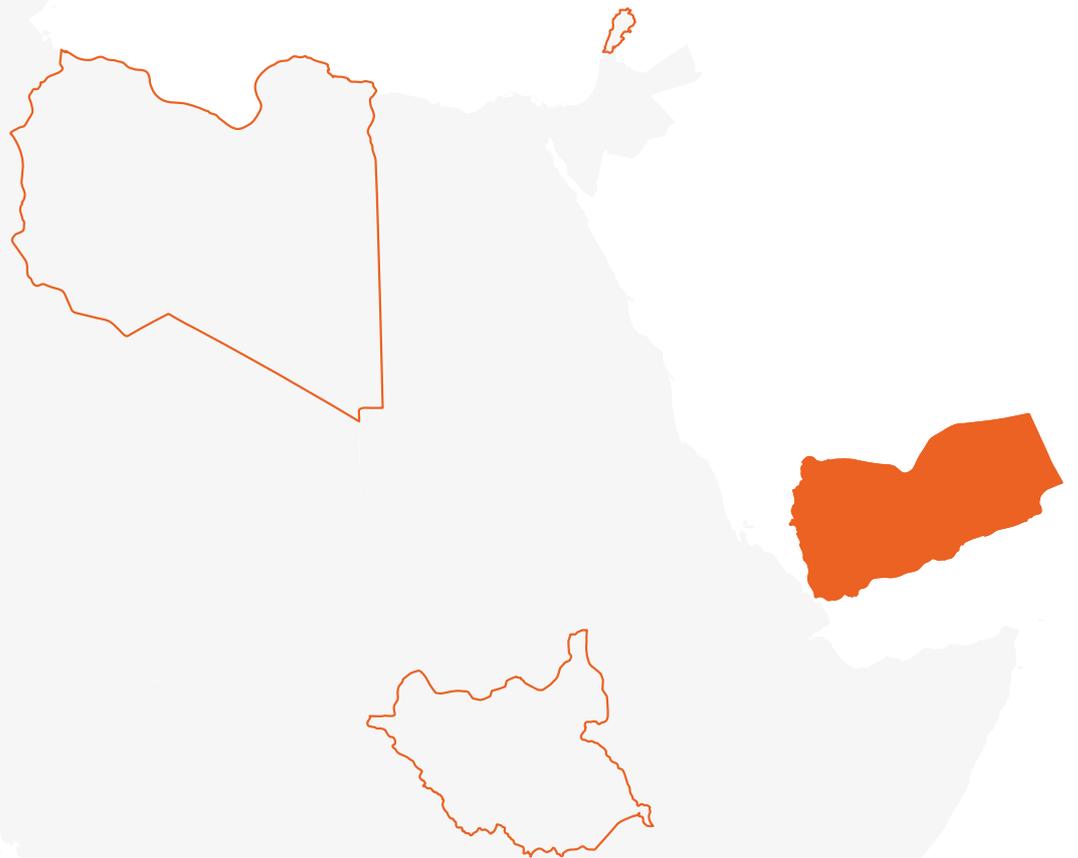




**CONFLICT
SENSITIVITY
COMMUNITY HUB**

Supporting conflict sensitivity through country-focused facilities

Case Study: Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform



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Acronyms

conflict sensitivity (CS)
Capacity Support Mechanism (CSM)
Donor Advisory Group (DAG)
European Union (EU)
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)
Global Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub (CSC Hub)
Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP)
international non-governmental organisations (INGOs)
Internationally Recognised Government of Yemen (IRGoY)
Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC)
monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL)
monitoring and evaluation (M&E)
Search for Common Ground (SFCG)
Seton Hall University (SHU)
Technical Working Group (TWG)
Theory of Change (ToC)
United Kingdom (UK)
United Nations (UN)
water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH)
Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform (YCSP)

Methodology note

This case study is one of three on the conflict sensitivity (CS) facilities in Libya, South Sudan, and Yemen that were produced between April and September 2021. Together with a smaller case study on a slightly different type of facility in Lebanon, the case studies accompany an overall Lessons Paper.¹ Collectively, the Lessons Paper and case studies contribute to a learning initiative for the Global Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub (CSC Hub).²

The authors also exchanged analysis and key points with a research team led by CSC Hub member International Alert, who were producing a lessons and design report in the same timeframe for the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to inform a new CS facility in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Yemen case study is based on a literature review and a very small number of key informant interviews. The literature review included programme proposals, activity descriptions, and a draft, internal version of an independent evaluation commissioned by the implementing organisations. As this is the newest of the three country-focused facilities, with only two years of implementation behind it (of which one was during the COVID-19 pandemic), there is less extensive experience to draw on. Four interviews were conducted, two with current or former staff working on the Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform (YCSP), one with a partner, and one with the donor (see Annex 1 for interview list). For the sake of efficiency and avoiding respondent fatigue, the perspectives of other stakeholders were drawn from the draft internal July 2021 evaluation report. In addition, comments were sought from the YCSP team on the draft of this case study.

¹ Conflict Sensitivity Community (CSC) Hub (October 2021), *Supporting conflict sensitivity through country-focused facilities: Lessons from Libya, South Sudan, Yemen and Lebanon*.

² <https://www.conflictsensitivityhub.net>

I. Origin and structure of the facility

Background and interest in the facility

The Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform (YCSP) came into being in July 2019 and ran until July 2021, with support from the United Kingdom's (UK) Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Implemented by Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and Seton Hall University (SHU), it was framed from the start as aiming to enhance aid effectiveness across the Humanitarian, Development and Peace (HDP) nexus.³

But the idea of a conflict sensitivity (CS) mechanism for Yemen is much older and dates from 2008, when the German government started designing something similar, but was then unable to pursue it further. The person involved then eventually joined SFCG and played a key role first as country director and then as regional adviser to get the facility off the ground. In this effort, he worked with another individual who was involved in setting up the facility in Libya and then moved to SHU, and a third person who worked in conflict advisory roles at the UK government and later at the European Union (EU).⁴ It is therefore an idea that was discussed among the donor community a decade before the facility was set up, and a core group of individuals have been instrumental in re-introducing and developing the idea over time.

