



Beyond Relief: Governance, Aid Effectiveness, and the Persistence of Food Insecurity in Yemen (2015–2025)

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Abstract

Over a decade into Yemen's civil war, the country remains one of the world's most severe food security crises, despite receiving over USD 10 billion in humanitarian and development assistance since 2015. This paper investigates the paradox of massive aid and minimal impact, analyzing why international and regional support has failed to produce measurable food security gains. Using a qualitative synthesis of official data from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), World Food Programme (WFP), FEWS NET, World Bank, and the Saudi Aid Platform, the study identifies structural causes underlying persistent hunger: fragmented governance, weak coordination, outdated data systems, and an overreliance on emergency food assistance. As of February 2025, 4.7 million Yemenis are classified in IPC Phase 3 or higher in Southern Yemen, and projections for early 2026 estimate this number could exceed 18 million for the whole country—more than half the population. The paper argues that humanitarian interventions have been trapped in a short-term relief cycle, while governance failures and macroeconomic collapse have neutralized donor impact. It concludes with a roadmap linking relief to development through agricultural revival, institutional reform, and integrated national data systems to achieve sustainable food security outcomes in Yemen.

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1. Introduction

Since 2014, the Republic of Yemen has faced one of the most protracted and devastating food crises in modern history. A decade of conflict, institutional fragmentation, and economic collapse has transformed the Arab world's poorest country into a laboratory of humanitarian fatigue and systemic failure. Despite more than USD 10.2 billion in Saudi assistance and roughly USD 4–5 billion annually from multilateral donors, the country's food security indicators have continued to deteriorate. By early 2025, approximately 4.7 million people were experiencing acute food insecurity in IPC Phase 3 ("Crisis") or worse, including 1.24 million in Phase 4 ("Emergency"). Forward projections for September 2025–February 2026 anticipate a further escalation to 18.1 million people living in crisis or emergency conditions (IPC, 2025) ^[15].

The persistence of such outcomes raises a central paradox. Why has massive and sustained aid not translated into sustainable food security? This question lies at the intersection of three overlapping crises involving the erosion of state capacity, the structural design of the international humanitarian system, and the collapse of Yemen's domestic economy. Each factor interacts to perpetuate dependency and undermine resilience, producing what Yemeni analysts have described as a composite dysfunction in which every link in the food-security chain operates in isolation.

Since 2015, Yemen has been the recipient of one of the world's largest coordinated relief operations. Saudi Arabia, through the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief) and the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY), has implemented over 1,300 projects valued at USD 10.22 billion. Approximately USD 4.6 billion has been disbursed through KSRelief alone across sectors such as food security, health, and water and sanitation (KSRelief, 2025) ^[16]. Additional funds from the Saudi Ministry of Finance and other agencies have supported budget stabilization and reconstruction initiatives. Complementary flows from the World Food Programme (WFP), FAO, UNICEF, and bilateral donors have maintained an extensive relief footprint, reaching nearly two-thirds of the population with some form of assistance. Yet the humanitarian outcome curve has remained flat or negative.

Yemen's macroeconomic environment has magnified the fragility of its food system. The Yemeni Rial lost nearly 90 percent of its value, falling from roughly 250 Rial per USD in 2015 to 1,518 in 2023, underscoring the collapse of monetary stability. This collapse in purchasing power coupled with an import dependency exceeding 90 percent for staple foods has eroded household access to markets. Public-sector salary suspensions since 2016 have pushed an estimated 1.2 million civil servants below subsistence levels. The resulting contraction in effective demand feeds a vicious cycle, humanitarian food baskets substitute for income, but their very presence depresses local production and trade.

Parallel to economic deterioration, Yemen's governance architecture has fragmented. The existence of dual central banks (Aden and Sana'a), overlapping ministries, and competing regional authorities has undermined fiscal coherence and donor coordination. The absence of a unified national strategy for food security has left humanitarian agencies to operate within parallel systems, often negotiating access on a district-by-district basis.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Global Perspectives on Food Security and Humanitarian Aid

Contemporary scholarship defines food security as encompassing four interdependent pillars: availability, access, utilization, and stability (FAO, 2023) ^[10]. International institutions such as the FAO, WFP, and IFAD coordinate interventions across these dimensions, yet outcomes in conflict-affected countries continue to diverge from global targets. Scholars describe this disjuncture as an implementation gap, when there is a mismatch between the design of global aid frameworks and the local political economies in which they operate (Maxwell & Hailey, 2020; Barrett *et al.*, 2022) ^[17, 31].

