

Intervention encounters and political performances during Yemen's transition phase: Towards gender- & conflict-conscious development?

- a proposal for collaborative research

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Introduction: Conflict-conscious development?

This project is a critical analysis of the transition phase in Yemen as a momentum for finding peaceful, just and democratic ways of co-existence between diverse parts of the population. The re-negotiation of power-sharing implied by the transition phase has in particular raised expectations for more gender equality in a country where men, compared to women, are continually privileged in political, social and economic terms. Thus, as observers repeatedly point out, Yemen figures as the least developed Arab country in gender inequality indexes, ranked as number 148 on a worldwide scale.¹

As an outcome of negotiations to end the 2011 violent, political conflict in Yemen, also designated “Arab Spring” or “popular uprising”, the transition phase was initiated by the GCC-agreement with the former Yemeni leadership in December 2011. The agreement was represented as a transition to a new and democratic constitution for the country, ensuring security, unity and development in Yemen (Sharkieh 2013, Alley 2013). However, also prior to the transition phase such objectives - improving the social and gender balance, in terms of a more equal distribution of welfare (health, income, education, rights), and in terms of finding ways to better integrate and include marginalized or disenfranchised parts of the population in the processes that shape and determine the direction of Yemeni development - were among the objectives of planned interventions (De Regt 2007; Strzelecka 2013) and civil society activism in the country (Carapico 1998). This activism was relying on support from different sides – political parties in Yemen, foreign donors, the UN, etc. and already in the early 2000s Yemen was designated a prioritized country for the fulfillment of the

¹ However, close to the position of Saudi Arabia – ranking at 145, according to Human Development Report 2013, <https://data.undp.org/dataset/Table-4-Gender-Inequality-Index/pq34-nwq7>. Accessed March 28th 2014.

Millennium Development Goals. In other words, the hitherto pretext of development in Yemen - sustaining social justice and a politically stable Yemen seems to equally valid for the transition phase whose immediate object, it goes without saying, was to end conflict, and initiate a political process that would create accord.

However, rather than accord, the transition phase initiated in December 2011 turned out to be a protracted transition during which continued and even in some instances increased political confrontations and violence occurred. Thus, US drones dropped in Yemen to strike and combat AQAP terrorists, sovereignty for the Southern parts and the war between Houthis – Salafists in the Saada region in the North are among the highly contested issues that have tended to dominate the agenda (Alley 2013). Consequently, it could be argued, that at best, i.e. if the pledges about increased development assistance made by a range of donors², consequences of the transition phase are intensified international interventions in terms of development assistance to Yemen rather than a qualitative turn or new objectives in development practices and policies.

What we henceforth call *transition interventions and activism* are therefore core objects for this collaborative research: Whereas ‘conflict-prevention’, ‘reconciliation’ and ‘peace-building’ have been standard references for many of the initiatives in Yemen (and beyond), the Yemeni transition begs the question: How does transition activism and interventions take conflict and conflict risk into consideration? In what ways may it be meaningful to refer to development as conflict-conscious? What are the relevance of conflict-conscious development for gender and the constitution of female and male subjectivities in the new Yemen?

Background

The status which Yemen has received within recent years as a fragile state (Doornbos 2006) potentially jeopardizing international security (Phillips 2011) was during 2011 supplemented with images and voices demonstrating that Yemen was yet another Arab country revolting against a long-reigning repressive regime. The popular and originally peaceful protests in the streets of Yemeni cities quickly transformed into violent conflict which aggregated and the country was on the verge of civil war with a disintegrated army, numerous casualties and direct intrastate warfare

² The donor group calling themselves ‘Friends of Yemen’ has in a sequence of meetings made pledges amounting to 7,9 billion US dollars. These pledges which were confirmed by the World Bank on the scheduled date of the National Dialogue Conference, 25th September 2013, see <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2013/09/25/friends-of-yemen-committed-support-next-stage-yemen-transition>

until the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in late November 2011 finally accepted to resign in a GCC-initiated and UN-supported agreement (Sharkieh 2013: 1). A transition plan was integrated in the agreement and included impunity for President and his entourage, but also a so-called National Dialogue Conference with a reformulated constitution and new elected president as the primary objectives (Ibid.). Stipulated in the transition plan, is the participation of the diverse parts of Yemeni civil society in the process of building a so-called “New Yemen”, as the slogan for the National Dialogue Conference claimed, and the plan particularly mentions the participation of women and youth.

