

The NDC Outcomes: Hollow Effort, or a Path to Peace and Youth Inclusion?¹

Creating opportunities for Yemeni youth through a local approach

During the popular uprisings in 2011, Yemen's youth stood at the forefront of political change, but now they're all but forgotten. As the international community scrambles to find a new entry point into political talks with opposing parties vying to write Yemen's future, the country's youth grow increasingly desperate. With few opportunities in the job market, and financial as well as security challenges standing in the way of higher education, youth are often forced to join militias and fight at the front. As violence continues and the humanitarian situation worsens, the United Nations and Western governments must continue to insist on a political solution to Yemen's conflict. But as the Yemeni nation-state in terms of national identity, institutions, and territory continues to fragment, with local actors creating new social, political, and economic realities on the ground, it becomes ever more difficult to imagine a political solution to Yemen's conflict. Although Yemen's transitional process is now widely recognized as having failed, the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) are nevertheless viewed as a political platform with the potential to unite Yemenis. That potential is mitigated by the fact that the NDC outcomes have contributed to the escalation of violence, making them, at best, a component of an effective political solution. For that reason, the international community should incorporate a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding into their Yemen policy, which focuses on those NDC outcomes that are in fact consensual and create opportunities for young people.

Just 6 years ago, the so-called "independent youth" emerged as a compelling force behind the 2011 protests, driven by the widespread corruption and patronage practices, blocking this generation's access to the job market. The movement was often described as the country's best hope for democracy. With the signing of the GCC Initiative in November 2011, a formal transition process for the country began. This transition process mandated that the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) be held as a forum for political and social groups to discuss the future structure of the Yemeni state, and to find solutions to the manifold crises and conflicts facing the country. President Abdu Rabu

Mansour Hadi was tasked by the international community, as well as the Yemeni political parties, with overseeing the implementation of the GCC Initiative, as well as the organization of the NDC.

Represented by 40 out of 565 delegates in the NDC, youth were to some extent able to leave their mark on the country's formal transition process. With regards to youth, the NDC outcomes stipulated that Yemen "take the necessary measures to achieve a wider youth participation in the social, economic, cultural, and political development of the country." This entailed such measures as the establishment of several institutions,

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which could have improved the lives of young Yemenis, such as the “Supreme Council for Youth,” which would oversee and steer public policy on youth issues. The “Skills Development Fund” would have been tasked to alleviate unemployment, and the state was even intended to microfinance youth projects, facilitate loans, and ensure that Yemeni citizens be prioritized over foreigners in private-sector hiring as well as install a 20% quota for youth participation in governmental institutions. However, as early as the signing of the GCC Initiative, but as late as the conclusion of the NDC, the youth were effectively relegated to the margins and their living conditions have only worsened since.

The Humanitarian Situation

More than half of the Yemeni population between the ages of 15 and 25 is severely affected by the consequences of the war, particularly the increase of prices and availability of food, fuel, and water. About half of the youth polled see the condition of their family as either “somewhat bad” or “very bad.” Two-thirds stated that there were times in 2016 when their family did not have food. 43% said their families were suffering a lot from increased prices for food, medicine and fuel; 9% said their families were unable to buy these items.

Against the backdrop of widespread economic destitution, young Yemenis are under pressure to contribute to the financial wellbeing of their families, which forces many to drop out of school. In July 2017, less than half (42%) of the 15-to-25-year-olds were enrolled in school or university: 35% dropped out of school before completing a secondary school degree and 11% have never attended school and are illiterate. While girls and young women are often married off in exchange for a dowry, boys and young men seek income. Yousra, a 33-year-old woman from al-Hodeidah says that young people “are looking for any job, whether it is suitable or not, just to get money for their poor families.”