Recent debates on aid effectiveness further emphasize that humanitarian flows are never politically neutral. Traditional relief models assumed apolitical benevolence, whereas newer analyses argue that assistance can entrench power asymmetries and substitute for domestic governance (Barnett, 2011; Weiss, 2018) ^[2]. In fragile contexts, humanitarian agencies often become de facto administrative structures, a phenomenon de Waal (2019) terms humanitarian counter-governance. This framework is particularly relevant to protracted crises such as Yemen, where international

organizations have assumed many state-like functions.

2.2. The Humanitarian-Development Divide

A persistent feature of global assistance architecture is the divide between emergency relief and long-term development. The concept of Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD) emerged to bridge these domains, yet operational evidence shows limited success. OECD (2021) and Oxfam (2022) estimate that less than 10 percent of humanitarian budgets worldwide are allocated to resilience or livelihood programs. Yemen reflects this global imbalance, with roughly 90 percent of donor funding between 2015 and 2024 supporting short-term food distributions rather than agricultural or market recovery (OCHA, 2024; ACAPS, 2023) ^[20, 1].

2.3. Governance and Data

Political-economy research on fragile states identifies governance capacity as the decisive variable shaping aid effectiveness. Brinkerhoff (2020) argues that fragmented authority and overlapping mandates lead to collective-action failure, prompting donors to replace rather than reinforce state institutions. In Yemen, dual central banks, politicized ministries, and opaque fiscal management have eroded donor confidence (World Bank, 2024) ^[32]. Government assessments published in 2025 highlight that well-intentioned initiatives are routinely undermined by corruption, bureaucratic overlap, and weak monitoring systems.

Data integrity presents a parallel challenge. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) framework has been unable to conduct nationwide surveys since 2018, relying instead on remote sensing, market-price monitoring, and mobile-data proxies. Although technologically innovative, such methods compromise representativeness and invite political interference. Sandvik (2022) warns that the "datafication" of humanitarian crises may create an illusion of precision, obscuring the structural uncertainties underpinning analysis ^[23].

3. Methodology and Data Limitations

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative, multi-source design to examine how governance fragmentation and aid structures have shaped Yemen's food-security outcomes between 2015 and 2025. The analysis integrates documentary review, secondary data synthesis, and comparative policy analysis. Combining institutional datasets with national policy documents makes it possible to trace both international and domestic dynamics influencing the persistence of food insecurity.

The research draws primarily on official sources from the IPC, WFP, FAO, FEWS NET, the World Bank's Joint Monitoring Reports (JMR), ACAPS, and the Saudi Aid Platform. These sources offer complementary perspectives. IPC and FEWS NET provide the most widely accepted estimates of the population in food-insecure phases and the geographic distribution of hunger. WFP and OCHA situation reports contribute operational and funding data, while World Bank and ACAPS analyses document macroeconomic performance, fiscal management, and exchange-rate trajectories. Government reports give insight into the political and institutional side of the crisis. Regional donors such as KSRelief and SDRPY provide data on financial flows and

sectoral allocations of assistance.

3.2. Data Limitations

While this design offers a broad and integrated view of Yemen's food-security landscape, several factors constrain data reliability. The most significant limitation is geographical. Since 2018, IPC and FEWS NET have been unable to conduct ground surveys in Houthi-controlled areas, relying instead on remote estimation using satellite imagery, market-price monitoring, and mobile-phone mobility data. These methods are technologically sophisticated but cannot fully capture local realities. Temporal gaps persist as well, with many datasets updated only once or twice per year, delaying the reflection of changing conditions. Political interference further complicates data collection, with humanitarian actors reporting pressure from local authorities to adjust figures, particularly in contested districts. On the economic side, Yemen's dual banking system produces inconsistent monetary and fiscal data, and donor platforms vary in how they classify and record assistance, reducing comparability across sources.

Given these challenges, all quantitative estimates in this study are treated as indicative rather than definitive. Figures are cross-checked across multiple sources wherever possible, and ranges are presented when discrepancies occur. The objective is not to generate new numerical findings but to interpret existing data critically, showing how informational gaps and inconsistencies mirror broader structural weaknesses within Yemen's humanitarian and governance systems. All materials consulted are publicly available, and no interviews or personally identifiable information were collected, ensuring full compliance with ethical and transparency standards.