This formalized and UN-guided peace-building process, backed by GCC-countries and US, the success of which is still to be ascertained, may constitute an expression of an expanded notion of security and the threat posed by an unstable Yemen to political and social stability in the region (Phillips 2011). Never-the-less this process seems to have created a momentum for national reconciliation and a reformulation of development strategies. In line with other post-conflict experiences (MacGinty & Williams 2005 – for a former Yemeni experience, see Molyneux 2004), the way that this momentum is unfolded will most probably be crucial in terms of political stability and unity of Yemen, consequently for socio-economic development in the country. Thus, certain groups, not least those who were in the forefront of protesters, have entered the National Dialogue with expectations of obtaining improved position and status in the new Yemen. They have also realized that improvements do not emerge automatically; the pressure and activism among women, youth and repressed groups such as the *Akhdam* has continued during the transition phase.

Purpose

The purpose of the proposed research is thus to investigate the possibilities and strategies for the inclusion of marginalized perspectives, in particular gender dimensions in post-conflict development, reconciliation and reconstruction (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009, Abirefah 2009, Moser 2001, Cockburn 2001) by studying the Yemeni case. The research therefore is characterized by an ambition to firstly, challenge theories and strategies that opt for a *conflict-conscious development* (Junne and Verkoren 2005: 6) incorporating but only inconsistently the ways that gender dimensions are inextricably interlinked with development, and secondly, to reflect and discuss the extent to which a conflict-conscious development in fact constitute an alternative or particular approach to development. For this task we need to include not only the transition phase as it was planned and enacted, but also the way that the population writ large interacted with it.

Research question

The research question asked is thus: ***How do intervention encounters and the political performances during the Yemeni transition phase contribute to a conflict-conscious and/ or gender balanced development?***

Sub-questions

A response to this research question preconditions clarification of the following sub-questions: 1. How does the security agenda, dominating international development policies, inflict on the possibility of a conflict-conscious development in Yemen? 2. What are the particular characteristics of ‘conflict-conscious’ development and how do they involve gender? – Equally: 3. How was the transition phase as a planned intervention encountered with support, resistance, or challenges in activism and political performances? These questions will be addressed in separate substudies of the programme, according to their relevance.

Theoretical frame: Challenging the conflict-gender-development nexus

This research programme takes inspiration in the combination of four strands of theories:

1. *The security agenda and its consequences for development:* In recent post-cold war decades attention to the level of violent and political conflict in developing countries has increased, and it has been argued that these conflicts are so-called ‘new wars’ which are primarily civil in character – wars or violent political conflict between different parts of the population of a county (Doornbos 2006). The international community does not always interfere in such conflicts, but if they are considered a security threat the likeness becomes much higher (Kaldor 2006) and development policies have been redirected accordingly - to avoid the threats inherent in conditions of instability, increasingly formulated as not only political conflict but also as social unrest resulting from e.g. youth unemployment, hunger and disease (Stern and Öjendal 2010, Beswick and Jackson 2011). The security-development nexus combined with a quest for more effective development aid in post-cold war decades which united many donor countries (Eyben 2005, Mosse & Lewis 2005) thus constitute a backdrop for the extensive literature on post-conflict development; here it is assumed that effectiveness of development can be promoted, not only by increasing the understanding of

the conflict potential of the social processes that development aid in general gives rise to, but in the situation of political conflict and its aftermath such knowledge needs to be seconded by sensitivity to the conflict itself, the conflicting parties and the consequences for the populations afflicted by it (Mac Ginty & Williams 2009; Junne & Verkoren 2005, Bouta et al 2005). Thus, in this study, the likelihood of conflict-sensitive development in Yemen should be evaluated against the backdrop of the dominance of the development-security nexus in development policies.

