Once that order is dismantled, there will potentially be a transition period with extreme levels of insecurity, especially in urban areas that lack cohesion and strong community-based security arrangements.

Moreover, a political settlement, even if it is perfectly designed, will not eliminate the deep hostilities between the warring factions and negative memories between communities. This is a given in any conflict. To make matters harder, the war in Yemen was largely due to a total breakdown of a power arrangement, which created a power vacuum that the Houthis tried and failed to exploit for their benefit. After a negotiated settlement is achieved, the attempt to reconfigure a new power structure will resume, and a key tool of that will be control and allocation of resources, especially those for rebuilding. Subsequently, any government that is born out of a Yemeni political settlement will be no more than a collective of officials answering to rival factions—old and new—with competing interests.

Reconstruction will be driven by a systemic favoritism, and it will take a strong president—if Yemen is lucky enough to obtain one in the immediate or near future—at least three years to streamline the government and represent the interests of the country as a whole. The long war has given birth to a thriving war economy that is benefiting the militias, politicians, and some merchants. The war's conclusion will not bring an abrupt end to this class of merchants of war. Those same actors exploiting the tragedy of Yemen to enrich themselves will change tactics and leverage their financial powers, contacts, and networks to create a new post-war economy. There is already a great deal of experience in exploiting international aid, and that experience will be used to capitalize on vast amounts of donor money and the economic potential of a PWR economy. These merchants' wealth will put them in a better position to implement large projects that require deep pockets and sustained cash flow, while thousands of professionals and impoverished business men and women will be relegated to spectators who lost during the war and will continue to lose. All of this would occur at the expense of genuine needs, whether of the economy at large or the immediate sustenance of millions of Yemenis barely surviving today.

Add to that the political and security consideration of donor allocations to

rebuild. Estimates for Yemen's reconstruction vary, but, according to recent figures from the country's planning minister, could reach $28 billion in the short term and $60 billion in the long term. Regardless of the estimates, what matters is how much will actually be given to Yemen. Whatever that number is, it will within a year or two inevitably empower some groups over others, especially those with a large popular base and who depend on their base's financial support. This alone creates a security challenge for donors keen to support Yemen's communities in a way that does not translate into more power for factions, especially factions whose interest is a weak Yemeni government in the long run.

Some Dos and Don'ts

Yemen's post-war reconstruction will not meet donor/recipient expectations and will face colossal challenges to avoid total failure. Based on the above and on the specific nature of Yemen's politics, a number of steps can be taken to maximize the positive effects and minimize the inevitable negative outcomes.

Decentralize Reconstruction

Centralizing rebuilding efforts would essentially mean creating a single reconstruction authority that works independently of, or at least parallel to, the newly formed Yemeni government. This would most likely lead to a systemic preference for certain PWR models over others. For example, some consider the priority to be the revitalization of the economy through mega infrastructure projects such as roads, airports/ports, and city water and sewage systems. Others prioritize smaller scale issues that have an immediate relief and sustenance impact for affected communities. Since it is given that there is no universally applicable PWR model that provides perfect results, the best rebuilders should opt for is one that facilitates the funding and implementation of multiple models. Decentralizing is better in that regard. Moreover, no one central body could ever be equipped to deal efficiently or effectively with different international, state, and community priorities. Centralizing reconstruction would lead to the dictatorship of that body over the process without any guarantee that it could deliver more than could a variety of government bodies.

One justification for centralization is that the Yemeni government has always had a limited capacity for both absorbing aid and implementing projects, and that the war has only made the situation worse. The assumption is that a newly created body would do better, but there is no evidence to support this, and efforts to do so in Iraq and Afghanistan tell us otherwise. Also, we need to note that government bodies are not equal; some are more efficient than others, and decentralizing allows for those who can fare better to function better. Finally, investing in existing government institutions will strengthen them, and in so doing strengthen the system of checks and balances.