The Yemen context is extremely challenging, with the country effectively being administered by two different governments since the outbreak of war in 2015. In the North, the Ansar Allah movement has actively blocked humanitarian assistance and cracked down on international and Yemeni civil society activities at times. In the South, the Internationally Recognised Government of Yemen (IRGoY) has also had fraught relationships with aid providers at times. The dilemmas and challenges from a CS perspective are therefore significant, and the YCSP aimed to assist the international community in making better-informed decisions.

At the time when the YCSP was initiated, there was widespread fear among humanitarian agencies (the majority of aid implementers in Yemen) about working on sensitive issues like conflict and peace. This was partly due to the Ansar Allah movement shutting down and arresting the staff of an organisation which was doing conflict analysis; and partly a general perception that working on CS would create a closer association between their work and the politics of the conflict, which could have serious safety and operational consequences for them. The YCSP therefore started in a very challenging environment, and perhaps implementers did not realise from the start how much work they would have to do to convince aid actors to engage in a CS agenda.⁵

Contracting/support modalities

Initially, many donors were interested in what such a facility could offer, but none committed to funding it. Eventually, SFCG and SHU approached the UK and the EU with a proposal for a 5-year facility, drawing on some of the experience of the South Sudan and Libya facilities. The UK immediately committed to support it, but only for a two-year pilot phase. SFCG and SHU therefore adjusted the project, but retained the ambitious framing of the YCSP's envisaged outcomes. In retrospect, YCSP staff (confirmed by the external evaluation) felt that the project was probably too ambitious for the two-year timeframe, especially since it took so long to get

³ YCSP (2020), 'Briefing note', YCSP, September 2020, p 1.

⁴ Interview, 15 June 2021.

⁵ Interviews, 15 June and 10 August; Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), Final evaluation Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform, July 2021, p. 23.

operational permissions and build trust with and interest from agencies to work on CS (see also Section III below).⁶

SFCG and SHU wanted to bring other donors on board in the first phase and then continue a second phase – as envisaged in the original five-year initiative design. However, at the time of writing, no additional donor has come on board and follow-on funding from the UK had not been secured. The implementing partners are therefore continuing some light-touch activities with their core funding, but there is a risk that the investment during the initial two years may be lost.

Implementation modalities

SFCG in Yemen and SHU implemented the YCSP project together. Both institutions saw this initiative as much more than a project, but rather as an opportunity to influence how the international community could better contribute to peace in Yemen across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding initiatives.⁷ To assist in positioning itself as trusted adviser, the YCSP was set up as an independent entity, with its own logo and team. This worked well in creating trust in the YCSP and its commitment to handling complex CS and organisational issues sensitively. Key staff were also complimented on understanding the complexities and inspiring confidence that partners could speak freely about their challenges.⁸

SFCG discussed internally how best to manage the positioning of YCSP and actively kept apart any activities or information that may have led to a real or perceived conflict of interest between YCSP and SFCG's other work in Yemen. However, in retrospect the YCSP perhaps ended up being too independent, so that it may not have fully benefited from broader programmatic support from SFCG and deeper research methodology engagement from SHU. For instance, the YCSP planned to work with SFCG's monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) capacities, but its independent status meant that colleagues did not sufficiently prioritise or engage with the YCSP. In the end, the YCSP team recruited its own MEL person, but this came late in the programme (see Section III).⁹

The YCSP intended to work in the North and South of Yemen, as well as in Amman, Jordan, where many of the donors are based. In the end, it took six months to obtain the necessary permissions from the Yemeni authorities in the South, while it proved impossible to get permission from the authorities in the North – a very common occurrence for international and especially peacebuilding organisations working in Yemen. Activities therefore started in Amman first, before expanding to Aden (in the South). CS terminology remains sensitive in the Yemeni context, and the project partners had to find the acceptable wording to describe the project to authorities. For instance, the YCSP aims were described as “enabling aid” and “enhancing the effectiveness of aid”, and conflict analysis was explained as “understanding the context and determining needs”.

With SFCG's presence in Yemen, it was able to support the operational set-up of the YCSP. The degree of independence of the YCSP took some time to work out and, as mentioned above, probably needed more clarity on what functions the YCSP would take on itself. The initial team had quite a flat structure, but as the work evolved and to speed up implementation after the six-month inception period, they restructured to have a programme manager and two advisers, one assistant, and three sub-teams working in parallel on the three different areas: i) research and

⁶ Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021; Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 18.

⁷ Interview, 15 June 2021.

⁸ Interview, 5 August 2021.

⁹ Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021, 10 August 2021; Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 18-19.

knowledge; ii) engagement, communications, and outreach; and iii) capacity-building.¹⁰ These 12 staff members were spread across the Amman and Aden offices and consisted of a combination of international and Yemeni staff (with those based in Yemen mostly being Yemeni). This set up seemed to work well to engage with all three focus areas of work, with close coordination between them.¹¹ The YCSP also drew on SFCG for IT, finance, logistical, and security support and worked with others (initially a local research company and later ACAPS) to do data gathering for YCSP's analysis function.

