



Onset of the Yemen Tragedy: UNICEF's Responseⁱ

The Arab spring of 2011 brought hope to Yemen – and then chaos.

Amid the turmoil of the 2011 Yemeni Revolution, President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down and his former vice-president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, was elected unopposed. However, the Houthis, a Zaidi-Shia movement from the northern tribes of the country and long-standing opponents of Saleh, boycotted the election – and were not invited to join Hadi's new cabinet in February 2012.

In 2014, following several conflicts with Sunni tribes in northern Yemen, the Houthis began protests against the government. The situation escalated and by January 2015, the Houthis had seized control of the Yemeni capital (Sana'a) and forced Hadi to step down. Hadi escaped to the southern port city of Aden and proclaimed on television that his overthrow had been illegitimate. Several countries, including Saudi Arabia, condemned the Houthi victory as a coup d'état or even an act of terrorism. Houthi leaders countered by condemning continued Saudi recognition of President Hadi as an attempt to destabilize the country, while Iran praised the Houthi uprising as the next phase in the Iranian revolution. Yemen's civil war was drawing ever closer to a "new Syria"¹ or "proxy war" between Iran and Saudi Arabia.²

Matters came to a head on 21 March, when Houthi forces mobilized to defeat Hadi once and for all. He responded by declaring Aden the country's temporary capital and fled to Riyadh, requesting support from Saudi Arabia. By the next day, the Houthis were already in control of key parts of Taiz, less than 200 km from Aden. They arrived on the outskirts of Aden on 25 March. One of their commanders claimed that they would not rest until they had reached Riyadh, the Saudi capital. On 26 March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of ten States began airstrikes on Sana'a and imposed both an aerial and naval blockade on Yemen, plunging the already ravaged country into an even deeper conflict.

Impact on UNICEF operations

When the bombing started, UNICEF had been present in Yemen for more than a decade and had put in place well-functioning supply lines to and within the country. The Yemen Country Office (YCO) was based in the capital, Sana'a, with five field offices spread across the country (Aden, Hodeidah, Sa'ada, Taiz, and Sana'a – see Figure 1).

UNICEF's Supply Division (SD) in Copenhagen handled all logistics activities related to delivering humanitarian supplies to Yemen, while the YCO organized the in-country transportation. The Middle East and North African Regional Office (MENARO) in Amman also played a support role, with their own logistics service providers and two regional warehouses

ⁱ This case is part of a series of humanitarian operations vignettes by the INSEAD Humanitarian Research Group called *Behind the Scenes of Humanitarian Operations*. It was written in August 2019 by Othman Boufaied, Charles Delagarde, Boas Meijer, Joachim Mikalsen, Luk Van Wassenhove and Elin Williams. For more information go to <https://www.insead.edu/centres/humanitarian-research-group>.

located in Amman (Jordan) and Mersin (Turkey). Only a limited range of goods were available locally in Yemen, so most of the supplies had to be shipped into the country.

Before the bombing, UNICEF was operating two separate supply chains: one for vaccines, and one for dry goods. Vaccine shipments were sent by air to Sana'a, while dry goods were shipped to the port cities of Aden and Hodeidah by sea. From these entry points, goods were transported to warehouses for temporary storage or shipped directly to partners for further distribution to beneficiaries. All logistics activities were outsourced to service providers via long-term agreements.

This well-oiled operation ground to a sudden halt when the Saudi-led coalition bombed port and airport infrastructures and imposed a blockade on Yemen. UNICEF's immediate problem was how to get relief shipments into Yemen, as it was not clear who could give them permission to enter the country, or how long the current situation would last. The YCO staff initially thought that Hodeidah Port and Sana'a Airport would remain open – or at least reopen after a short time. “We didn't expect the entire delivery system to collapse,” said Yasser Al-Azazi, a logistics officer in the YCO.