2. *Gender as a buzzword in post-conflict development approaches*: Feminist researchers have argued that our understanding of post-conflict situations on local, national and international level is preconditioned by an analysis of their gendered consequences (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009, Moser & Clark 2001, Cockburn 2007, Schott 2013). In other words, the way that women and men partake in violent conflict in obvious or more subtle ways and the differentiated consequences for femininities and masculinities as well as their transformations during conflict (Baez and Stern, Parpart & Zalewski 2009) are considerations to be included, if development and social change is to take a conflict-conscious direction. The fact that feminist research in the development sector has identified ‘gender’ as a buzzword, emptied for real substance and meaning (Cornwall & Brock 2005), ‘domesticated by development agencies’ (Cornwall 2007: 71), rather than as in reality a concern and priority (Molyneux 2004), calls for a skeptical approach to the gender-conflict-development nexus in Yemen in this research programme, and in our analysis, the development buzzwords of the transition phase, including gender, will be identified.
3. *Ethnographies of aid*: As has been highlighted in so-called ‘ethnographies of aid’, generally development policies and project logics do not correspond, and development workers do not just implement the policies that projects and programmes are designated to accomplish (Mosse 2005, Hagberg & Wickman 2006, Eyben 2006, Hindman & Feather 2011). Development interventions set in motion a number of processes that are likely to change power balances in the societies targeted; they are, for this and other reasons, inherently conflict-generating (MacGinty & Williams 2009: p.i). The likeliness that the sum of these processes can be contained or even included in the stated objective of the intervention is considerably lower than usually claimed. In fact, a number of actors need to be taken into account for a full narrative about the ‘effect’ or consequences of particular development projects, including the development workers and the ‘recipients’ who are social actors

themselves, capable of influencing – twisting, contesting or altogether circumventing the processes of a development intervention (Mosse 2004; 2005). Although the transition phase in Yemen is pointed out as at least a relative success, e.g. in the words of the UN envoy, Jamal Benomar, it is equally contested as an intervention, indicated by attempts at sabotage, and at blocking the progress of the National Dialogue Conference.³ Thus in this programme the Yemeni transition phase is approached as a planned development intervention, the processes of which are uncovered in close and careful scrutiny of how actors in different positions vis-à-vis the transition intervention, in action and speech impact on its direction and outcome.

4. *Politics as performative*: Politics in Yemen are not only – perhaps even seldom - handled in political institutions (Alley 2010, Phillips 2008, Wedeen 2008). More likely political events are to be found in shadow institutions in which direct remuneration of political allies is common, and in which tribal values and laws may be invoked (Phillips 2008); thus politics is highly influenced by neo-patrimonial patterns of interaction (Alley 2010), exacerbated by Yemen's rentier economy (Schwartz 2008). More relevant for the study of political change in a fragile state like Yemen – and for the transition process – would therefore be informal gatherings such as qat-chews (Wedeen 2008: 216). In a fragile state like Yemen, allegiances and construction of community are based on context-specific *performances*, be they discursive or non-verbal, which reinvigorate or alter such observable allegiances, rather than on one-time established social categories (Wedeen 2008: 213). Such an approach constitute in this programme a strategy to analyze e.g. the activities during the transition phase, meant to establish a united and democratic Yemen, such as was the mandate for the UN-guided transition process.

Methodological strategy

Development partners are already paying efforts to develop a framework for conflict resolution and transformation in a Yemeni context – a more systematic approach based on current advances in research is needed – and here proposed. The outcome of Yemen's transition may be limited social and political change since this intervention cannot shake existing elite political power patterns (Alley 2010 & 2013) – and conflict-sensitive and development interventions may in that case be

³ <http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2013/09/as-yemen-national-dialogue-nears-end-challenges-remain-un-envoy/index.html>, accessed May 2014

approached as sustaining this status quo. On the other hand the outcome may be that the transition's constitution-development and other reform initiatives, including in the field of gender, bring a more inclusive Yemeni society – and conflict-sensitive development may then conversely be seen as in fact sustaining these processes.