Feedback from respondents suggests that the YCSP took quite a bit of time to reach its full capacity, but with a lot of potential to do more. The short duration of the funding is therefore seen as unfortunate when so much effort had gone into getting everything off the ground.¹² One of the reasons for the slower scale-up is that the YCSP wanted to recruit Yemeni staff rather than rely on international CS experts who did not know the context as well. This required some skilling up of new recruits, since the combination of conflict-sensitivity expertise, context knowledge, and other skills was very rare among Yemeni candidates.¹³

Emerging lessons on origin and structure of the YCSP

- A group of individuals was instrumental in advocating for the idea of a CS facility, and it finally took off when a donor was willing to fund it as a project. However, initial funding was only for two years, creating a risk that the effort that went into establishing the Platform and its relationships could be lost if no further funding is secured.
- Working on CS in a context like Yemen is extremely sensitive and needs careful framing, as well as patience with operational delays due to the need for project permissions from the authorities.
- Humanitarian agencies feared that engaging with CS would risk them being associated with 'politics', which could lead to even more restrictions or security and operational threats. The YCSP had to do careful relationship-building to overcome this.
- The YCSP was set up as an independent entity at arm's length from the SFCG and SHU, which has helped to create trust in its discretion and its advisory role. This worked well in some respects, but also created challenges that slowed down the operationalisation of the YCSP and the support it could obtain from the two implementing partners. More deliberate planning of this relationship could have helped avoid these challenges.

II. Approach of the YCSP Forum

Defining conflict sensitivity

The YCSP put forward two main assumptions for its CS approach: namely, that aid is delivered more effectively if conflict dynamics are well managed, and that aid always influences conflict dynamics. Furthermore, the YCSP emphasises that CS does not only apply to the local level and relationships between communities but also to the broader political level and to contextual stability. The potential impact of aid on these three levels was further elaborated as follows:

- Aid can reinforce or weaken the ability and willingness of **political** / security actors to constructively participate in attempts to reach a negotiated solution;

¹⁰ The team consisted of the YCSP programme manager and two part-time advisers; a research and knowledge team with three members (two of whom are in Yemen); an engagement, communications, and outreach team with two people (in Amman); a capacity-building team with two people (in Yemen), and one assistant; as well as a MEL officer.

¹¹ Interview, 15 June 2021.

¹² Interviews, 15 and 18 June, 5 August 2021.

¹³ Interview, 10 August 2021.

- Aid can strengthen or weaken **contextual stability**, which in turn can impact on the way political conflict is managed and the likelihood of localised violence; and
- Aid can provide a bridge between **local groups** that are using or have the potential to use violence against each other or reinforce divides and increase the likelihood of violence.¹⁴

Formally, the YCSP followed the mainstream CS definition that describes it as an approach that “seeks to minimise risks that assistance inadvertently contributes to conflict dynamics and drivers, and to maximise opportunities (appropriate to an agency’s mandate) to contribute to peace and stability”.¹⁵ It then articulated the three main steps for CS practice as follows:

- Understand the conflict environment in which they are operating;
- Design and adapt to respond to changing conflict dynamics; and
- Continually monitor the relationship between interventions and conflict events.

The YCSP further anchored its CS work within the HDP nexus, drawing on an understanding of protracted social conflicts and what this type of conflict means for aid delivery. The overarching theory of change (ToC) for addressing protracted social conflict focuses on peacefully managing the vertical relationships between the state and different groups within society, as well as the horizontal relationships between different identity groups. Conflict dynamics across these two axes have specific implications for aid provision and generate a range of CS dilemmas.¹⁶ In this respect, the YCSP was quite deliberate in spelling out that aid should contribute to peace – and the type of peace that should be envisaged.

With regards to integrating gender, the YCSP drew on SFCG’s general gender sensitivity approach, which focuses on understanding gender dynamics as one element of broader context and conflict dynamics. SFCG works across a range of topics to integrate a gender lens as well as on the empowerment of women and girls specifically.¹⁷

Overall intended impact, outcomes, and Theory of Change

The YCSP had as its overall goal: *To promote peace and stability in Yemen by enhancing conflict-sensitive approaches and practices for actors planning and delivering assistance*. The detailed ToC (set out in Box 1 below) placed strong emphasis on the different impacts aid interventions could have in terms of peace contributions and conflict prevention.

Box 1: YCSP Theory of Change¹⁸

IF agencies, policymakers, and donors have the necessary **skills and resources** to deploy programs, policies, and strategies that are conflict-sensitive and feed into the development of a humanitarian-peacebuilding-development nexus,

AND IF their efforts are **better coordinated and better informed** about local contexts

THEN assistance interventions in Yemen are more likely to avoid exacerbating existing tensions, to feed into stabilization efforts, promote more peaceful management of existing conflicts, and prevent further conflicts,

¹⁴ YCSP (n.d.), ‘Framing paper: Annex’, YCSP, p 5-7.

¹⁵ YCSP (n.d.), ‘Framing paper: Annex’, YCSP, p 5.

¹⁶ YCSP (n.d.), ‘Framing paper: Annex’, YCSP, p 7-9.

¹⁷ Cf SFCG’s website on its gender-related work: <https://www.sfcg.org/search/?q=gender+sensitive>

¹⁸ “YCSP theory of change and objectives summary” (no author, no date, obtained from YCSP implementation team), p. 1.

BECAUSE assistance interventions are more sensitive to conflict drivers in local areas, better adapted to mitigate conflict drivers, and better able to support the development of peace infrastructure.

