

Women's Local Mediation Efforts in the Water Issue in Taiz Governorate

Jan 2023

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2023

Summary

This case study examined the efforts of the women's mediation team in the water issue in Taiz Governorate during the period 2020-2022. The aim was to restore the water network in the governorate, which had been inactive since 2015. The effective role of the women's mediation team was highlighted, as they were able to reach significant agreements that were not expected to occur. They convinced the internationally recognized government military forces to vacate water facilities and reservoirs and hand them over to the Water Corporation. They also persuaded the authorities of Ansar Allah to accept the maintenance of wells in their controlled basins, including those in the buffer zone, in order to restore services to both the city and Al-Hawban.

These major agreements were not easy to achieve without several factors possessed by the mediation team. These factors included the team's persuasive strategy, which was based on building common interests and leveraging the both human and political dimensions of the problem. They dealt with the sensitivity of the conflict and demonstrated a high level of determination and resolve. The team was able to gain the trust of key decision-makers in both authorities and leverage the relationships of team members with decision-makers and influencers from both sides in favor of a significant humanitarian effort in the governorate.

The mediation team faced several obstacles that affected the completion of the task. The negative role of the media, lack of responsiveness from some parties, and their skepticism about the team's neutrality were among the most prominent challenges. Funding issues for some mediation activities, such as travel, communication, and meetings, also posed a problem since most of the team's efforts were voluntary. Security concerns of donors and the substantial funding required for network maintenance and operation, as well as the lack of proper follow-up and laxity in tracking the task progress by both the mediation team and the Water Corporation, contributed to the difficulties. Additionally, the multiple decision-making levels, especially within the internationally recognized government, further complicated the mediation efforts.

The experience yielded several lessons that can be applied to future activities. It emphasized the power of strong will in overcoming significant risks and obstacles to achieve success. Volunteer work provided a model for risk-taking and accomplishment. Following effective strategies to deal with conflict sensitivity accelerated the attainment of successes. Promoting inclusivity with all parties and stakeholders was a key factor in the success of negotiations based



on trust in the mediation team's neutrality, and it played a vital role in the success of the mediation efforts. Evaluating failures objectively contributed to learning and facilitated resilience without succumbing to discouragement. Lastly, avoiding media appearances had significant benefits in achieving high accomplishments without distractions.

The study presented a number of recommendations, focusing on building women's capacities, disseminating and generalizing the experience for wider benefit, and ensuring the team's continued efforts until donors take over network maintenance and operation. This will further solidify the task success, instill trust for future mediation tasks that serve civilians' interests, and capitalize on local authorities' involvement, especially given the ongoing war situation to restore suspended services.

Keywords: women's efforts, local mediation, war, water problem, Taiz Governorate.

Introduction

The ongoing war in Yemen since 2015 has led to numerous consequences on the population across the country, but it has been particularly severe in areas that witnessed armed confrontations. One of the prominent consequences is the cessation of services, either due to their destruction or the conversion of their premises into military barracks. This has hindered the restoration of services to their pre-war levels without mediation efforts, agreements with warring parties, and substantial financial resources. Schools, institutes, healthcare institutions, water and electricity service sites, roads, and other services were militarily controlled, leading to significant hardships for the population in accessing these services. This situation persisted even after the fighting ceased in many areas.

Taiz Governorate represents a clear example in this regard, where many service institutions stopped providing their services due to their presence in conflict zones or the presence of armed groups within them. This further exacerbated the suffering of the population due to the interruption of services. Amidst this, local community mediation efforts occasionally emerged, involving various parties in restoring services. These mediation efforts were not limited to men, elders, and sheikhs but extended to civil society organizations, youth activists, and active women's groups.

Despite the significant efforts made by women in the field of community mediation between conflict parties, these experiences are often not documented in a way that allows later benefit from their results. The documentation fails to shed light on the magnitude, nature, success, and failure of these experiences and the obstacles faced by the women who participated in them. In line with this, this paper aims to study a unique experience in local mediation, in which a women's group of young activists participated in the water issue in Taiz Governorate. The paper systematically presents this experience as a case study, documenting the women's efforts, successes, and failures. It provides data to be utilized in any future mediation efforts involving women.