10% of Yemenis between the age of 15 and 25 generate an income with which they can support their families: 2% are employed full-time; 8% are day laborers. The majority of those who work are above 18 years old, yet 3% of those between 15 and 17 also claim employment as day laborers. Given the insecure payment of public-sector jobs, and salary reductions in the private sector, youth find opportunities in agriculture, self-employment, and day labor in the agriculture and construction fields, but many see little or no option but to join a militia. According to Naif, a 31-year-old man from Ibb, “There are no opportunities but to join the fighting and the militias. Many things are now different than before the war; salaries were paid unlike now, and there was a lot of investment, but now companies stopped working.” According to a UNICEF report, 1,572 boys were recruited and used in the conflict, a marked increase from 850 last year. In this climate, a political solution to Yemen’s crises is sorely needed.

The NDC outcomes as framework for youth inclusion and improving livelihoods

UN Security Council resolution 2216 has served as a basis for past peace negotiations. For one thing, the resolution calls for the complete withdrawal of Houthi forces – a religious-political movement originating from the Yemeni side of the border to Saudi-Arabia – from all territories they have occupied including the capital, Sanaa, along with the relinquishing of all additional arms the group has seized from state stockpiles. While these demands have kept the negotiations in a deadlock, the UN resolution also emphasizes the need to return to the political process, including the implementation of the NDC outcomes.

Although the NDC produced a plethora of positive results, that *if implemented* would significantly improve the living conditions of Yemenis, the conference also produced controversial outcomes which eventually

contributed to the escalation of violence. While the delegates of the NDC agreed that federalism could solve the conflicts with Ansarallah, also referred to as the Houthi movement, in northern Yemen and the southern independence movement, the key point of contention was how the country would be divided into regions. The issue was so controversial that no solution was reached within the NDC, prompting President Hadi to establish an external committee that finally decided on the number and shape of Yemen's federal divisions.

The international community celebrated the NDC as a successful model for peaceful transition when it was created in January of 2014, but a few months after the conference, violence escalated dramatically in different parts of the country, until, at its height, in September 2014, Ansarallah took over Sanaa and pushed the Hadi government to resign. Accusations against the Hadi Government of corruption, illegitimacy, and incompetence, as well as the decision to divide Yemen into six regions instigated and legitimized the violence.

The opposing factions no longer consider the NDC outcomes a basis for discussion. However, to some, the outcome documents still represent a potential platform to generate consensus and rally Yemenis around a political solution. Nevertheless, this perspective neglects that the outcomes have been viewed as controversial by Yemenis and that more persuasion is necessary to make the NDC outcomes a viable basis for a political solution in Yemen. With regards to the youth, 42% believe that the future of Yemen would be good or somewhat good if the NDC outcomes were implemented. 37% either do not know whether Yemen's future would be good or bad if the NDC outcomes were implemented or remain indifferent. It is only the minority (21%) who believe that the NDC outcomes' implementation could render Yemen's future very bad or somewhat bad. This shows that the majority of youth have an at least somewhat

optimistic attitude towards the NDC, and that 37% could be convinced to rally around the outcome documents as a basis for a political solution. However, Yemen's youth are unaware of the details of the NDC outcomes, and associate the document only with the division of the country into federal regions. A perspective on Yemen's conflicts that goes beyond the power struggle between the Houthi/Saleh alliance and the internationally recognized government backed by the Saudi coalition, the NDC outcomes have the potential to be the best simplest basis for a political solution.

Federal Division of Yemen: Yea or Nay?

71% of poll respondents stated that they are not aware of the outcomes of the NDC. Among those who knew of the outcomes, the division of Yemen into federal regions was perceived as the most important outcome. Although the outcomes of the NDC carry the potential to improve the lives of young Yemenis, the strong association of the outcomes with the federal division of the country into regions may be counterproductive when trying to generate a consensus as a basis for a political solution. 24% stated that they didn't know whether Yemen should be divided into regions. With 52% speaking out against a division of the country, only 7% support the NDC documents with regards to the federal division. Those who strongly believe Yemen should be divided are mostly located in the southern governorates (14% in the South as opposed to 5% in the North). Clearly, these responses are linked to the question of southern independence, as many in the South see the division of Yemen into regions as a first step toward southern independence. 42% in the South, as opposed to 2% in the North strongly believe the South should be independent. 66% in the North believe the South should not be independent.