Put Communities First

A second step is to put communities first, and the interests of international NGOs (INGOs) second. As much as we prefer to think otherwise, there exists a relief and reconstruction complex of some local, but mainly international, NGOs who do good, but also make massive amounts of money by acting as intermediaries for much of the funding coming into a country from donors. The final beneficiary in Yemen may only receive a fraction of the original allocated amount, the rest going to a chain of intermediaries for what is dubbed "management costs". This will certainly continue as it is almost institutionally impossible to manage the transfer of funds from donors to projects without INGOs with the right expertise. That said, local communities should play a role in determining which projects are to be implemented in their area. They should even be empowered to nominate the right INGO for the task.

There exists a relief and reconstruction complex of some local, but mainly international, NGOs who do good, but also make massive amounts of money by acting as intermediaries for much of the funding coming into a country from donors.

One way Yemen's Ministry of Planning could facilitate this is by setting up a portal, with both a website and mobile app, to map the needs of each small locality. This platform would connect each area's needs with interested donors and relevant INGOs, with a map reflecting where and how existing funds have been allocated. It would also provide users with a way to give publicly accessible feedback, empowering local communities down to the level of the individual to determine their needs and priorities. The technology for such a process is available, and once disseminated, Yemenis would quickly learn how to use it.

Beware Donor Conditionality

Donors normally set conditions on recipients to guarantee that their funds are properly spent. Some require that the recipient country make far-reaching reforms that impact, among other things, the political system (i.e. democratization), the size of government, and taxation and public spending. More often than not, financial support comes with demands for austerity measures which may be destabilizing. Donors are not unaware of the disruptive power of some of their conditions, but tend to brush these off as short-term survivable challenges with long-term economic benefits. Yet, this is not always the case, and in Yemen some conditions enforced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had destructive outcomes that could have been avoided.

The IMF unintentionally impeded the transitional process in Yemen following the 2011 uprising, and in the view of some, set the stage for the current

conflict by pushing the government in 2014 to lift fuel subsidies. They were of course aware of the fragile context of Yemen's political environment, and expected short-term unrest, but ultimately decided to accept the risk and move forward. This is a subject of great contention, and one can always find counterarguments that do not place blame on the IMF. Yet, it deserves serious consideration by all who would seek to place conditions on their rebuilding packages for Yemen. While conditions must and will be set, donors must be extremely attentive to the political context of their conditions—they should always question the ability of Yemen's government to survive the social and political backlash. One war is enough.

Support Start-Ups and SMEs

Post-war reconstruction presents a country with an opportunity to create a new merchant class and diversify the accumulation of wealth. This could be achieved if start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are given the opportunity to participate in the effort and benefit from cash injection into the country. The current approach favors contractors who have track records and strong financial capacities. A quick glance into the usual terms of reference for donor-funded projects shows eligibility requirements that exclude almost everyone except well-established firms.

While this makes sense for some of the larger projects, the terms of reference should allow for recent entrants into the market, especially if they provide innovative solutions that compete in cost and quality. This is especially important when we consider that much of the professional and merchant class lost everything they had in Yemen's civil war. This process can begin by acknowledging start-ups as key actors in the reconstruction process. Existing models recognize government, foreign states, donor organizations, and INGOs as the main actors in the process. Some may add contractors. Recognizing start-ups would be a major step toward giving them a role and facilitating a fair distribution of wealth in the process.

Invest in Wartime Innovation

War pushed Yemenis toward innovation and entrepreneurial initiatives. One important example is in the energy sector. The destruction of the power system forced people to find alternative sources of energy to keep their fridges, irrigation pumps, and communication tools functioning. Luckily, this became such a widespread phenomenon that it has been recognized internationally and received support from some international organizations. It is important to continue supporting this trend after the war ends.

The destruction of the power system forced Yemenis to find alternative sources of energy to keep their fridges, irrigation pumps, and communication tools functioning.

At this point, the solar alternative to fuel-powered electricity is neither efficient nor advanced enough to compete with conventional electric power sources, and thus people may quickly turn back to traditional sources once they are available again. In addition to the environmental benefits of solar power, there are economic and developmental ones. Alternative sources of energy would save the country billions of dollars that can be allocated elsewhere. Moreover, the majority of Yemen's population—especially in rural areas—has no access to electricity, making alternative sources an opportunity to expand that access.