The paper was prepared using a case study methodology, tracking the experience from its introduction through its implementation pathways to its outcomes. Various published documents about the experience were collected from different sources. In addition, eight interviews were conducted with the mediation team and relevant stakeholders from both sides of the mediation, along with five remote interviews with a number of youth activists who contributed to or were familiar with the experience. These interviews were conducted between December 25, 2022, and January 6, 2023.

Women's Efforts in the Local Mediation in Yemen: A General Perspective

The contributions of women in the field of peace during the war have been various, including initiatives that have provided social services to mitigate the effects of the war on civilians. Many women, some of whom had not worked in the general field, have been engaged in the areas of education, rehabilitation, providing emergency relief, psychological support to the IDPs, etc. They have also worked on building women's capacities to help them access incomes. In addition, women have contributed to various local mediation efforts, such as the women-led mediation in Hadramout for opening the road leading to Ar-Ri yan Airport.

Moreover, many community activists take risks to make qualitative achievements in peace building (through community or political mediation efforts), the issue of prisoners, opening roads, etc., without protection, as many of them have been facing dangers and suffering as a result of these efforts. Furthermore, some activists with no prior experience have participated in self-motivated, dangerous mediation efforts.

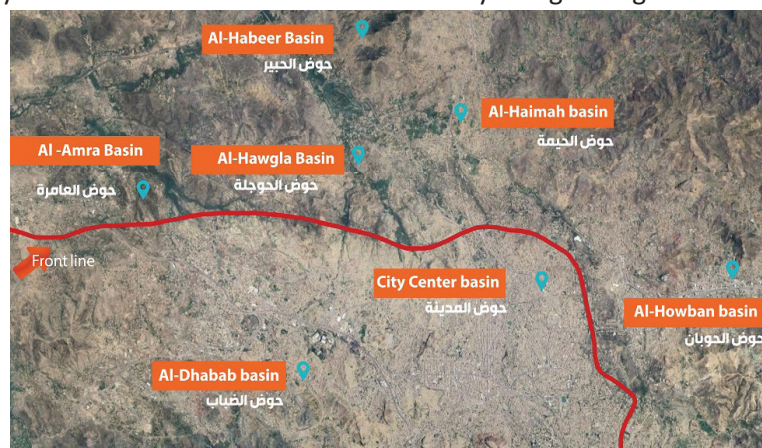
First: The general context of the water problem in Taiz Governorate

Taiz City, more than the other cities, has been suffering from a wide range of service suspensions, considering that there have been many lines of contact in it and daily armed confrontations between the main parties to the war in Yemen. Among these services is the water supply service, which is a deep-rooted problem that extends back decades and is not a momentary issue. However, the war has exacerbated the severity of the problem and increased the suffering of the civilians.

To understand the outlines of the problem, it is necessary to examine the infrastructure of the public water network in the governorate and its relationship to the mediation opportunities inspired by the mediation team. This network includes three components, which must be addressed in order to understand the context from which the idea of mediation discussed in this paper has been emerged.

- Available water basins and well network: Prior to the ongoing war since 2015, Taiz Governorate had six water basins, including 65 wells. These wells constituted the main source of water from the public network in the governorate. The wells with abundant water resources are located in three large water basins under the control of Ansar Allah (Houthi) forces. Two of these basins are located in the contact zone, meaning that neither party can benefit from them individually. On the other hand, only one basin, called the "emergency basin" according to its pre-war name, falls under the authority of the internationally recognized government and contains 22 wells. It used to be relied upon in case of any interruption in the other main basins for pumping water. However, due to the reliance on this single basin by the population in the part of the city under the authority of the internationally recognized government, its water reserves were depleted, reducing its capacity to provide the necessary water for the population due to the decrease in water levels. The suffering of the people there increased as a result of water scarcity, and the contours of a water crisis began to emerge.

- Water reservoirs: On the other hand, in the part of the city under the authority of the internationally recognized government, there are large concrete reservoirs that are salted and empty, as they are not operated or utilized because the basins and wells that used to pump water to them are under the control of Ansar Allah. These basins were previously under the control of the army forces affiliated with the internationally recognized government.