(Direct quote, except for author's emphasis)

The YCSP team, the donor, and the draft internal evaluation all agreed that the ToC was extremely relevant for the Yemen context.¹⁹

Focus areas of work

The Platform focused explicitly on international agencies and Yemeni organisations who partner with them. While some Yemeni organisations were engaged in specific activities like trainings, the YCSP felt that it would be sensitive to work directly with local organisations, especially given the aforementioned incident of an organisation being shut down by the Northern authorities. This sent shockwaves through the aid sector and highlighted the importance of managing risk to aid organisations and their partners. The YCSP also felt that it did not have sufficient resources to work with Yemeni organisations and that it was more realistic to target international agencies. SFCG And SHU did, however, plan to review this position and wanted to work with local civil society organisations as well as government authorities in any potential second phase of the YCSP.²⁰ Officials from the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC) also participated in YCSP training activities²¹ – the only one of the reviewed facilities to include government officials. This created opportunities to increase their knowledge about the aid sector, which could assist aid delivery. However, such knowledge has also been used by the Northern authorities to restrict or prevent aid, thus posing a CS dilemma.²²

The YCSP had an open-door policy for the participation of international agencies who commit verbally or informally to the Platform instead of a paid membership modality. However, to ensure that agencies take their participation seriously and to discourage those who only want to extract information from the initiative, the YCSP required that organisations work in Yemen or were in the process of registering to do so. The YCSP also considered the type of activities that agencies are involved in before approving their participation. Agencies were invited to join or could request to join, and then become part of the Technical Working Group (TWG) in the first instance, which gave them access to the YCSP mailing list that contained information about trainings and other opportunities.²³

The YCSP was conceived around three core functions (see also Figure 1 below):

- Technical support and advice: primarily targeted at the Donor Advisory Group (DAG) of policymakers and donors, this area of work includes providing conflict analysis and policy or strategic recommendations as needed;
- Capacity assistance: provided by the Capacity Support Mechanism (CSM) and including not only training but also an Online Resource Centre and ad-hoc support; and
- Learning: that includes sharing lessons among aid agencies, convened as the TWG.

¹⁹ Interviews 15 June, 5 and 10 August 2021; Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 13, 26.

²⁰ Interview, 15 June 2021.

²¹ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 14, 20-21.

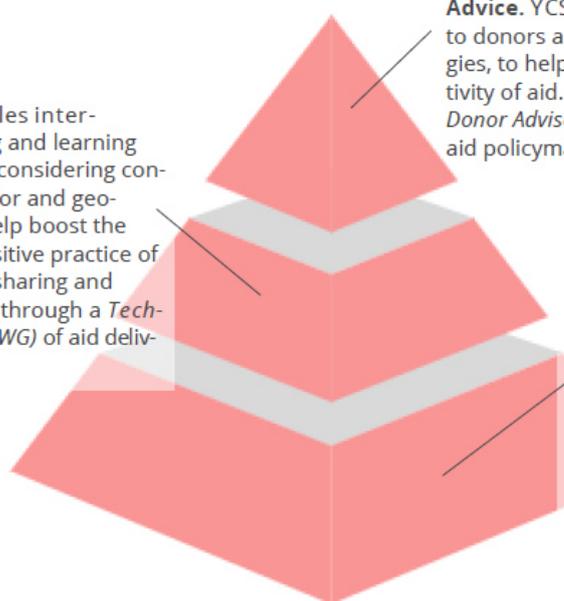
²² Written feedback from YCSP team member, 31 August 2021.

²³ Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021.

Figure 1: YCSP support model²⁴

To promote conflict sensitive approaches in Yemen, YCSP provides three types of support:

Learning. YCSP enables inter-agency lesson-sharing and learning on how to deliver aid considering conflict dynamics (by sector and geographic location) to help boost the collective conflict sensitive practice of aid agencies. Lesson-sharing and learning is conducted through a *Technical Working Group (TWG)* of aid delivery agencies.



Advice. YCSP provides technical support to donors and policymakers on aid strategies, to help boost the overall conflict sensitivity of aid. Advice is provided through a *Donor Advisory Group (DAG)* of donors and aid policymakers.

Capacity. YCSP provides capacity assistance to agencies delivering aid in the country, to help boost the conflict sensitivity of individual agencies; this is provided through a *Capacity Support Mechanism (CSM)*.

Adaptive management

The YCSP was implemented in a very volatile context where international aid actors were under constant pressure and often unable to do their work. An initial inception phase of six months gave the team the opportunity to recruit, set up, and make adjustments to how they could conduct the work. A few months after implementation got fully underway, the COVID-19 pandemic struck and new adjustments and redesigns needed to be made to cancel or move activities online. The capacity-building activities had to be significantly adjusted and some of the DAG and TWG meetings were cancelled.²⁵

The YCSP team therefore had to be very responsive to the context and the realities of what it was trying to achieve. It adapted its team structure (as mentioned in Section I) and its activities at several points. The donor was accommodating and understood the need for flexibility, although the process for changing the budget when these changes were made proved quite extensive.²⁶

A particularly effective adaptive management response was the re-allocation of resources to produce quick, responsive reports or analyses that were directly relevant to what was happening in the context. These were very much appreciated by International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and donor agencies.²⁷

Multi-stakeholder elements

The YCSP was funded by the **UK government only**. Some people felt that this created the perception of the YCSP being a “UK initiative”, but others felt that this was not really an issue.²⁸ The YCSP carefully diversified its engagement to mitigate this perception by, for instance, asking the World Bank to convene the DAG, which worked very well. However, the UK expected to some extent to be involved

²⁴ YCSP (2020), ‘Briefing note’, YCSP, September 2020, p 1.

²⁵ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 21, 23.

²⁶ Written feedback from YCSP team.

²⁷ Written feedback from the YCSP team; Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p.16.

²⁸ Interviews, 15 June and 5 August 2021.

in important pieces of work as the YCSP funder. In this respect, having more than one donor may have been helpful to mitigate perceptions of the YCSP representing the UK's agenda, and to have a larger group of engaged donor governments to work with.

The YCSP was **multi-stakeholder in its implementation**, since SFCG and SHU worked together from the start in conceptualising the YCSP and designing its elements. The combination of SFCG as an operational agency and SHU as an academic partner worked well to bring different skills and expertise to the table. However, one respondent felt there was perhaps insufficient time for this partnership to really come to fruition. In addition, SHU, as a university, had more freedom to be quite political in its analysis and approach; whereas SFCG had to manage more sensitivities in order to protect its operational capacity and programmes in Yemen. This was a challenge in some respects, but in the end meant that SHU rather than SFCG led on more sensitive analysis and outreach.²⁹

The multi-stakeholder element also applied to the **partners and target audiences** for the YCSP's activities. While the focus was squarely on international actors, namely donor governments, United Nations (UN) agencies, and INGOs, at times the Yemeni partners of these agencies and MoPIC officials joined too, especially in training activities.