This is just one example. Throughout the past four years, many young Yemenis have come up with solutions to the war-related problems they are facing: low-cost prosthetics, alternative techniques for dialysis and water purification, among others. Mapping those innovations, validating those that actually work, and supporting them should be one of the mandates of donor funding.

Heal the Environment, Prioritize Health

The environmental footprint of modern warfare is staggering. A bomb is not simply a bomb. Each one of the millions upon millions of bombs used in this war leaves a chemical residue that sticks in the air, seeps into the soil, and is transferred by rain and wind across vast geographies, wreaking havoc in disease for the population at large, and especially children. In a country such as Yemen, where almost two-thirds of the population live in rural areas, this crisis becomes more urgent than ever. In the absence of healthy alternatives, people will resort to the food and water resources available, which are likely to be contaminated by disastrous chemicals. The accumulated impact on individual health and the wellbeing of the economy is beyond anyone's capacity to measure.

The focus of donor money on this must be a priority. Innovative start-ups can play a special role here by providing low-cost solutions that can be implemented on a wide scale. For example, some start-ups have developed accessible technologies that predict mosquito-related health risks. Others have provided inexpensive solutions for water purification, especially in areas that do not have access to a supply network.

The possibilities are endless, and networks of global innovators with existing solutions, or who can tailor unforeseen ones, are out there. Donors and the Yemeni government should encourage experts who understand the country's health and environmental challenges to engage with those innovators and to introduce them to Yemen's challenges.

Weaken, Don't Strengthen, Sectarianism and Regionalism

Yemen, like any other country, is composed of a complex mosaic of communities

with diverse yet overlapping cultures and interests. It is simply impossible to draw borders for such a mosaic. Regrettably, the tendency has been to divide Yemen into neatly defined categories of Southern/Northern, Zaydi/Sunni, and Tribal/Urban. Yemeni political actors in the past four decades found it useful to mobilize based on these categories and weaponize them against their contenders, leading to the explosion of sectarian and regional politics with devastating consequences.

Yet, for many of us today, Yemen's division along these lines seems ubiquitous, historical, entrenched, and natural. Sectarianism and regionalism are even used to explain the roots of the existing conflict. Some peace initiatives start from the premise that these categories should be recognized and institutionalized. But a closer look reveals sectarianism and regionalism to be local, fleeting, weak, and most importantly, contingent upon political weaponization. They are the tools and façade of the conflict, not the cause of it, and legitimizing them will certainly not enhance prospects for peace or social harmony. On the contrary, legitimizing them will sow the seeds for future conflict.

Yemen's post-war reconstruction can either aggravate or mitigate sectarian and regional divides. To ensure the latter, funding distribution should firmly honor the fact that Yemen's mosaic defies neat and clear divisions.

There are Yemeni politicians, consultants, and activists who will demand that funds be divided according to these categories, under the pretext of fairness and equal opportunity for all groups and regions. The greatest risk of post-war reconstruction efforts in Yemen is that it accedes to such demands and thus solidifies sectarianism and regionalism. This agenda, which sounds natural and looks appealing, only requires a closer look to realize that equal opportunity for all groups and regions is not the same as equal opportunity for Southern/Northern, Zaydi/Sunni, and Tribal/Urban-based binaries. Equal opportunity founded on these divisions is merely another weaponization of difference using international funds. PWR should avoid allowing itself to become a catalyst for further fragmentation in the political identity of Yemen's communities. If there is anything this author would insist on, it is this.

Finally, it is vital to continuously reflect on how we think when we approach reconstruction. Reconstruction is not an exact science. It is essentially an art whose key tool is a deep, localized understanding of the social fabric, political structure, cultural context, and economy of a country. Being an art, at its heart lie not theories and models (especially economic ones), but rather passion and imagination—a passion for human prosperity and wellbeing, and an imagination for how to achieve this in different localities. The hope now is that artists with imagination and passion as well as reflection and understanding will lead or significantly contribute to the process of Yemen's reconstruction. ℝ