- Pumps and water distribution network: The water network in the governorate is a unified network that can be easily reconnected. There are parts of the network under the control of each party, and neither party can use it individually and comprehensively to manage the water reserves from various basins. Therefore, a significant portion of the network is dysfunctional and difficult to restore without maintenance and connection to the wells in the inactive basins unless both parties agree on that.

1. Strategic Basis for the Mediation Team:

Moeen Al-Obaidi and Ola Al-Aghbari (members of the mediation team) say that the mediation team realized from the first moment the strategic importance of persuasion in mediation, centered around the inability of any individual party to benefit from the extensive network resources. On the other hand, there have been significant opportunities to gain benefits for each party if they work together and agree on shared roles through an effective mediation. The idea of mediation is based on the fact that the internationally recognized government has the necessary reservoirs, primarily supplying both areas under the authority of the two parties with water. Thus, residents under the authority of both parties can not benefit from these resources. In contrast, the basins and wells fall under the authority of Ansar Allah (Houthi). Furthermore, the operation requirements of the wells are substantial and require maintenance to enable water pumping from the reservoirs through an integrated network. Hence, it was essential to have a key to drive the mediation process towards successful horizons by offering opportunities for sharing benefits, considering the urgent water needs of the residents under the authority of both parties.

Once the mediation team recognized this opportunity, they focused their efforts on it. They planned to communicate with the two parties to initiate rigorous mediation efforts and establish agreements that serve both parties politically and benefit the residents and alleviate their suffering.



2. Background Leading to the Water Mediation Experience: Focusing on the water issue in Taiz Governorate has been one of the priorities for local and international organizations working in the field of relief and humanitarian response since the outbreak of the war in 2015. Greater emphasis has been placed on the water issue as a priority in the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding since 2020 when the first step was taken by the Taiz Consultations Team. This local team consists of prominent political party leaders and representatives from youth, civil society organizations, women, and private sector. The team aims to discuss service-related issues concerning the governorate. One of the issues they worked on was the water issue in the governorate.

The team conducted several field visits to the Water Corporation and various stakeholders from the private sector and local authority. After a year of work, a policy paper was prepared, which identified the problem and proposed some solutions.

The activity of the Taiz Consultations Team stopped at this paper, and from there, Sheba Youth Foundation took over. The CEO of the foundation was a member of the Taiz Consultations Team, and her presence in the team motivated her to delve deeper into the water issue as the foundation's work focused on peacebuilding projects and activities. This marked the beginning of the second step in working on the water issue through the "Water Sector Initiative" project.

Coordination Committee to analyze the Water Situation in Taiz:

The second step in the water issue in Taiz city was based on efforts by Sheba Youth Foundation through the "Water Sector Initiative" project, which lasted for four months and was funded by the Partners Yemen Organization. The project aimed to improve the relationship between the local authority, represented by the Water Corporation, and the community. The project included the formation of a coordination committee for the water issue, intervention to maintain some of the inactive water wells in the city, and the implementation of an awareness campaign highlighting the important role of the Water Corporation. The coordination committee consisted of representatives from the Local Water and Sanitation Corporation, the General Authority for Rural Water Supply Projects, the water resources authority, Sheba Youth Foundation, and a water consultant. The committee held regular meetings to diagnose the water problem, and subsequently issued a policy paper on the water problem..

Bringing Stakeholders Together to Discuss the Problem:

Al-Aghbari, a member of the mediation team, says that the policy paper prepared by Sheba Youth Foundation has been adopted as a basis for conducting an in-depth dialogue to address the problem. Consequently, a discussion session has been held with key figures in the local authority, including the Director of the Office of Planning and International Cooperation, the Deputy Director of the Office of Social Affairs and Labor, Directors of districts, the Director of the Local Corporation for Water and Sanitation, a representative of the Taiz Military Axis, and representatives of the local authority in the governorate, in addition to activists and journalists. During the session, the contents and recommendations of the paper were thoroughly discussed. Two significant recommendations received particular attention during the session. The first recommendation was to withdraw military forces from the concrete reservoir sites within the city, and the second was to work on restoring the water supply to the city and Al-Hawban. The session concluded with the voluntary commitment of several local mediators, local authority officials, and journalists to form an implementation team for these recommendations. Prominent individuals who agreed to participate in the mediation activities included activists Al-Obaidi and Al-Aghbari, the Director of the Planning Office, the Deputy Director of the Social Affairs Office, and others. They initiated a mediation campaign within the city. Subsequently, another mediation team was formed, comprising female volunteers and additional activists, to carry out a mediation campaign with the authority in Al-Hawban.