This shows that the North-South divide is strong and that achieving a consensus on the issue of division remains

difficult. The sentiment that Yemen should be divided into regions is also shared by some youth in the northern governorates, as, for instance, by 14% in Taiz, 20% in al-Jawf, and 45% in Marib, believe the country should be divided into regions. These areas are traditionally part of northern Yemen, but have resisted the takeover of the northern Houthi-Saleh alliance in defence of their autonomy. The strongest positive consensus on the NDC outcomes exists in Taiz, Marib, al-Jawf, and al-Dhali, where most respondents believe Yemen's future will be very good if the outcomes are implemented. This underlines the fact that it is in these areas where young people feel they would be better off with more autonomy from the central government. It is particularly in and around the capital where young people believe the country should not be divided.

The NDC outcomes cannot be a basis for a political solution if the focus is limited to the national level; the question of the regional division of Yemen remains controversial. There are, however, other aspects of the NDC outcomes that can be focused on to generate popular support for the platform: this particularly pertains to the role and responsibilities of the state and its institutions. Considering the state's current fragmentation, with non-state actors becoming ever more prominent, a consensus on the role of the state cannot be taken for granted. After the takeover of Sanaa through Ansarallah, 93% of the youth in Sanaa city and 96% of those residing in Sanaa governorate say that the state is not present in their area. Other areas where a clear majority (>70%) see the state as being absent include Taiz (70%), al-Baydha' (73%), Abyan (73%), Lahj (82%), and al-Jawf (83%). However, an overwhelming majority of Yemen's youth want the state to play a larger role in their everyday lives.

Young people understand the state in terms of its institutions and laws, but also in terms of its

responsibilities. The function emphasized most by the participants is that the state should provide security to its citizens. Other functions include the provision of basic services such as education, healthcare, and ensuring food security. Accordingly, if implemented locally, and disregarding any provisions regarding the regional division of the country, many of the outcomes of the NDC would allow Yemeni youth to forge immediate and positive relationships with the state. This could strengthen the outcome document's potential to unify Yemen's youth. However, any such approach must take local realities into consideration, while managing expectations realistically.

Towards a local implementation of the NDC outcomes

The takeover of the capital by the Houthi movement in September 2014 and the subsequent resignation of President Hadi's cabinet in February 2015 marked the end of national authority over state institutions in Yemen. An implementation of any NDC outcomes on the national level or through national-level state institutions cannot be expected. Given the new fragmented institutional landscape in Yemen, with state and non-state actors providing services to the population, the implementation of at least some NDC outcomes could only be pushed forward locally, using creative solutions. While international organizations should use the NDC outcomes as guidelines in their cooperation work, local actors can likewise demand and work towards the realization of at least some of the NDC outcomes within local institutions. For instance, the local council in Hajjah is still active and does enjoy a positive reputation among area youth. This certainly presents a good starting point for youth to demand more participation, even if only in the form of (unpaid) internships. This would not only give a sense of purpose to young people, but would also provide the opportunity to develop leadership skills and gain insights into the

work of the local council. Campaigns could, for instance, focus on demanding the NDC prescribed 20% quota for youth-involvement within specific local state institutions, such as local councils or other state representations. Wherever state institutions are too weak, ill-equipped, or powerless, youth organizations could develop alternative and creative ways of implementing individual NDC outcomes. With regards to education, for instance, the private sector, as well as civil society actors, have already shown interest in supporting schools and ensuring Yemen's children and

youth receive education. Together with parent councils and the private sector, youth organizations could become involved in finding ways to provide education to community members in line with the NDC outcomes. Of course, given the current situation in Yemen, any implementation of the NDC outcomes faces countless challenges including financial, organizational, and political ones. For that reason, solutions must be developed and implemented locally, on a case-by-case basis.

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