4. Findings

4.1. Governance and Institutional Drivers

Governance data and operational audits show a consistent administrative breakdown that directly constrains food-aid effectiveness. Between 2019 and 2024, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation required an average of 4.3 months to approve international project proposals, more than twice the regional median of two months (World Bank, 2024) ^[32]. During the same period, 46 percent of humanitarian projects were suspended or delayed because of conflicting approvals between Sana'a- and Aden-based authorities (OCHA, 2024) ^[20]. These procedural conflicts froze or re-routed roughly USD 380 million in donor funds, equivalent to six months of national food-basket distributions.

Governance failures were equally visible at the local level, with 12 of 22 governorates applying unstandardized customs or transit fees on relief shipments (ACAPS, 2023) ^[1]. Averaging 6-8 percent of cargo value, these informal levies reduced delivery volumes and discouraged private transporters from working with aid agencies. Audit trails reviewed by the Yemeni Anti-Corruption Commission (2025) traced missing or diverted consignments to district-level patronage networks. In Aden, project approvals average 2.5 months and in Ibb they exceeded 6 months, reflecting uneven bureaucratic bottlenecks (World Bank, 2024) ^[32]. Collectively, these findings quantify how overlapping authority converts administrative duplication into tangible resource loss, absorbing humanitarian capital before it

reaches households.

Politicization compounds these structural weaknesses. In both Sana'a and Aden, rival authorities routinely use humanitarian permissions to consolidate legitimacy and extract rents from aid flows. Field reports describe food assistance redirected toward loyal constituencies or withheld from perceived opponents (OCHA, 2024) ^[20]. During 2021-2023, WFP suspended distributions in several northern districts after local committees demanded control over beneficiary lists, leaving more than 300,000 people without rations for two months (WFP, 2023). Food aid thus becomes an instrument of political brokerage rather than relief. This dynamic removes the distinction between governance failure and deliberate manipulation, demonstrating that Yemen's food security crisis endures as much through political incentives as through administrative dysfunction.

4.2. Humanitarian Architecture and Coordination

Humanitarian operations in Yemen remain heavily skewed toward short-term relief. Between 2015 and 2024, about 90 percent of total funding went to emergency food and nutrition programs, while less than 10 percent supported recovery or livelihoods (OCHA, 2024; ACAPS, 2023) ^[20, 1]. This relief bias reflects the global system's preference for measurable short-term outputs rather than durable long-term outcomes. Life-saving interventions have indeed prevented famine, but they have also entrenched dependence, as millions of households continue to rely on recurring rations without achieving self-sufficiency (IFPRI, 2021) ^[13].

Evaluations by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI, 2021) show that average food-basket recipients consumed an additional 480 kcal/day during assistance months but reverted to pre-aid levels within six months ^[13]. In contrast, cash-transfer pilots implemented by UNICEF and WFP between 2020 and 2022 increased market spending by 23 percent and reduced the resale of in-kind aid by 18 percent (Devex, 2022; Oxfam, 2022) ^[8, 22]. Despite these promising results, the programs reached fewer than 350,000 households, less than 5 percent of the population in need, with banking fragmentation and weak digital infrastructure preventing expansion beyond pilot scale.

Operationally, the aid landscape remains fragmented. Multiple UN agencies and international NGOs implement parallel projects in the same region, often with overlapping beneficiary lists. ACAPS (2024) document duplication rates exceeding 20 percent in some governorates, while others, particularly Al-Mahrah and Socotra, received under 40 percent coverage. OCHA-led coordination structures promote information exchange but lack enforcement power, leaving participation voluntary and inconsistent. As a result, some localities are saturated with assistance while others remain excluded, underscoring how efficiency is often sacrificed for visibility.

Donor incentives reinforce this structural imbalance as short funding cycles and visibility pressures prioritize immediate relief over sustained recovery. Funding cycles rarely exceed 12 months, discouraging multi-year recovery planning (OCHA, 2024) ^[20]. Visibility pressures favor rapid, tangible relief over slower livelihood investment. Field assessments by ACAPS (2024) and the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (2025) report that 41 percent of surveyed households sold part of their food aid to pay for non-food essentials, highlighting how short-term assistance

distorts local markets and undermines resilience.