Second: A Complex and Challenging Path of Negotiation Rounds:

Throughout the efforts of the mediation teams assigned to negotiate the water issue with different stakeholders within each party, there were numerous negotiation and coordination efforts that proved to be demanding and complex. These efforts resulted in both notable achievements and setbacks. The mediation team, particularly the women's team, persisted in their efforts until the conclusion, aiming to create tangible positive outcomes for the community. The significance of their efforts can be emphasized in the various negotiation rounds, as outlined below:

1. Direct Mediation Efforts Lead to Reservoir Handover to the Water Corporation:

Building upon the outcomes of the discussion session, the mediation team initiated their tasks by visiting the reservoirs and wells under the control of military forces in the city. Al-Obaidi stated that the team implemented a strategy centered around forming alliances.

According to Al-Aghbari, an alliance was established, comprising the Director-General of Al-Muzaffar District, a respected and widely accepted figure in the city, the Director of the Planning Office, the Deputy Director of the Social Affairs Office, female mediators, a representative from the military police and the Taiz Military Axis, the moral guidance officer in the Security Department, cultural figures, and the project coordinator at the Sheba Youth Foundation. The diverse composition of these individuals played a crucial role in the success of the initial mediation efforts. As a result, six reservoirs, which had been outside the control of the Water Corporation for an extended period, were handed over to them.



2. A New Phase of Self-Volunteered Mediation Efforts:

Although the funding for the Water Initiative project concluded after achieving the objective of military forces withdrawing from the reservoir sites and their subsequent handover to the Water Corporation, the work did not cease. Individual community activists and local actors stepped forward with voluntary efforts. Some volunteers chose to participate independently, and these endeavors were structured into multiple planned rounds to ensure coordinated actions and prioritize specific objectives. The mediation process commenced with a round of negotiations in Al-Hawban, involving the local authority of the Ansar Allah government. This was followed by another round held in the city, involving the local authority of the internationally recognized government. Additionally, efforts were made to engage international organizations, such as the International Red Cross, to secure funding for maintenance and pumping activities.

A Mediation Round in Al-Hawban Leads to Approval for Network Rehabilitation:

The efforts of this phase commenced in February 2022 when the voluntary mediation team visited the Ansar Allah authority in Al-Hawban area to gather updates on humanitarian issues and the water problem. The visiting team comprised a significant female representation, led by lawyer Moeen Al-Obaidi and CEO of Sheba Youth Foundation Ola Al-Aghbari, accompanied by other young female mediators. Activist Abdul Latif Al-Muradi and lawyer Abdullah Shaddad later joined these efforts. The dialogue extended over two days, involving intensive coordination and meetings with the local authorities of Ansar Allah in Al-Hawban.

The mediation team conducted extensive interviews with the local authority of the Ansar Allah government in Al-Hawban. Various parties and coordinators from the central authority in Sana'a, as well as the Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation Officer in Al-Hawban have contributed to these efforts. The culmination of these endeavors was a meeting with the governor of Taiz in the Ansar Allah authority, Sheikh Salah Bajjash. During the meeting, the team shared their perspective and emphasized their role in impartial humanitarian action. The mediators reaffirmed their commitment to addressing the humanitarian impact of the war on the people of Taiz governorate, whether in the city or in Al-Hawban. The governor responded positively, expressing his concern for the well-being of civilians and granting his approval for pumping. Subsequently, an agreement was formulated, and representatives from the Water Corporations in both Al-Hawban and the city were scheduled to convene and develop a plan for the resumption of pumping activities. This achievement marked the first success attributed to the mediation team in this issue.

