# Community-Run Aid Networks in Yemen

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## Introduction

Yemen's prolonged conflict and blockade have created extreme barriers to humanitarian access, forcing communities to increasingly depend on local aid networks for survival. International organizations face severe restrictions, including access denials and operational risks, which have shifted much of the burden of aid delivery onto community-run groups (Kimball and Jumaan, 2020).

This brief focuses specifically on organizational adaptation and excludes broader political or military analysis, as these would distract from understanding how local actors practically reorganize to meet urgent needs. The topic holds practical importance because it provides insights into community-based organizational strategies, helping humanitarian practitioners and policymakers strengthen crisis response in environments where international access is limited. Academically, its relevance lies in the fact that existing studies highlight the importance of grassroots initiatives in fragile contexts, but rarely examine their internal structural adaptations in detail (Elayah et al., 2024). By addressing this gap, the article contributes to a new understanding of how community-run networks maintain functionality under extreme constraints. In one line, the article argues that community-run networks adapt by decentralizing their structures, localizing supply chains, and leveraging community trust to sustain aid delivery.

Therefore, the research question guiding this paper is: How have community-run aid networks adapted their organizational structures to deliver assistance amid Yemen's blockade and restrictions on international humanitarian operations?

Methodologically, the article uses a literature-based approach, drawing on humanitarian reports, academic studies, and publicly available documentation. The article is structured in three parts: the first outlines the context in which the blockade was imposed and its effects on the Yemeni population, the second analyzes organizational adaptations by community networks, and the third evaluates the broader implications for humanitarian practice.

Origins And Effects Of the Blockade

In 1990, the Houthi movement emerged as a form of resistance to President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia and whom the group accused of corruption. The movement became significantly more radicalized following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and later organized anti-government protests, to which Saleh responded with a series of crackdowns, including the detention of approximately 600 Zaidi protesters in Sana'a. These tensions culminated in 2004 with the killing of the movement's founder and leader, Hussein al-Houthi, with the central government believing that this would mark the end of the movement (Riedel, 2017; Boucek, 2010).

However, the movement was far from dismantled; fighting with the group now led by Hussein al-Houthi's brother continued for the following years, only reaching a ceasefire with the central government in February 2010. In the years following the ceasefire, the Houthi movement expanded and strengthened both militarily and politically, and by the end of 2014, they had taken control over most of Sanaa (Montgomery, 2021). The president at the time, Hadi, fled to Aden and declared the capital occupied. Following these events, President Hadi turned to Saudi Arabia, a long-standing regional ally, and by March 2015, a Saudi-backed coalition had launched the military intervention Operation Decisive Storm, imposing a naval blockade (Baron, 2015).

In practice, the blockade transformed an internal conflict into a humanitarian crisis. Before its imposition, Yemen depended heavily on imports, relying on foreign markets for over 90 percent of its essential food supplies (OHCHR, 2016). Restrictions on imports caused the prices of basic goods to rise sharply, not only damaging the national economy but also making essential resources unaffordable for a substantial part of the population. By the end of 2015, commercial fuel imports had fallen to only 1 percent of the country's monthly needs, consequently creating major problems across Yemen, as fuel was essential for pumping water, powering hospital generators, and transporting food and humanitarian aid (OCHA, 2015). This disruption of water pumps and supply systems forced many Yemenis to rely on unsafe water sources, consequently increasing the spread of

water-borne diseases such as cholera and diarrhea (Lopour, 2017). The healthcare system was also affected by the fuel shortage, with hospitals becoming partially functional or closing entirely due to shortages of electricity and medical supplies. Additionally, essential medicines and vaccinations became extremely difficult to obtain, exposing vulnerable groups to disease and malnutrition (ICRC, n.d.).

In this context, international humanitarian aid was heavily constrained by restrictions that remain in place today, which led to the emergence of community-run aid networks to address the resulting gaps in formal humanitarian assistance.

Blockade Conditions and Operational Constraints

The blockade in Yemen has fundamentally reshaped the operational environment in which community-run aid networks function. The blockade consists of severe restrictions on imports, humanitarian access, and movement imposed throughout the conflict. These constraints have disrupted supply chains, damaged infrastructure, and limited international organizations' ability to operate effectively (Sowers & Weinthal, 2021). As a result, community-run networks face structural pressures that require significant organizational adaptation to continue delivering aid.