Emerging lessons on the approach of the YCSP

- The YCSP anchored its CS approach in the HDP nexus and in its understanding of how to resolve protracted social conflict. This point of departure gave the Platform's CS approach a clearly articulated peace-promoting aim alongside the ambition to avoid or mitigate potential harms.
- The YCSP took a gender-sensitivity approach to its CS work, drawing on the broader framing used by SFCG.
- The focus areas of work are widely seen as the right ones for the YCSP initiative, but despite its large team of 12 people, making progress on all these elements and setting up the facility in the Yemeni context in two years was very ambitious. Only two part-time staff were CS experts and a pool of CS consultants / resource people may have been useful to support the work and strengthen YCSP staff capacity on CS.
- The UK was an active and supportive donor; it is unclear whether only having one donor caused the YCSP to be perceived as a "UK initiative" with associated political sensitivities.

III. Evolution and changes to which YCSP has contributed

Focus area 1: Technical support and advice

At the policy level, the YCSP established a forum of donors and policymakers in Yemen, known as the Donor Advisory Group (DAG). About 19 donor agencies attended the meetings regularly, which was an achievement in itself.³⁰ The first DAG meeting was held in person, in Amman, and this established a good basis for developing relationships for the rest of the YCSP's work. Having most of the aid community based outside of Yemen is a big challenge as they are often disconnected from the in-country dynamics, which could lead to conflict-blind decision-making. It was therefore important for the YCSP to engage with donors and other international agencies in

²⁹ Interviews, 15 June and 5 August 2021.

³⁰ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 6.

Amman.³¹ The meetings were co-hosted by the World Bank, who played a very useful convening role and allocated staff resources to do this efficiently.

The DAG was the space for high-level discussions on how to make aid strategies and policies more conflict sensitive. Its objective was to identify responses to “critical conflict sensitivity challenges”³² that might arise in Yemen and affect aid delivery. To achieve this, the DAG could task the YCSP to gather data, conduct analysis, and produce recommendations for such responses.³³

The YCSP was well-placed to access information from across Yemen, even though it remained challenging to verify the accuracy of the information given the context on the ground. Nevertheless, it produced interesting conflict analyses and thematic papers that were circulated to the DAG and TWG mailing lists. To manage sensitivities regarding the information contained in the reports, they were password protected, and agencies were asked to notify YCSP if they shared the analyses further within their institutions in order to keep track of where the information went. Some analysis pieces were disseminated more widely, outside of the YCSP structures, such as to the country directors’ forum and INGO advocacy working groups.

The YCSP presented conflict analyses and research at DAG meetings to stimulate discussion and eventually to lead to specific policy changes and/or incentives (including potential funding) for programming that addresses important conflict and CS issues in Yemen.³⁴ But two main challenges made it difficult for the YCSP to progress as far as it envisaged.

The first related to the length and utility of the analyses. Some respondents felt the analysis pieces were too long, perhaps too academic, and not operational enough for aid agencies to take forward. While the conflict analyses was seen as of good quality by many respondents, the concern was that this did not sufficiently spell out the implications for aid agencies operating in Yemen or took too long to produce, thereby being less useful for quick response to context changes.³⁵ Several discussions were held between the YCSP team and the donor about how this could be improved, and revisions were made to the analysis products to find a more impactful way forward. The YCSP reported that the most useful analysis pieces in the end were those that were produced quickly to enable rapid responses, rather than more in-depth research that took longer to be completed and shared. However, getting the balance right for recommendations or other ways to make the analysis and research more directly applicable was more difficult. Some DAG members felt the recommendations were too broad, while the YCSP felt it could not produce tailored recommendations for different sectors or programmes in an analysis piece that focused at the higher aid policy level and targeted the entire DAG (and TWG) groups.³⁶ Despite these challenges, the evaluation cites positive feedback from agencies who used the regular monitoring reports to inform their own work – particularly relating to the COVID-19 response – and who found the peace focus of the YCSP products filled a gap in the agencies’ own risk-focused analysis.³⁷ Towards the end of the project, YCSP was also able to work with specific agencies in producing tailored research and recommendations through its draw-down facility.³⁸

The second challenge was how best to complement the analysis with an effective engagement strategy for the DAG group. At each meeting, a specific theme was discussed – usually decided

³¹ Interviews, 15 June and 5 August 2021.

³² YCSP (2020), ‘Briefing note’, YCSP, September 2020, p 2.

³³ YCSP (2020), ‘Briefing note’, YCSP, September 2020, p 1-2.

³⁴ YCSP (2020), ‘Briefing note’, YCSP, September 2020, p 2; Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021.

³⁵ Interview, 10 August 2021; Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 15.

³⁶ Interviews, 15 June and 10 August 2021.

³⁷ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 15-16; written feedback.

³⁸ Interview, 10 August 2021.

between the TWG and the DAG, based on ideas put forward by the YCSP on issues that resonated for more than one donor or implementing agency. In this sense, the Platform saw itself more as a facilitator of conversations on CS between the donors, UN agencies, and INGOs.³⁹ But despite these efforts, there is general feedback that the DAG meetings were not participatory enough.⁴⁰ This may be because not enough was done between meetings to build a conversation around the agenda of each meeting and to approach specific participants to play a more active role, such as responding to a particular analysis piece or speak about specific dilemmas.⁴¹ The YCSP did revise its engagement approach over the course of the project and made several adjustments to the meetings as the COVID-19 pandemic forced them online. This helped improve levels of engagement and energy towards the end of the project,⁴² even though the online format meant losing informal opportunities to discuss and follow up on key points.⁴³ The interaction with DAG members also sparked requests for the YCSP to review or comment on funding calls, strategies, or tools.⁴⁴

Regardless of these challenges, the DAG and TWG groups were unique in providing a space for shared analysis.⁴⁵ DAG members also reported appreciating the opportunity to come together across the HDP nexus, as they usually operated in their separate sectors, and regarded the work of the YCSP as providing a missing link in the Yemen peace process.⁴⁶ Over time, the quality of discussions increased, although in the project timeframe no specific joint and high-level CS policies were agreed.