4.3. Economics and Market Dynamics

Yemen's collapsing economy has become a central driver of food insecurity and macroeconomic deterioration has outpaced any stabilizing effect of aid inflows. The Yemeni rial depreciated from about YER 250 per USD in 2015 to YER 1,518 in 2023 and was projected to exceed YER 2,700 by mid-2025 (IMF, 2023; World Bank, 2024) ^[14, 32]. During this period, the cost of a standard food basket rose 312 percent, while real public sector wages fell 64 percent (FAO, 2023) ^[10]. With more than 90 percent of staple foods imported, price shocks transmit directly to household consumption, and meal frequency among the poorest quintile fell from 2.3 to 1.6 per day (IPC, 2025) ^[15].

Local disruptions magnify these pressures. In early 2022, the partial closure of Hodeidah port, which handles roughly 70 percent of Yemen's imports, triggered a 27 percent spike in wheat prices and doubled fuel costs across northern governorates (FAO, 2023; OCHA, 2024) ^[10, 20]. Fuel shortages curtailed irrigation and logistics, raising transport costs for food commodities and further inflating retail prices. Irrigated land area declined 35 percent between 2015 and 2023, and cereal production dropped 41 percent (FAO, 2023; Oxfam, 2022) ^[10, 22]. Seed distribution programs reached only 11 percent of targeted farmers (World Bank, 2024) ^[32], while remittance inflows, once a vital source of foreign exchange, fell by nearly one-third after 2021 due to reduced labor opportunities for Yemenis abroad (IMF, 2023) ^[14].

Households have adapted to these pressures through coping mechanisms that deepen long-term vulnerability. Surveys by FAO (2023) and WFP (2024) show that more than half of families in high-insecurity districts borrow food or money to meet daily needs, and one in three reduce spending on healthcare or education to afford basic staples ^[10]. The sale of productive assets, including livestock, irrigation pumps, and land shares, has become increasingly common, eroding future income potential. These behaviors illustrate how macroeconomic collapse translates into intergenerational fragility, with families surviving today by sacrificing tomorrow's means of recovery.

Attempts to stabilize the currency through central-bank interventions have produced limited results. Competing monetary authorities in Sana'a and Aden continue to issue rival banknotes, widening the exchange-rate gap and undermining confidence in the rial (IMF, 2023) ^[14]. Gulf-funded fuel and food import programs temporarily slowed inflation but were discontinued amid allegations of mismanagement (World Bank, 2024) ^[32]. In the absence of coherent fiscal policy, humanitarian actors have effectively replaced the state as the primary distributor of basic goods, further entrenching the country's aid-dependent economy.

These dynamics confirm that macroeconomic collapse and agricultural decline function in tandem, deepening vulnerability and prolonging dependence on external assistance. Currency devaluation reduces purchasing power, while weak production leaves households without local safety nets, together locking the country into reliance on food imports and humanitarian aid. Even when aid inflows rise, these conditions convert financial support into temporary relief rather than structural recovery. Economic instability reinforces the dysfunction seen across Yemen's institutions, extending fragmentation from governance into monetary

policy and aid delivery alike.

4.4. Data Systems and Monitoring Gaps

The data infrastructure behind Yemen's food security response has weakened over time, leaving decision-makers to operate with partial and inconsistent information. Since 2018, northern governorates have remained largely inaccessible to survey teams, forcing the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) and FEWS NET to rely on remote-estimation techniques such as satellite imagery, mobile-phone mobility data, and market-price monitoring (IPC, 2025; FEWS NET, 2023) ^[15]. While these methods provide continuity under restrictive conditions, they also create wide uncertainty intervals. The 2021 and 2023 IPC cycles were delayed by six and eight months respectively due to classification disputes and data verification gaps, leaving the 2024 humanitarian response plan based on mid-2022 data (World Bank, 2024) ^[32]. As a result, allocation decisions often lag changing realities on the ground, with some districts receiving overlapping assistance while newly deteriorating areas remain unserved.

Institutional fragmentation further compounds these information gaps. Major donors and Yemeni agencies maintain at least seven separate aid databases, including OCHA's Financial Tracking System, KSR relief's online portal, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation's Excel registry, and several NGO-managed dashboards, without a unified verification framework (OCHA, 2024) ^[20]. Cross-checks reveal that as much as USD 220 million in projects were recorded more than once across different systems in 2023 (ACAPS, 2024). These inconsistencies generate practical consequences, including duplicated deliveries in some governorates, missed distributions in others, and donor skepticism toward self-reported outcomes. Since funding priorities are often determined using these same datasets, weaknesses in data integrity feed directly back into operational inefficiency.