It is our assumption, as already mentioned, that the National Dialogue Conference and the transition phase in Yemen (1.12.2011- 31.1.2014) in its entirety can be considered a *planned development intervention* - planned, orchestrated and monitored by the UN, and integrated in the GCC agreement, specifying a roadmap for a 'New Yemen'. Therefore, in accordance with recent ethnographies of aid (Hagberg & Wickman 2006, Mosse 2004 & 2005), this programme will locate the social settings in which development interventions are negotiated, twisted, contested and transformed. These sites are constituted by cultural encounters, in essence (but not only) between donors and receivers (or 'beneficiaries') that we shall call 'arenas of encounters'. In analyzing arenas of encounters we take inspiration from actor-oriented 'interface analysis' (see Long 1999).

Interface analysis

Arenas of encounters are sites where interventions are addressed explicitly, such as in formal meetings between donors and recipients, but they might also be sites of informal social interaction in which contestation-negotiation-rejection of the meanings emerging from interventions nonetheless occurs. Arenas therefore constitute *battlefields of knowledge* (Long and Long 1992), since at stake is what is known and meaningful according to actors taking different and at times conflicting positions vis-a-vis the intervention. Thus, interface analysis requires a particular attention to the knowledge produced:

“- in intervention situations [knowledge] assumes special significance since it entails the interplay or confrontation of 'expert' versus 'lay' forms of knowledge, beliefs and values, and struggles over their legitimation, segregation and communication. (Long 1999: 4)

Development interventions constitute a case of one knowledge claim confronting another, local form of knowledge, i.e. about how to build a state. Attention to how knowledge is at the forefront of interventions is however not self-evident in the case of Yemen's transition process. What needs to be spelled out, then, is the kind of 'expert-knowledge' which the transition process represents, in general and in more particular activities which are in direct or indirect linkage with the transition

process. A central part of the transition phase is the national dialogue and the way it came to be formulated.

While a technical committee without participation from the UN or from other stakeholders decided on the specific organization of the NDC, the UN special envoy and the experts employed in his office throughout the process directed and gave advice. This expert knowledge is not readily accepted by all parties, but may be contested or opposed as legitimate forms of knowledge, or twisted and thus transformed. For interface analysis, then, it is:

“A major task [-] to spell out the knowledge and power implications of this interplay and the blending or segregation of opposing discourses”

(Ibid: 4)

During the technical team’s preparation of the National Dialogue and throughout its timeframe, different actors had conflicting views regarding how the national dialogue should be organized and critique and protest continued to be raised on how delegates were chosen, and to what extent the NDC was an élite project or not⁴. Thus different discourses on the National Dialogue Conference gave conflicting versions of what would be a legitimate Conference and what would in one way or another misrepresent the population – how many delegates should the Southern, Hirak movement be allotted? How was independent youth represented? How many Akhdam delegates? – in other words, who was advantaged in the organization implemented and who was not.

Spaces for participation have been investigated by a group of researchers as spaces of interface – co-governance - between civil society and state, designed and put in place by large development agencies as avenues for increasing participation of marginalized and poor population groups (Cornwall and Coelho 2007). We approach spaces for participation as a specific or particular form of arena, which is organized with the specific purpose of boosting local participation and ‘ownership’. The National Dialogue Conference in Yemen comes forward as such a space, with the potentiality for marginalized, poor and disenfranchised population groups such to emerge as ‘new political actors and political subjectivities’ (Ibid.: 3). Although organized with democratic ideals as the model, participation in spaces of participation is far from straightforward:

⁴ <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2014/03/03/yemens-negotiated-transition-between-the-elite-and-the-street/>, accessed November 10th 2014.

“- there remains a gap between the legal and technical apparatus that has been institutionalized and the reality of the effective exclusion of poorer and more marginalized groups” (Ibid.: 3).