One important achievement was the agreement to create a health management unit to coordinate the COVID-19 response in the South between the conflict parties (the IRGoY and the Southern Transitional Council).⁴⁷ This flowed from the YCSP's consultations within the DAG, TWG, and Track 2 dialogues, and the successful relationship the YCSP developed with the World Health Organization in its capacity as health cluster lead.⁴⁸ This illustrates what can be achieved when the DAG and the other components of the YCSP's work became mutually reinforcing.

The World Bank also reported to the external evaluators that its new multi-donor trust fund for Yemen will include CS as a cross-programme mainstreaming priority, and attributed this decision partly to the work of the YCSP.⁴⁹

As the YCSP's activities evolved, donors more proactively requested specific support. This sometimes included very ambitious tasks, such as conducting a large survey or accompanying very large programmes, which the YCSP had to scale down or had to change its own role to match its capacities across focus areas. This experience also helped the team to formulate parameters and a prioritisation of tasks for its ad hoc draw-down facility, and to communicate these clearly.⁵⁰

The YCSP mostly engaged with other coordination structures through the DAG group, as well as some bilateral engagement with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. One YCSP staff member also participated in a separate INGO advocacy working group, which helped

³⁹ Interviews 15 and 18 June 2021.

⁴⁰ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 7, 8, 27.

⁴¹ Interview, 10 August 2021.

⁴² Interviews, 5 and 10 August 2021; Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 15-16.

⁴³ Interview, 10 August 2021.

⁴⁴ Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021.

⁴⁵ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 15.

⁴⁶ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 15.

⁴⁷ Written feedback; Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 15-16.

⁴⁸ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 16, 19.

⁴⁹ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 19.

⁵⁰ Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021.

the team track humanitarian issues. However, YCSP staff feel that it would take much more focused efforts to really target aid coordination structures.⁵¹

Emerging lessons on technical support and advice

- The YCSP had a high level of access to the donor community, assisted by the active roles played by the UK as funder and the World Bank as co-convenor of the DAG meetings. Being able to meet in person at the start enabled strong relationship-building, though this became more difficult when meetings moved online due to COVID-19.
- Facilitating discussions between the DAG and the TWG on specific themes was helpful to keep discussions grounded, and to focus the YCSP's data gathering and analysis efforts.
- It was challenging for the YCSP to achieve its stated aims. The project had a short timeframe, a challenging start-up period, was affected early on by the COVID-19 pandemic, and started its work in a context where agencies actively resisted or were fearful of the CS agenda. Achieving transformative policy changes at the higher, collective level, seemed ambitious in these circumstances. Future CS facilities would do well to agree with their donors what would be realistic in such contexts and what type of 'policy change' could be envisaged.
- Analysis pieces that were shorter and with a quicker turnaround, and those that spelled out policy and operational implications more explicitly, proved to be more useful to donors than long, in-depth analysis pieces. The YCSP was appreciated more for its role as analyst of existing data, rather than collector of primary data.
- It was important for the YCSP to be clear about the scope and number of activities it can deliver – to manage expectations once the interest of DAG (and TWG) members in CS-related work increased.

Focus area 2: Capacity assistance

The YCSP provided capacity assistance through the Capacity Support Mechanism (CSM) to agencies who deliver aid in Yemen as a means to help strengthen their conflict sensitivity.⁵² The target audience included INGOs, UN agencies, and national organisations and partners. The CSM provided this support through:

- A Standard CS Training Programme: that was tailored to the Yemen context and was offered at introductory, intermediate, and advanced levels. The CSM aimed to deliver this training as close to the field as possible (including in Amman and Aden);
- An Online Resource Centre: that hosted CS resources and training material specific to Yemen, as well as learning on CS aid delivery. This was open to all participating agencies; and
- A draw-down facility: Agencies could request tailored support, mentoring, and assistance. This could take the form of, for instance, custom training, facilitation, project planning, internal process development, and crisis management.⁵³

In this way, the capacity assistance function incorporated individual skills training, organisational accompaniment, and technical and learning resources in the same focus area. The YCSP also wanted to start an online service where all conflict analysis data could be stored and made accessible, but this was not developed in the end.

⁵¹ Interview, 18 June 2021.

⁵² YCSP (2020), 'Briefing note', YCSP, September 2020, p 1-2.

⁵³ YCSP (2020), 'Briefing note', YCSP, September 2020, p 2.

One observation from the YCSP is that their different focus areas of work quickly grew in scope as the implications of what it entails to support CS operationalisation became clear to all involved. They therefore had to manage carefully what they could deliver, and also investigated the option of vetting some consultants that agencies could then hire to help them with further in-depth CS work.⁵⁴

To make the connection between the training and capacity work and eventual collective action, the YCSP included sector-specific courses to its curriculum, which created a useful space for agencies to discuss the challenges they all came across and help them avoid repeating the same mistakes: for example, training materials for CS and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) were developed together with the WASH cluster lead. Towards the end of the project, the YCSP also engaged with specific clusters to help stimulate policy change.⁵⁵

Its accompaniment work was reported as useful by one partner, whose staff benefited from training as well as an active review of the partner's indicators and research methodologies.⁵⁶ The YCSP also worked with a number of organisations on CS during the COVID response, which led to some adjustments to these organisations' programmes. Of those who attended training events and were surveyed by the external evaluators, 89% reported that they subsequently started applying CS in their project implementation.⁵⁷

Overall, the YCSP experienced a high level of interest in training and capacity support from the aid agencies working in Yemen. However, it was more difficult to find ways to assess the impacts of the training, and the project ended before the YCSP could operationalise a new strategy to address this.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the evaluation found that almost 40% of training respondents believed they will continue to use the skills gathered from the training in their projects.⁵⁹ The remaining challenge is to connect the individual skills to opportunities for change within the agencies' policies and practices. This was highlighted as particularly difficult in Yemen, where many agencies are quite centralised, so that changes need to be made across country, regional, and headquarters levels,⁶⁰ which require a more intense engagement across organisations and decision-making levels.