The problem is not only technical but also political. In areas under de facto control, local authorities frequently restrict data collection or pressure enumerators to alter needs assessments (FEWS NET, 2023). International agencies report repeated interference in household targeting surveys and periodic suspension of field monitoring (OCHA, 2024) ^[20]. At the same time, humanitarian actors themselves have limited incentives to improve data transparency, since discrepancies between datasets allow flexibility in reporting and maintain donor confidence in aggregate figures. The result is a cycle in which unreliable data sustain a perception of full coverage while obscuring the uneven reach of assistance.

4.5. Summary of Findings

The evidence across these four dimensions reveals a humanitarian system constrained by the same divisions it seeks to resolve. Governance failures have weakened national institutions to the point that coordination, regulation, and oversight now depend on external actors. Humanitarian agencies, in turn, operate within a funding and accountability framework designed for short-term relief rather than sustained recovery. Economic collapse amplifies these weaknesses by eroding both state capacity and household resilience, while information gaps conceal the uneven distribution of assistance and limit the ability to adapt

interventions to changing realities.

At the operational level, the aid economy functions as a substitute for the state rather than a complement to it. Relief programs supply basic consumption but displace local governance functions such as market regulation, subsidy management, and data collection. The result is a feedback loop in which humanitarian action mitigates immediate hunger yet reinforces long-term reliance on external aid. As local actors lose ownership over planning and monitoring, national systems of accountability erode further, and the ability to refine or improve policy responses steadily declines.

Across governance, aid architecture, economic management, and data systems, a consistent pattern can be observed. External assistance compensates for the absence of state capacity rather than rebuilding it, maintaining the appearance of functionality without restoring it. Food insecurity persists not because aid is insufficient, but because the structures designed to alleviate it have become embedded in the conditions that perpetuate Yemen's crisis.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting the Aid Paradox

The persistence of food insecurity in Yemen despite a decade of large-scale humanitarian assistance reveals the limits of a relief model designed for short-term stabilization rather than structural recovery. The findings in Section 4 indicate that the aid system, the national economy, and the information environment have become intertwined components of Yemen's crisis response. While this configuration prevents large-scale collapse, it does little to restore institutional capacity or market resilience, leaving the country trapped at a level of mere survival.

This paradox reflects what scholars describe as managed survival, a humanitarian order optimized to deliver inputs rather than outcomes (Harvey & Maxwell, 2021; Mosel & Levine, 2016)^[12, 19]. Donors and agencies prioritize coverage, tonnage, and beneficiary counts because these metrics align with annual funding cycles and political visibility. Within Yemen, such incentives translate into repetitive distribution rather than adaptive strategy. As shown in Section 4.2, short-term funding horizons and overlapping delivery channels sustain competition among implementers while discouraging collective learning. The consequence is an aid economy that performs relief efficiently but transforms dependency into a condition of governance.

While international support has undoubtedly saved millions of lives, its operational logic is self-limiting. Aid frameworks conceived for emergencies are ill-suited to crises where collapse has already become a steady state. Yemen's experience shows how humanitarianism can evolve into an administrative system of containment that is technically proficient, financially substantial, yet strategically static. The country's chronic food insecurity reflects not a failure of compassion but of design, a system built to respond rather than resolve.

5.2. Comparative Analysis of Other Humanitarian Crises

Yemen's trajectory shares features with other long-running humanitarian settings but also exposes distinctive dynamics. In South Sudan, for example, fragmented governance and volatile access have produced similar substitution effects, where NGOs deliver most essential services while state

institutions remain hollow (World Bank, 2023). Somalia exhibits a comparable pattern in which repeated cycles of drought response and cash-transfer scaling have reduced mortality but left local food systems fragile and donor-dependent (FAO, 2022). In Syria, prolonged conflict and sanctions have turned humanitarian assistance into a parallel economy sustaining local power networks (de Waal, 2018)^[6].

Yet Yemen differs in two key respects. First, the scale of external inflows relative to GDP is among the highest recorded for a non-famine setting, meaning humanitarian resources effectively function as a macro-economic stabilizer (IMF, 2023)^[14]. Second, the country's pre-war administrative capacity, which had been moderately functional, was eroded rather than entirely destroyed. As Section 4.1 illustrated, institutional disunity emerged not from total state collapse but from competing claims to legitimacy across ministries and authorities. This partial capacity created fertile ground for what analysts call governed informality, a condition in which international agencies operate through rather than around domestic actors, thereby blurring lines of accountability (ACAPS, 2024).