The approval received paved the way for progress in securing funding from international and local entities for the restoration and rehabilitation of wells and the network, in preparation for operation and water pumping.

According to officials in the local authority of Al-Hawban, they fully support the local mediation efforts and believe that restoring water pumping to both Al-Hawban and the city is a humanitarian endeavor. They acknowledge the importance of developing a joint action plan between the Water Corporation in Al-Hawban and the Water Corporation in the city to prevent any future conflicts between the parties involved.

Exceptional efforts in the water problem inside the city

After the return of female local mediators to the city from their mediation tour, thoughts began to arise on how they can continue their work on the water file. Here, Shabab Saba Foundation, led by one of the members of the water mediation team, initiated the adoption of the Sannad (1) project, funded by Chemonics International through the Josoor program. This project served as a complementary and supportive idea to the efforts of resolving the water issue.

The project focused on establishing community youth councils aimed at supporting the Water Corporation through raising community awareness about the importance of water consumption and clarifying the role of the Water Corporation in the community. Additionally, the project included activities for resolving disputes related to the contested wells within the city.



A New Round of Negotiations with the Internationally Recognized Government in Taiz City:

Following the mediation team's return from Al-Hawban, where they conducted a mediation round with the local authority of Ansar Allah, the team embarked on a series of meetings as part of an intensive negotiation round with the local authority of the internationally recognized government in the city. These meetings involved the governor, Nabil Shamshan, and other local officials. The negotiation team specifically targeted influential individuals and decision-makers, including influential leaders in society. The objectives of this round were twofold: to provide a report on the negotiation process with Ansar Allah and to persuade the local authority to take subsequent steps based on the agreed-upon points with Ansar Allah. The meetings with the local authorities in the city resulted in positive cooperation, and they expressed their willingness to fulfill their role in the mediation and implementation process.



The governor within the internationally recognized government emphasized that his primary responsibility is to serve the civilians, irrespective of whether they reside in the city area or in Al-Hawban area. He approached the situation from a humanitarian and service-oriented perspective, rather than a political one. Consequently, he pledged his support for any steps or efforts related to humanitarian issues, such as the water issue.

Efforts to Fund the Agreement:

The initial steps towards implementing the agreement involved negotiations with the International Red Cross, at the beginning of 2022. The objective was to secure funding for maintenance work on wells and the network. The Water Corporation in Al-Hawban engaged in discussions with the Red Cross regarding this matter, and a mutual agreement was reached to proceed with the necessary intervention and trial pumping. However, the completion of the work faced obstacles related to the allocation of funds.

Additionally, a problem arose concerning the sharing of operational expenses between the two authorities. Through the mediation efforts, progress was made as the internationally recognized government in the city agreed to contribute 10 million Yemeni Rials monthly (in the old version of Yemeni Rial banknotes) to the Water Corporation in Al-Hawban. This decision was based on the understanding that most of the maintenance work would be carried out in Al-Hawban. However, during the mediation team's visit in December of the same year, the authorities expressed the challenges they faced at the societal level.

Despite the agreement and mutual acceptance by both parties, the previous efforts did not result in the actual commencement of maintenance work and water pumping throughout the year 2022. Detailed obstacles and priorities emerged, hindering the implementation of the agreement, particularly due to the residents' rejection of the Red Cross's involvement in the well areas. The residents justified their rejection by expressing concerns about potential damage to their wells in the area.

3. Resuming the Problem-Solving and Mediation Efforts with a New, More Effective Strategy:

After completing Sanad (1) project, which aimed to support the resolution of the water problem in the city and enhance the role of Water Corporations through community awareness and coordination activities, a comprehensive evaluation of the mediation efforts and the previous work conducted by the Sheba Youth Foundation was carried out. Building upon the achievements made previously, the foundation initiated the Sannad (2) project, which incorporated the lessons learned from past experiences in addressing the water problem and mediation efforts. The Sannad (2) project led to the establishment of a water issue coordination committee, comprising the director of the planning office in the governorate, two local mediators, Moeen Al-Obaidi and Ola Al-Aghbari, the Security Director for neighbourhood leaders affairs, and the director of the Water Corporation. The committee's primary focus was to seek solutions to the water problems within the city by collaborating with relevant entities in the internationally recognized government authority and developing a work matrix to address the obstacles.