Following the announcement of the blockade, the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) took the difficult decision to evacuate all international staff from Yemen. The UN received permission to land and depart from Sana'a Airport on 4 and 5 April, at which point all 25 of UNICEF's international personnel were relocated to the regional office in Jordan. With every passing day, the situation in Yemen was growing in complexity. By April 2015, ever more citizens, especially children, badly needed humanitarian assistance. Civilian casualties were on the increase – not only as a direct result of bombing or gunfire but because humanitarian support had been cut off. In addition, essential commodities were beginning to run low.

UNICEF's initial response

The person initially in charge of coordinating the Yemen response, Paul Molinaro, Regional Chief of Supply and Logistics, was based in the MENARO. On 27 March, the day after the initial airstrikes, he requested the Supply Division to identify all ships with UNICEF cargo on board that had Hodeidah as destination. UNICEF containers at sea needed to be rerouted, while for vessels at berth, loading had to stop. Molinaro also explored the possibility of chartering a flight to Sana'a to deliver urgently needed aid cargo – and instructed the YCO to make a funding requisition accordingly.

Through Ibrahim El-Ziq, who worked at UNICEF's Gulf Area Office in Riyadh, Molinaro learned that the Coalition had introduced a process to grant selected flights approval to land in Sana'a. By using El-Ziq's contacts in the Saudi government, a flight permit was applied for and an aircraft was loaded with emergency aid from UNICEF's Supply Division on 2 April. However, the process of delivering these supplies to Yemen proved to be a major challenge. After withdrawals of fly-over and landing permissions from several countries' civil aviation authorities, a stop-over in Djibouti including a change of planes, and five permit applications

to the Coalition, the cargo was finally unloaded in Sana'a on 10 April. One simple delivery had taken eight days of intense work and frustrated hopes. On the positive side, UNICEF was the first humanitarian organization, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross, to land a plane with aid cargo in Yemen.

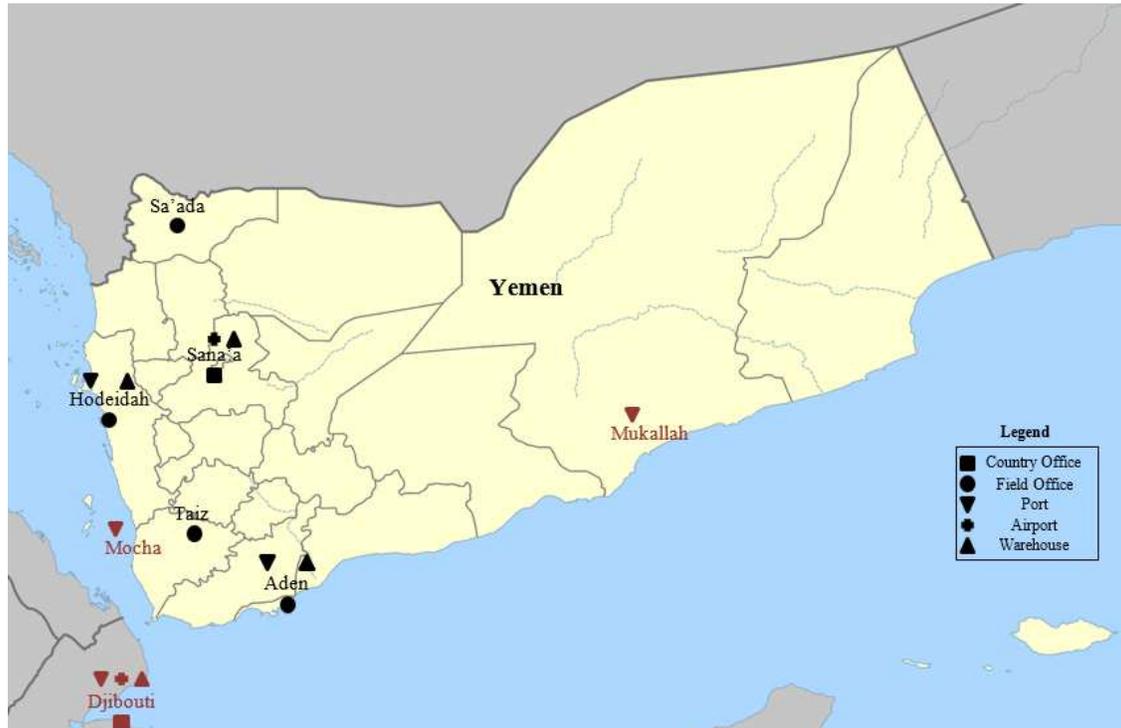


FIGURE 1. KEY UNICEF LOCATIONS IN YEMEN (WITH CHANGES DURING THE CRISIS MARKED IN RED).