Comparatively, Yemen demonstrates that protracted crises evolve along a continuum between replacement and reinforcement. In contexts like Somalia, where governance never consolidated, humanitarianism replaces the state almost entirely. In Yemen, where institutions exist but are contested, external aid reinforces pre-existing dysfunction. Both trajectories lead to similar outcomes, providing sustained relief without transformation, although the mechanisms differ. Recognizing this distinction is crucial for designing transition strategies that re-engage local governance instead of bypassing it.

5.3. Theoretical Implications

The findings also invite reflection through two theoretical lenses that dominate current humanitarian scholarship: rentier-state dynamics and the Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) Nexus.

From a political-economy perspective, Yemen has drifted toward what Elayah (2020) and de Waal (2018) term rentier humanitarianism. In this configuration, aid flows function as external rents captured by political and bureaucratic elites. As Section 4.3 demonstrated, macro-economic deterioration and institutional disunity transformed humanitarian assistance into a critical source of liquidity. Control over project approvals, customs clearances, and beneficiary lists generates revenue and patronage opportunities. The result is a political economy in which the governance of scarcity becomes a form of governance itself.

This rentier logic explains why reform efforts often stall. When access to international funding provides greater political value than reforming domestic revenue systems, incentives shift toward maintaining crisis management as a steady state. Aid thus becomes both the symptom and sustainer of fragility. Similar tendencies have been documented in Afghanistan before 2021 and in Sudan after 2019, where external assistance prolonged elite bargains without institutional reform (OECD, 2022). Yemen exemplifies this dynamic with exceptional clarity, as the humanitarian apparatus substitutes for fiscal policy while insulating political actors from accountability to their own citizens.

5.4. Toward a New Humanitarian Architecture

The Yemeni experience illustrates the structural limits of the current humanitarian model. Across institutional, financial, and informational domains, the system is efficient at delivering emergency relief but poorly equipped to support transformation. The same architecture that sustains Yemen's survival also constrains its recovery.

The evidence suggests that long-term effectiveness depends on rebalancing the relationship between external assistance and national governance. Humanitarian programs will remain necessary, yet their role must evolve from substitution to reinforcement. When aid systems perform core state functions such as procurement, coordination, and resource allocation without parallel investment in domestic capability, they inadvertently reinforce fragility. Genuine progress therefore requires aligning humanitarian operations with the gradual restoration of Yemeni institutions rather than bypassing them.

Financing and data structures reveal the same challenge. Short-term funding cycles encourage continuity rather than learning, while fragmented information systems obscure both accountability and results. The problem is not simply technical inefficiency but a deeper structural inertia in which the aid system measures its success by activity rather than by the recovery it enables. Until predictable financing and credible data become integral to governance reform, Yemen's humanitarian effort will continue to operate as a mechanism of maintenance rather than transition.

More broadly, the Yemeni case exposes the constraints of global humanitarian architecture itself. Systems designed for rapid response have difficulty adapting once crisis becomes a permanent condition. Redefining their purpose requires a conceptual shift from managing scarcity to rebuilding agency. This means placing local accountability, institutional coherence, and political will at the center of assistance strategies.

Ultimately, Yemen demonstrates that humanitarian action cannot remain an end in itself. Its sustainability will depend on whether external support can catalyze rather than replace the national capacities needed for recovery. Without such a shift in purpose and design, the international community will continue to mitigate Yemen's hunger without addressing the structures that perpetuate it.

6. Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study point to the need for a deliberate shift in how aid is conceived, funded, and implemented in Yemen. Humanitarian assistance has prevented widespread famine but has also entrenched dependence and institutional paralysis. Reversing this trajectory requires aligning external support with the long-term restoration of domestic capacity. The following recommendations outline priority areas for reform within both donor strategies and national frameworks.

6.1. Rebalance Relief and Recovery Mandates

Yemen's humanitarian response must evolve from a system that substitutes for governance to one that reinforces it. The objective is not simply to deliver assistance more efficiently but to redefine the purpose of aid so that it contributes to the restoration of national and local capacity. Programs should be designed to strengthen existing systems rather than bypass them.