The steady increase in demand for training and ad hoc support through the draw-down facility showed that the YCSP had been established as a trusted accompanier and that agencies were interested in becoming more CS in their work. However, more than one respondent felt that the YCSP did not have enough time to really get traction, despite its strong promise.

Emerging lessons on capacity assistance

- The YCSP experienced a high level of interest in its different capacity assistance options and set up a range of services from the start (training at three different levels, accompaniment, and online resources). Participant feedback was positive, and this seems to have had a positive impact on individual and project-level CS skills and awareness.
- Conducting sector-focused training was a good way to bring together field-focused staff from different agencies around common challenges, dilemmas, and solutions; and to identify opportunities for collaboration (such as the joint health mechanism in Southern Yemen).

⁵⁴ Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021.

⁵⁵ Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021.

⁵⁶ Interviews, 15 June and 5 August 2021.

⁵⁷ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 19.

⁵⁸ Written feedback.

⁵⁹ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 20.

⁶⁰ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 20.

- The increase in demand for the YCSP's support shows that agencies started moving from a general awareness of CS to training their staff, changing their programmes, or adjusting their strategies; and that the YCSP was seen as a trusted interlocutor in this work. Broader organisational change would likely require deeper and wider engagement across different levels of agencies, not only at the country level.
- Interest in the draw-down facility only really started picking up towards the end of the project, suggesting that it took some time for agencies to progress from overcoming initial resistance to CS, to accepting it as an important agenda, and finally wanting to work on changing institutional policies and practices.

Focus area 3: Learning

Complementing the collective policy work of the DAG and the individual/agency-focused support through the capacity assistance strand, the TWG activities aimed to promote learning between aid agencies and help them make their assistance more conflict sensitive. It also aimed to enable collective responses in specific sectors or geographical locations.⁶¹

Given the pre-existing nervousness about CS, the first task when the YCSP established the TWG (and the DAG) was to get everybody comfortable with discussing these issues in a safe space. The YCSP was successful in convincing at least 19 INGOs and UN agencies to join the TWG.⁶² Their mandates spanned the HDP nexus, although given the context in Yemen, there was a preponderance of humanitarian work. The YCSP hosted the TWG meetings, held quarterly in Amman, with remote participation for those in Sana'a and Aden.⁶³ Agenda points were agreed with TWG members in advance of every meeting; during the meeting, the YCSP presented analysis and emerging conflict issues and then facilitated a discussion about response options.

The TWG was aimed at the operational level, and participants varied between project implementers and senior managers. As is the case for other such initiatives, the YCSP found it challenging to have the right people in the room for these discussions. Project managers usually participate actively since they grapple with the issues on a daily basis, but do not have decision-making authority to change organisational practices. Senior managers, such as country directors, have decision-making authority, but have less time to engage and often use the TWG meetings as an opportunity to listen for new information, rather than contribute to the analysis and brainstorm collective actions.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the YCSP team felt that participation in this group was strong, with Yemen-based project management staff engaging regularly, so that there was good access to the organisations and context information in Yemen. The group also had important discussions on CS challenges and potential responses and discussed opportunities for the international community to help bring people in Yemen together across divides as they engage on issues that matter to everybody (such as the health and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19).⁶⁵ One interviewed partner said that YCSP's role in providing the CS-focused analysis was important to this forum, and remained very much needed.⁶⁶

In order to catalyse cumulative change across its focus areas, later in the project the YCSP connected the agendas of the DAG and TWG meetings so that similar issues could be taken up at

⁶¹ YCSP (2020), 'Briefing note', YCSP, September 2020, p 1-2.

⁶² Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 15.

⁶³ YCSP (2020), 'Briefing note', YCSP, September 2020, p 1-2.

⁶⁴ Interview, 10 August 2021.

⁶⁵ Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021.

⁶⁶ Interviews, 15 June and 5 August 2021.

both the policy and implementing level and the outcomes of one meeting could feed into the other. The example of the health cooperation on the COVID-19 response is a case in point.⁶⁷

However, the YCSP found that it was often easier to have conversations about the role and contribution of aid from a CS perspective at the DAG group, because the TWG group was under such pressure to deliver programmes and navigate the volatile context that they tended to have a stronger interest in better understanding and receiving information about what was happening on the ground. The YCSP also noted a difference in approach, if not a tension, between the more political interests of the DAG and the clear hesitance among especially the humanitarian agencies who attended the TWG meetings to discuss conflict and peace issues that they saw as too political.⁶⁸

The YCSP would have liked to see more joint programming and responses coming out of these fora, but this proved more difficult to achieve within the project timeframe than anticipated. Some changes were, however, achieved in the YCSP's partnership with individual agencies. For instance, in its collaboration with ACAPS, the YCSP drew effectively on ACAPS's extensive analysis and research capacities and its own conflict analysis and CS expertise to produce joint products. At the same time, ACAPS found it beneficial to have YCSP's input on enriching its own research approach with a stronger focus on conflict drivers and conflict sensitivity considerations.⁶⁹ In addition, several agencies who participated in the TWG activities subsequently started using CS language in their internal decision-making, which was an important change. And at the level of country directors, some INGOs started taking a more collective stand towards authorities on problematic, conflict-insensitive issues.⁷⁰