The creation of the Djibouti hub

With airports and major seaports closing, and difficulties in flying goods into Yemen, it was clear that UNICEF needed to reengineer its supply chain into the country. Soon after the onset of the crisis, the idea of a “forwarding hub” close to Yemen emerged (see Figure 1).

The proximity to Yemen was especially important given the Coalition’s rules for flight permits. Once a permit was obtained, the plane would need to enter Yemeni airspace, unload the goods and exit the airspace, all within a four-hour time window. Moreover, flight permits were usually obtained only the night before departure, which made proximity to Yemen even more critical. Short distances also equated to lower lead times for the much slower deliveries by sea.

The options considered as possible locations for the hub were: Amman (Jordan); Aqaba (Jordan); Dubai (UAE); Salalah (Oman); Djibouti; and Saudi Arabia. Djibouti was selected for a variety of reasons including UNICEF’s presence there, flexible logistics facilities, and relatively light government regulation. In fact, the logistical infrastructure at Djibouti was excellent. It was one of the region’s major seaports – with a tax-free zone for the import,

storage and export of goods. In addition, Scan Global Logistics, UNICEF's principal freight forwarder in the region already had subcontractors in Djibouti. Other humanitarian organizations were successfully using Djibouti as a transport hub for Africa, which suggested that it could work for Yemen too. However, the most important reason to select Djibouti was its proximity to Yemen – just 242 km to Aden, 394 km to Hodeidah (by sea) and 453 km to Sana'a (by air).

Stéphane Arnaud, from the SD, arrived in Djibouti on 9 April to assess the suitability of the city as a forwarding hub. The starting point for his assessment was to establish contact with two local service providers through two of UNICEF's international freight forwarders, Scan Global Logistics and Kuehne + Nagel. In addition, some Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff in Djibouti put Arnaud in touch with two further transport companies, one which owned a fleet of dhows (motorized wooden vessels, typically used to transport dates, timber, and fish in the region). MSF told Arnaud that they had already successfully used dhows to send medical aid from Djibouti to Yemen. Through discussions with various transport companies, he also obtained information about clearance, warehousing and transport. Arnaud brought the service providers together and worked out how to organize shipments from Djibouti to Yemen.

After Arnaud had met with Paul Molinaro (MENARO) and Joselito Nuguid (SD) in Djibouti and presented his suggestions, a plan for staffing and managing the hub was drafted. Collaboration with Djibouti Country Office (DCO) staff, who agreed to lend some of their office space to support the hub, was essential in getting the operation started. Following discussions with the DCO, who agreed to continue providing necessary support, Molinaro and Nuguid flew straight back to Amman to get the plan signed off by the YCO and MENARO. The task was made easier by the fact that both teams were in the same building. The contract for managing the hub was awarded to Scan Global Logistics, which in turn was responsible for subcontracting further service providers to carry out day-to-day operations.

The use of dhows for sea transport from Djibouti to Yemen proved beneficial and gave UNICEF a great deal of speed and flexibility. As ports in Yemen had been bombed, there were only a limited number of functional unloading cranes available and waiting times to enter large ports had risen significantly. Container vessels therefore often had to wait weeks before being handled. On the other hand, the much smaller dhows could quickly be loaded and unloaded manually. These wooden vessels could also deliver to smaller Yemeni ports allowing UNICEF to land goods much closer to where they were needed.