Invitations to participate are not enough to inspire political agency, nor influence for all participants. As a space for participation, the National Dialogue generates conflicting accounts of the Yemeni population and the demographical and political divisions of its population. In these accounts local knowledge is blended with external ‘expert’ knowledge, e.g. in the sense that justifications produced locally for who is justified as a delegate and who is not were referring to the guidelines of the UN-backed GCC agreement. However, other examples of arenas may be much more unobtrusive (such as organized ‘dialogue-settings’, funded by foreign donors and put in place by local, Yemeni organizations, see for instance US Peace Institute for their programme in Yemen, Justice and Security Dialogue, <http://www.usip.org/category/countries/yemen>) and yet others may be found in more informal gatherings such as qat-sessions (analyzed by Wedeen 2008) or - to pinpoint a women’s event - the *tafrot*, a social gathering in celebrating e.g. a newborn or a homecoming *hajja*. Also the local shop or café, the gathering after listening to a *khutba* in the mosque, the health clinic etc. might constitute such an arena. To reiterate, arenas are social spaces, specific in terms of time and place, in which social contestation over meanings of planned development interventions occur. An arena is not necessarily physical in shape (thus might e.g. include the social media); in each case the arenas of this study will constitute *strategic sites of fieldwork* for the construction of data following a range of methods made to fit the individual sub-study.

Arenas are spaces of cultural encounters emerging where development interventions are negotiated, contested, twisted or transformed by ‘recipients’ of the intervention

The selected arenas of this research will be subject to analysis, taking inspiration from Long’s interface analysis, in each sub-study specifying how actors located in different positions struggle for the legitimacy or supremacy of certain meanings of the transition process – or specific expression of this process - as a development intervention.

The approach will be applied in a number of sub-studies, organized in three thematic frameworks, each constituting a work package:

Workpackage 1: The implementation of SCR 1325 in Yemen

The national Dialogue in Yemen, officially initiated March 18th 2013, and headed by the UN special envoy, constitutes an opportunity to study and conduct research on post-conflict resolution and transformation in processes of reconciliation. The process of National Dialogue was formed from the so-called transition plan or road map, and a number of elements of this plan are pointing at the requirements of the SCR - e.g. in its claim of representing all parts of the Yemeni civil society and of including at least 30% female participants. As the transition plan was unfolded in practice in Yemen, the question raised is, what the effect of such a resolution seems to be in this case.

Substudies:

1. *Women in Post-Conflict Societies: Training Women for NDC in Yemen (Fawziah)*
2. *Women, Peace and Security in Transition Yemen (Husnia)*
3. *Gender, Conflict and Security in Yemen's Transition Process (Connie)*

Work package 2: Gender transformations during conflict

Gender as a practice and imagined social category is transformed during violent political conflict. Already in a pre-conflict context such transformation, e.g. militarization and the development of hyper-masculinities can be expected. Under the impression of such a process, it is hardly masculinities only that undergo transformations, and it becomes pertinent also to ask how femininities are transformed during political conflict. The Yemeni popular uprising, with its focus upon women participants in the uprising and its pursuing (and troubled) transition process, presents itself as an opportunity to study such transformations.

Substudy: Renegotiations of Gender in Transition Yemen

Work package 3: Conflict and intervention in Yemen

Often pointed out as fragile state, external powers have been keen to support the Yemeni state and assisting it in the difficult task of controlling its territories, not less so since the popular uprising and the stronger position of AQAP in Yemen. Many pledges from foreign donors have been made, and

the ‘development industry’ is currently heavily engaged in the Yemeni process of reconciliation – or perhaps more to the point, the process of continued conflict, although the level of violence has decreased since the height of the crisis in the summer of 2011. What is the effect of this presence in Yemen? Does it lead to development rather than conflict and to the intended improved gender balance? Or are other effects more likely?

Sub-studies:

1. *Interventions into public water supply in Sana’a City during the 2011 conflict; access and effects (Bilkis)*
2. *Gender and peace-building (Ghaidaa)*

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Title: Intervention encounters and political performances during Yemen's transition phase: Towards conflict-conscious development?

Purpose: To investigate the possibilities and strategies for the inclusion of marginalized perspectives, in particular gender dimensions in post-conflict development by studying the Yemeni case.

Main Question: *How do intervention encounters and the political performances they entailed during the Yemeni transition phase contribute to a conflict-conscious and/ or gender balanced development?*

Hypotheses:

I: Yemen's transition cannot radically shake elite political power patterns, thus social and political change is limited – and conflict-sensitive development interventions tend to sustain status quo in terms of power-sharing.

II: Constitution-development and other reform initiatives during Yemen's transition bring a more inclusive, united and democratic Yemeni society, including more gender equality, and conflict-sensitive development approaches are sustaining these processes.