As these pressures intensified, community-run aid networks emerged as the primary responders, able to reach populations that international actors could no longer access. These networks are locally embedded groups that rely on social ties, volunteerism, and informal governance structures. They remain operational even when international organizations are blocked or restricted, making them indispensable in Yemen's humanitarian landscape (Kimball & Jumaan, 2020). Their centrality in aid delivery underscores the importance of understanding how they reorganize themselves under extreme constraints.

One of the most significant adaptations among these networks is the shift toward decentralized organizational structures. Decentralization distributes decision-making authority across smaller, localized units rather than concentrating it in a central leadership body. This structure enables community groups to bypass mobility restrictions, respond quickly to local needs, and reduce vulnerability to political interference (Elayah et al., 2024). Decentralization, therefore, strengthens operational resilience under blockade conditions.

Another major adaptation is the development of localized supply chains that reduce dependence on external imports. Localized supply chains involve sourcing goods, labour, and logistics from within the community rather than relying on international supply routes. Local procurement minimizes exposure to blockade-related delays and allows aid networks to maintain continuity even when external supply routes collapse (Kimball & Jumaan, 2020). This shift demonstrates how structural innovation emerges directly from environmental constraints.

Community trust also serves as a critical organizational asset, enhancing the effectiveness of local aid networks. Trust is built through long-term engagement, shared identity, and consistent presence within the community. It enables local organizations to negotiate access, avoid conflict with armed groups, and mobilize volunteers more effectively than external actors (Moosa Elayah & Verkoren, 2020). Trust, therefore, becomes an embedded organizational resource that supports aid delivery under blockade conditions.

In addition to internal adaptations, community-run networks have restructured their relationships with international organizations through selective, strategic partnerships. These partnerships balance local autonomy with access to external resources. Local NGOs increasingly assert their priorities and reshape partnerships to protect their operational independence (Elayah & Al-Mansori, 2025). Partnerships thus function as adaptive mechanisms rather than sources of dependency.

Political interference has also forced community-run networks to adopt flexible organizational practices to ensure survival. Organizational flexibility involves modifying roles, procedures, and communication channels in response to political threats. In many areas, local groups adjust their internal structures to avoid detentions, bureaucratic blockages, and coercion by armed actors (Sowers & Weinthal, 2021). For example, aid committees in Houthi-controlled territories often shift leadership roles or reroute distribution plans when local authorities demand control over beneficiary lists or attempt to redirect supplies for political gain. This flexibility ensures continuity in an environment where rigid structures would collapse.

Another important adaptation is the expansion of informal communication networks that operate alongside or in place of formal channels. Informal communication relies on personal relationships, community elders, and trusted intermediaries to share information and coordinate activities. These networks allow aid groups to navigate fragmented authority structures and maintain situational awareness even when official communication routes are disrupted. Civil society actors in Yemen frequently depend on these informal social ties to coordinate assistance and maintain community-level communication in the absence of functioning state institutions (Elayah & Verkoren, 2020). As a result, information flows remain intact despite the broader collapse of state institutions.

Community-run networks have also diversified their resource-mobilization strategies to reduce dependence on any single funding source. Diversification includes tapping into diaspora contributions, local fundraising, small-scale community pooling, and in-kind support from local businesses. This approach stabilizes operations during periods of international funding volatility and reinforces the networks' autonomy. By spreading risk across multiple sources, community groups maintain a steady flow of resources even in highly unpredictable conditions.

Taken together, these adaptations demonstrate the emergence of structurally resilient community-run aid networks capable of operating under extreme constraints. Structural resilience is an organization's capacity to maintain core functions despite systemic shocks. Decentralization, localized supply chains, trust-based legitimacy, flexible governance, diversified resources, and adaptive partnerships collectively enable community networks to operate where international actors cannot (Elayah et al., 2024). Organizational adaptation is therefore the foundation of their sustained humanitarian role under Yemen's blockade.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, Yemen's blockade and restrictions on international humanitarian operations have forced community-run aid networks to transform their organizational structures in order to survive and remain effective. These networks have adapted through decentralization, localized supply chains, trust-based legitimacy, flexible governance, diversified resource strategies, and strategic partnerships, allowing them to deliver aid where formal systems have failed. Their resilience demonstrates the critical role of local actors in conflict-affected environments and highlights the need for humanitarian policy frameworks that recognize and support community-based organizational capacity. The following recommendations translate these findings into practical guidance for humanitarian actors, policymakers, and donors operating in Yemen and other fragile environments:

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