On the ground in Yemen

When the fighting had escalated in late March, all non-life saving programs in Yemen had been stopped. The focus had shifted to delivering emergency supplies to assist a population in peril. Although shipments to Yemen were vastly improved by the creation of the forwarding hub in Djibouti, the situation within the country remained complicated.

The YCO was forced to suspend its long-term agreements with transport companies in Yemen for two reasons. First, fuel became difficult and expensive to obtain. Second, the security landscape shifted considerably. Service providers were unable to reach some destinations, while for others the prices rose sharply. The charge for a delivery from Sana'a to Taiz, for example, was five times the pre-crisis rate. The decision was taken to source service providers case by case for each delivery instead of using the established long-term agreements.

On the other hand, the customs process at Yemeni entry ports became more efficient. In April 2015, UNICEF reached an agreement with the customs authorities to speed up the process, obtaining a so-called "direct release" of goods. This meant that shipments could leave the port as soon as the approval from the Ministry of Health came through, whereas they had previously needed approval from four or five ministries. Customs clearance (or exemption) was handled afterwards. The time taken to release supplies after arrival at the port fell from 3–4 weeks to 2–3 days. Thus, UNICEF's lead times for shipments into Yemen became even shorter than before the blockade, even though deliveries now had to be routed via the Djibouti hub.

Another problem faced by the YCO was electrical cuts due to bombing of power plants. Even before the conflict escalated, electricity supplies had been unreliable such that many Yemenis used generators. However, with fuel either unavailable or unaffordable due to the blockade, this was no longer an option. Yasser Al-Azazi, who was the only UNICEF logistics person left in Yemen, took the initiative to buy solar panels. This compensated for the unreliable electricity supply and greatly enhanced communications with his colleagues outside the country.

In May 2015, Al-Azazi's international teammates returned from Jordan, but the Yemen crisis endures to this day (August 2019). Despite sporadic peace talks and ceasefires, airstrikes and fighting have become regular occurrences and essential commodities are still hard to come by. Recently, aid thefts have further hindered operations with some organizations suspending food deliveries. What was already the poorest country on the Arabian Peninsula has been further ravaged by war, disease and malnutrition.

Meanwhile, amidst the most arduous working conditions, UNICEF has continued to deliver unbroken emergency aid. Its support is essential for a population in which 3.65 of the 29 million inhabitants are internally displaced, and a staggering 83% in need of humanitarian assistance, including 2 million acutely malnourished children. Initially planned to operate for 3-6 months, the hub is still very much needed – and looks as if it will remain open for quite some time.

After a successful intervention in Yemen, UNICEF clearly has the potential to consolidate a powerful asset: the capacity to be agile in the response to sudden crises. In response to the aerial and naval blockade, UNICEF quickly recognized that a forwarding hub close to Yemen was necessary and that large vessels would suffer queuing delays and unloading difficulties. Resources were swiftly allocated to establish a hub in Djibouti and use the versatile dhows



for transportation to different ports in Yemen. It was the collective commitment within and between the different UNICEF offices that allowed for these adjustments of the supply chain to take place in a timely manner.

With an increasing number of sources hindering response operations (natural disasters, conflicts), the ability to quickly react to changes in the setting and adapt operations is ever more important. For humanitarian organizations to be successful in such dynamic settings, strategic agility is essential.³ Humanitarian organizations can benefit from incorporating a strategic agility framework, creating an environment facilitating rapid detection of the need for change and timely implementation of a satisfactory supply chain solution.⁴

¹ *Is Yemen Becoming the Next Syria?* Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/06/is-yemen-becoming-the-next-syria/>.

² *Yemen Conflict Devolves into Proxy War*. The Wall Street Journal.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-presses-sunni-security-force-as-bulwark-against-iran-1427415577>.

³ *Embedding strategic agility: A leadership agenda for accelerating business model renewal*. Doz, Y. L., & Kosonen, M. (2010). Long range planning, 43(2-3), 370-382.

⁴ This mini case is based on the Humanitarian Agility in Action: The 2015 Yemen Crisis case studies written by the HRG, <https://cases.insead.edu/humanitarian-agility/>.