The first aspect of the project involved working with youth councils to support a community awareness campaign that emphasized the importance of backing the ongoing efforts related to the water issue. It also entailed the repair of water networks within the city. This aspect built upon the activities of Sannad (1) project and aimed to continue working with youth councils to raise awareness about the significance of community support for the initiatives addressing the water problem and repairing the city's water networks. The second aspect of the project concentrated on resuming the mediation efforts with the authorities in the city and Al-Hawban. Local mediators, Al-Obaidi and Al-Aghbari, along with a group of young activists, traveled to Al-Hawban accompanied by representatives from the Water Corporation in the city to negotiate with the local authority of Ansar Allah. Several meetings were arranged, in coordination with relevant parties in the central authority. These efforts yielded a significant achievement as the Ansar Allah authority approved the entry of engineering teams to inspect the wells in the two fields situated along the demarcation line. This approval was a notable milestone for the women's mediation team, particularly considering that both parties had not agreed on this step during the negotiations in early 2022..

Completion of Mediation Efforts with the Internationally Recognized Government in the City:

Following their successful mediation round with the local authority of Ansar Allah, the local women mediation team returned to the city and held an interview with the governor of the internationally recognized government, accompanied by the coordinating committee established for this project. During the negotiation round, the governor approved the agreement reached with the Houthi authority and expressed his enthusiasm for facilitating the entry of engineers into the wells situated on the front line. However, he set a condition that the International Red Cross Committee should be the primary sponsor of this agreement. As of the current year, 2023, the mediation team is actively engaging with the donor to discuss and finalize the sponsorship arrangement. This document serves as one of the communication tools being utilized by the Sheba Youth Foundation to facilitate these discussions and further progress the mediation efforts.

Roles of mediation team members

Although mediation efforts were voluntary and spontaneous, there was a division of roles among the team members based on their relationships and their access to both sides of the mediation. Women played an active role in sitting and managing mediation dialogues with the parties involved. They visited both parties together. Additionally, the relationships, accumulated previous efforts, and experiences in community activities played a significant role in communication and coordination efforts with the parties.



Third: Addressing Conflict Sensitivity in Mediation Efforts:

According to Al-Obaidi, the mediation team did not adopt a specific strategy but rather considered various factors imposed by the reality of the situation. Through discussions with the main mediators, Al-Obaidi and Al-Aghbari, along with other team members, it became evident that the negotiation strategy was based on the following principles:

1. Sensitivity to Conflict: The team recognized the importance of addressing conflict sensitivity, which posed risks to the mediation efforts. They aimed to achieve good results while navigating these risks. Neutrality and a humanitarian approach were the guiding principles for the mediation team. Despite facing occasional accusations that questioned their neutrality from officials on both sides, the team's commitment to transparency and objectivity played a crucial role in maintaining their neutrality and mitigating conflict sensitivity.
2. Media Management: The media was identified as a potential threat to conflict sensitivity during the negotiation process. Al-Obaidi emphasized the negative impact of leaked news that created tension among the negotiating parties, sometimes derailing progress. To mitigate this, the mediation team adopted a strategy of avoiding media engagement and refrained from discussing the mediations publicly until the appropriate time.
3. Building Relationships: Building positive relationships with new officials, particularly within the city authority, contributed to the success of the mediation efforts.
4. Coordination and Mobilization: Effective coordination and mobilization of political and social influencers played a vital role in the negotiation strategy. Gaining access to key civilian and military parties, directly involved in the mediation, was facilitated through these influencers. This was especially important when engaging with the internationally recognized government, which had multiple decision-making levels. In contrast, the Houthis were more centralized, with decision-making power held by the governor. Thus, the focus was on persuading the governor while engaging in multiple dialogues with various stakeholders on the other side (such as the national army, the public electricity corporation, and political parties).