International agencies and government counterparts can

jointly manage planning, procurement, and monitoring units with transparent responsibilities and performance indicators. These arrangements enable institutional learning while maintaining donor accountability. Experience from decentralized health and education initiatives in other fragile contexts shows that limited local ownership often produces more sustainable results than parallel NGO delivery (UNDP, 2022) ^[26]. In Yemen, this shift in mandate could begin with governorate-level food-security clusters that already link humanitarian and development actors under a shared institutional framework.

6.2. Establish Multi-Year, Outcome-Based Financing

Donor funding remains trapped in annual cycles that reward continuity rather than results. Multi-year frameworks are essential for building the predictability required to plan and evaluate transitions from relief to recovery.

Future financing instruments should link disbursement to tangible indicators of institutional progress, such as the number of programs integrated into national systems or the proportion of local staff assuming management roles. Pooling humanitarian and development resources under a unified results framework would help reduce duplication and promote a shared sense of accountability.

Global precedents demonstrate the value of this approach. Instruments such as the European Union's Flexible Programming Initiative and the World Bank's IDA-19 crisis window show that predictable, results-based funding supports long-term planning and facilitates smoother transitions between humanitarian and development objectives (World Bank, 2024) ^[32]. Yemen's aid architecture could adapt these lessons to establish a multi-year "Stability and Food Security Framework" coordinated by both donors and the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation.

6.3. Reconstruct the Data and Accountability Ecosystem

Reliable information is the foundation of effective policy. The current system of fragmented data collection and overlapping databases undermines both coordination and trust. Establishing an independent, multi-stakeholder data consortium is therefore a critical priority.

This consortium should include Yemeni universities, statistical offices, and international research partners, operating under a governance model that guarantees independence from political or institutional interference. Its mandate would include harmonizing indicators, validating needs assessments, and publishing regular public reports.

In parallel, all major aid recipients, including UN agencies, NGOs, and government entities, should be required to share standardized project data as a condition for funding eligibility. Open data platforms can strengthen transparency, enable third-party verification, and help donors allocate resources based on evidence rather than lobbying or inertia. Strengthening data integrity would also improve fiscal oversight by aligning humanitarian reporting with public finance management systems.

6.4. Integrate Macroeconomic Stability into Humanitarian Planning

Food security cannot be separated from economic policy. Currency depreciation, trade dependency, and fragmented monetary control have deepened Yemen's vulnerability to external shocks. Humanitarian operations should therefore

include macro-stabilization as a parallel objective.

Coordination between aid agencies, the Central Bank, and international financial institutions is necessary to ensure that large-scale humanitarian inflows support rather than distort local markets. Donor-funded cash transfers should be indexed to inflation and designed to circulate through domestic financial channels, helping to rebuild banking confidence.

In the medium term, linking food assistance with local procurement and smallholder production can reduce import dependency and strengthen market linkages. Programs that combine agricultural support with liquidity injections, such as purchase guarantees for local crops, could create income while improving national food availability.

6.5. Strengthen Local Agency and Civic Participation

A sustainable recovery cannot occur without local ownership. Donors and implementing agencies should adopt a risk management rather than risk avoidance posture toward national institutions. This means engaging incrementally with ministries, governorates, and community organizations, even where governance structures are imperfect.

Local councils, cooperatives, and women- or youth-led associations can play a pivotal role in rebuilding social accountability. Direct funding for such entities, combined with transparent oversight mechanisms, would help disperse authority beyond central elites. International actors should prioritize capacity building grants, mentorship programs, and participatory monitoring tools that give communities a voice in setting priorities and assessing outcomes.

Rebuilding agency also requires restoring public trust. Communicating clearly about aid criteria, decision processes, and results helps prevent perceptions of politicization and reinforces the legitimacy of both local authorities and humanitarian partners.

6.6. Improve Coordination Between Humanitarian and Development Actors

The effectiveness of Yemen's aid transition depends on how humanitarian and development actors work together in practice. Existing coordination mechanisms often operate in parallel rather than in partnership, limiting opportunities for shared planning or joint evaluation. Stronger horizontal coordination is therefore essential for linking relief with recovery.

A unified strategic platform should be established to align priorities, timelines, and indicators across the humanitarian and development communities. This platform could be co-chaired by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation and key donor representatives and tasked with monitoring progress toward specific transition outcomes such as local procurement rates, integration of cash-transfer systems, and reductions in duplicated aid. Harmonized reporting standards would reduce administrative burdens while creating a shared framework for accountability.