One important lesson that emerged for the YCSP from this work is how difficult it can be to stimulate organisational change from the outside and that, therefore, some level of existing internal commitment to CS is indispensable. In addition, one respondent emphasised that while the analysis, reflection, and training activities were important, this was the foundation and needed to be complemented by helping agencies implement CS in practice with more tools, guidance, and accompaniment support. This was present in the YCSP's design, but the timeframe was perhaps too short to get to that stage of the supporting relationships.⁷¹

As for the other facilities, frequent staff turnover in target agencies was disruptive to their ability to take forward a CS agenda. One lesson for the YCSP team was to find a way to engage with staff at all levels through the different activities, so that a larger group of internal CS champions could be created, and to engage in induction for new staff.⁷²

Overall, the YCSP team felt that their objectives were probably too ambitious given the breadth and depth of the change they wanted to achieve. Alongside this, donors and partners may not have fully appreciated how resource- and time-intensive such processes are, resulting in some unrealistic expectations of the YCSP. The lesson for facilities such as the YCSP is therefore how important it is to build constructive trust relationships with the donors and participating organisations, and to be clear about what YCSP can deliver. The combination of working with implementers as well as policymakers showed potential for change at both policy and operational levels.

⁶⁷ Interviews, 15 and 18 June 2021; Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 15-16.

⁶⁸ Interview, 10 August 2021.

⁶⁹ Interviews, 15 June and 5 August 2021.

⁷⁰ Interview, 15 June 2021.

⁷¹ Interview, 18 June 2021.

⁷² Interview, 18 June 2021.

Emerging lessons on learning

- Aid agencies may be fearful of engaging on CS in particularly repressive and aid-hostile contexts, and a careful safe space needs to be crafted for this engagement.
- It can be difficult to stimulate an appetite for change towards more CS practice from the outside, but creating a safe space and discussing issues collectively within the TWG helped overcome initial nervousness and resulted in some agencies taking up CS language in their internal decision-making.
- It is important to move beyond analysis, reflection, and training to support agencies on how to implement CS in practice in real time – through guidance, tools, and practical accompaniment support.
- The combination of working with the implementers as well as the policymakers proved important, so that implementers do not see CS as box-ticking and policymakers understand some of the implementation dilemmas.
- Broad engagement within targeted organisations was important to mitigate the effects of regular staff turnover, as was connecting with new staff.

Measuring change

For this type of facility, it can be challenging to know what changes are being or have been achieved when working at different levels across such a large group of international agencies and in such fast-changing contexts.

The YCSP had particular challenges in monitoring the impacts of its work. As mentioned above, it did not have sufficient monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capacity in place from the start, which created challenges in putting in place effective M&E strategies and creating a baseline for monitoring what was being achieved. In addition, multiple changes were made to the project during the inception phase, in response to the context as well as a request to align with donor indicators. Another round of adjustments was necessary when the COVID-19 pandemic started. Consequently, indicators were changed several times, and in the absence of sufficient M&E capacity and strategies, it became difficult to collect and track evidence of changes consistently. These issues were addressed later in the YCSP project with the recruitment of a dedicated M&E staff member, and a very useful outcome harvesting exercise was conducted towards the end of the project.⁷³

IV. What could this facility look like in future?

There continues to be strong interest in and demand for analysis and research about the conflict dynamics in Yemen – notably at the sub-national level. While there are many organisations providing research, such as ACAPS, REACH, iMMAP, and MercyCorps, respondents felt that the YCSP brought a particularly useful conflict and CS lens to the work that will remain in demand in future. In addition, the linkages to the DAG and across the TWG meant that research was discussed and disseminated, creating the potential for broader influencing.

In terms of sustaining the YCSP or a similar mechanism, one observation was that it is always difficult to sustain knowledge services because these are small and specialised, whereas donors much prefer to fund initiatives that are large in scope as well as budget to reduce the administrative cost of their spending. One proposal was therefore to consider a larger research and analysis consortium that could include CS expertise, such as that offered by the YCSP.

⁷³ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 18-19.

The original intention of the YCSP initiative was to have a second phase, and to engage with national organisations and authorities during this phase. MoPIC officials were indeed included in some of the training activities; and the external evaluation found that there was much stronger awareness among international aid actors about the importance of engaging with Yemeni civil society.⁷⁴ For the first phase, involving national organisations directly in the DAG and TWG seemed risky, as sensitive information could be shared with authorities or intelligence agencies (whether deliberately, accidentally, or under duress). This could have serious repercussions for aid agencies and their staff, as well as for national organisations participating in these conversations, and would therefore need to be managed carefully. However, national organisations – mostly partners of international organisations – were involved in many of the training activities. The YCSP team is clear that it would be important to engage with Yemeni organisations much more in facilities like these in future.

In terms of sustainability of the YCSP's work, despite the challenges, a good foundation has been laid with a large group of agencies more aware of and willing to participate in conversations about CS. Many have also started changing their practices. However, this investment may be lost if no further resources are secured to support aid agencies in Yemen to take forward these initial seeds of change into their everyday practice and organisational policies.

⁷⁴ Makokha, B.B. and Kimote, J. (2021), p. 19.

Annex

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Interview List

No.	Name	Organisation	Position
1	Al-Maktary, Shoji	Search for Common Ground	Senior Regional Conflict Sensitivity Advisor - MENA - Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform
2	Brereton, Victoria	FCDO	Yemen Conflict Advisor
3	Hampton, Kelsey	Search for Common Ground	Senior Officer, Partnerships - Yemen Conflict Sensitivity Platform
4	Thorpe, Joel	Yemen Analysis Hub, ACAPS	Team Leader



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