5. **Building Common Interests:** The mediation team pursued a strategy of emphasizing the significant political and social benefits for both parties. They highlighted the extent of suffering experienced by the population in areas controlled by each party and how the agreement could address a critical problem affecting the lives of people under each party's authority. This persuasive approach aimed to seize the opportunity, recognizing that it may not present itself again.
6. **Sequential Resolution of Disputes:** The mediation team followed a strategy of deferring the discussion of certain contentious issues to later stages and accepting a minimum level of initial agreements. They built upon these agreements, particularly in sensitive areas. For example, this approach was adopted for disputed areas in the buffer zones, postponing their resolution in the first round and addressing them in the subsequent round.



Fourth: Perceptions of the Mediation Efforts by the Benefiting Community:

Ryan Al-Shamiri, a community activist closely following the water mediation efforts in the governorate, believes that the involvement of women in the mediation process has increased the likelihood of reaching an agreement between the parties. He also highlights the significant impact of the mediation team, particularly the women, in revitalizing the water issue and instilling hope for the resolution of a previously stubborn problem. Furthermore, he acknowledges their role in activating the Water Corporation, enhancing people's understanding of its purpose, and restoring trust in its efforts as a service-oriented institution. This has made the Water Corporation more determined to achieve results after a period of weak performance.

Ola Al-Saqqaf, community activist following the women's mediation efforts in the water issue, acknowledges the complexity of the water crisis due to the shared water network and the sensitivity of the conflict. However, she emphasizes that the water crisis is a top priority for society and must be addressed. Therefore, the role of women in mediation efforts reflects the community's suffering and priorities. The positive response to these efforts signifies the recognition of all parties regarding the importance of addressing the issue and finding shared solutions, which increases the chances of future success.

Ammar Al-Suwayi, another community activist, considers the water issue in Taiz as one of the most urgent challenges faced by the residents. He recognizes that this issue involves political, humanitarian, and security complexities. He appreciates the tangible and effective efforts of the mediation team, particularly the women, in a delicate reality marked by conflicting political perspectives and a sensitive security and military situation. Based on his observations, he believes that community highly appreciates and values the efforts made in addressing the water issue due to its vital importance to them.

Rashed Mohammed, a researcher and human rights activist, states that the performance of women in mediation in the water issue in Taiz governorate was outstanding and effective. Their efforts resulted in practical steps on the ground and contributed to advancing a long-stalled issue, which previous political initiatives, media campaigns, and pressure tools failed to achieve. The mediation efforts led to building trust between the parties regarding the water issue. The importance of women-led mediation in the water issue lies in highlighting the presence of social actors capable of fostering trust and alleviating the suffering of civilians. These promising actors can help overcome obstacles that hinder civilian well-being and reduce social divisions. Moreover, their focus on humanitarian motives, rather than political motives, has been instrumental in the success of these efforts.



Fifth: Strengths and Challenges Encountered in the Mediation Experience:

1. Key Strengths and Empowering Factors That Contributed to the Success of the Mediation Experience:

Based on the opinions of those interviewed, whether from the mediation team or community activists, the prominent strengths and empowering factors that supported the mediation efforts and led to those qualitative agreements in the issue are as follows:

- a. The persuasive strategy adopted by the mediation team, which is based on building common interest and utilizing the human and political dimensions of the problem, while dealing with the sensitivity of the conflict.
- b. The team's determination to achieve and accomplish the task without stopping, relying on self-driven and voluntary efforts.
- c. The confidence of the main decision-makers from the negotiating parties (the internationally recognized government authority and the Ansar Allah government authority) in the negotiation team members and their neutrality, which supported the mediation efforts.
- d. The willingness to help from multiple international parties such as the International Red Cross, UNICEF, and others, to provide funding for the maintenance of wells and the surrounding network.
- e. The relationships of the mediation team members with the main mediation parties, especially decision-makers, and the team's ability to reach influencers.