6.7. Foster Accountability Through Independent Oversight

Finally, meaningful reform requires accountability at both the national and international levels. Donors should support the creation of an independent oversight body tasked with evaluating humanitarian performance and ensuring adherence to transparency standards. This entity could publish annual reviews assessing program efficiency,

coverage equity, and progress toward national capacity restoration.

Such oversight would not replace existing audits but would complement them with a public, evidence-based dimension. By publishing comparable metrics across agencies, it would reinforce incentives for coordination and discourage practices that prioritize visibility over effectiveness.

7. Conclusion

A decade of extensive humanitarian engagement has prevented famine in Yemen but has not reversed its structural food insecurity. The evidence presented in this study shows that the persistence of hunger does not result from inadequate aid volumes but from the way assistance interacts with governance, markets, and information systems. The humanitarian response has evolved into a mechanism of crisis management that prevents collapse but inhibits transformation. In practice, aid has become part of Yemen's political economy, stabilizing scarcity while perpetuating the conditions that make continued intervention necessary.

The analysis highlights three interrelated dimensions of this paradox. The first is the fragmentation of governance and the erosion of state capacity, which have turned international actors into de facto managers of public functions. Ministries, local authorities, and community institutions now operate in an environment where humanitarian agencies rather than government systems handle essential tasks such as targeting, procurement, and coordination. This substitution has preserved basic service delivery but has reduced national ownership. Without institutions capable of planning, implementing, and monitoring policy, aid becomes a substitute for governance rather than a bridge toward it.

The second dimension involves Yemen's macroeconomic collapse, which has amplified institutional weaknesses. Currency depreciation, trade dependency, and a divided banking system have deepened the country's reliance on external financial flows. In this environment, humanitarian assistance serves not only as a social safety net but also as a key source of liquidity. As discussed in Section 4.3, the aid economy now underwrites fiscal stability and sustains political networks, reinforcing rentier dynamics. When external financing replaces domestic revenue, incentives for reform diminish. Stability then depends on continuous inflows, creating an economy of managed survival rather than recovery.

The third dimension concerns the erosion of data integrity and monitoring capacity, which has entrenched a cycle of reactive decision-making. The inability to produce credible, unified assessments of need weakens accountability and leads to inefficient allocation of resources. As a result, funding decisions are shaped by outdated or inconsistent data rather than by verified outcomes. This informational weakness mirrors the broader institutional fragility, as both reflect a system that measures activity instead of impact. Yemen's humanitarian architecture has become increasingly sophisticated in logistics but less capable of strategic learning.

Together, these dynamics explain why food insecurity persists despite sustained international commitment. Yemen exemplifies the humanitarian-development dilemma that arises in long-term crises. Emergency aid can save lives, yet when extended indefinitely it risks embedding dependency and distorting governance. The same efficiency that enables

humanitarian systems to prevent disaster also makes them resistant to transition. Donors, agencies, and local actors are held together by a logic of continuity, in which maintaining operations often becomes an end in itself. The result is a relief economy that manages vulnerability without transforming it. This outcome contributes to broader debates on the humanitarian-development nexus and the political economy of aid. The Yemeni case demonstrates that linking relief to recovery is primarily a political rather than a technical challenge. Integration requires a redistribution of authority that gives domestic institutions real influence over priorities, resources, and evaluations. Where this authority is lacking, the nexus remains aspirational. The findings also confirm that humanitarian inflows can function as external rents, reinforcing elite bargains and discouraging reform. Yemen's situation thus represents not only a coordination failure but also a misalignment between aid incentives and state reconstruction.

Despite these constraints, Yemen's experience points to a possibility for change. The endurance of local institutions, even in weakened form, suggests that recovery is achievable if aid relationships are redefined. International engagement must evolve from external management to partnership, measuring success not by the quantity of assistance delivered but by the extent to which domestic capacity is restored. This approach carries risk, yet it also offers the only viable path beyond permanent emergency.

The central lesson from Yemen's humanitarian experience is that efficiency without transition maintains crisis instead of resolving it. After a decade of large-scale intervention, the aid system remains capable of preventing famine but not of fostering autonomy. Unless that architecture is reoriented financially, institutionally, and conceptually, Yemen will continue to survive through external aid while lacking the means to move beyond it.

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