2. Key Obstacles that Encountered the Implementation of the Mediation Experience:

- a. The media played an influential role, and sometimes negatively impacted the work's results, even pushing some efforts back to square one.
- b. The weak response from some parties and their skepticism about the team's neutrality, as a result of the conflict's sensitivity and each party's concerns about the presence of team members leaning towards the other side, despite the main decision-makers from both sides having more trust in the mediation team and their neutrality, which included women.
- c. Since the team mostly relied on self-driven and voluntary efforts in its activities, funding for its activities and visits was a major obstacle, and sometimes some activities were postponed until self-funding was available according to each member's capabilities.
- d. The lack of clarity in specifying the donor's capacity and the amount of funding they could provide, along with security concerns of the donor in engaging in supporting the task through maintenance work and operating the pilot pumping.
- e. Insufficient post-monitoring and tracking the task progress by the mediation team due to their being busy with their own work.
- f. Delayed reporting from the Water Corporation offices to the mediation team about the latest developments and events to continue the follow-up process.
- g. The multiplicity of administrative decision-making levels within the local authority in the city controlled by the internationally recognized government has increased the burdens and coordination activities there.

Sixth: Key Lessons Learned from the Experience (Conclusions)

The mediation experience, in which women volunteers played a central role in the water issue in Taiz Governorate, yielded several lessons that can be applied to future similar mediation efforts involving women. The following are the lessons learned from the experience:

1. Strong determination overcomes significant risks and obstacles and leads to success: This is the primary lesson derived from the experience, agreed upon by the mediation team and even the researchers and community activists. Believing in the cause and working persistently for the people, with unwavering determination to achieve success, without any financial support or sponsorship, and fearlessly facing risks by the mediation team, had a profound impact on achieving successes and reaching agreements that were previously considered nearly impossible.
2. Mediation activities serve as a model for self-initiated voluntary work in a challenging environment: Sometimes, great achievements do not require external support or funding. Many significant accomplishments begin with voluntary efforts. The voluntary commitment of the mediation team, combined with their belief in the cause, determination, and willingness to take risks, became instrumental in their success. If the task had received support, funding, or sponsorship from other parties, whether donors or others, it may not have been accepted by the negotiating parties, as witnessed in this experience.
3. Effective strategies for dealing with conflict sensitivity: True success relies on identifying risks and opportunities. The mediation team successfully managed the sensitivity of the conflict by employing diversified strategies to address each type of sensitive conflict. This approach convinced the parties to accept proposed solutions for the benefit of the people.
4. Collaborative work with all stakeholders: The collaborative approach followed by the team, whether in coordinating efforts or engaging stakeholders in dialogues, making them active participants in the mediation process and creators of successes, along with leveraging all available relationships of team members and involving influential individuals, proved to be crucial factors in achieving those agreements.
5. Building trust among the negotiating parties: The mediation team prioritized the establishment of trust from the very beginning. Trust was fostered through neutrality, objectivity, and transparency when presenting issues for discussion, starting with the interests of the community and acknowledging their human suffering. Patience and effective communication skills in managing dialogues were also key factors that bolstered trust among the negotiating parties and facilitated the attainment of agreements.
6. Responding promptly to changing circumstances: The mediation team adopted an approach that responded to evolving variables in a timely manner, avoiding hasty assumptions regarding the reactions of the parties involved in mediation. Embracing neutrality, transparency, and independently addressing each obstacle as it arose, while rallying efforts to address them, greatly contributed to achieving successes.
7. Viewing failure as an opportunity for learning and renewal, rather than a cause for discouragement: Evaluation at the end of each task and a willingness to discuss failures, acknowledge them, and work towards overcoming them, played an essential role in achieving success—particularly in the second phase of the task, which incorporated evaluation to prevent the repetition of previous mistakes. Evaluation fostered learning within the mediation team, enabling them to benefit from both past failures and success factors.
8. Avoiding media exposure facilitated mediation activities without unnecessary attention: The sensitivity of the conflict and the obstacles created by negative media involvement necessitated refraining from engaging with the media or disseminating news until after the completion of tasks. This avoidance of media interaction during mediation efforts helped mitigate conflict sensitivity, especially in the presence of biased and influential media outlets.

Seventh: Recommendations

1. Disseminate and generalize this experience to local mediation teams, especially women, to benefit from its successes and failures.
2. Enhance the role of civil society in building the capacities of women in local mediation.
3. Local authorities should strengthen their alliance with civil society activists and human rights advocates who can play significant roles in community mediation, particularly regarding public services, which are one of the local authority's commitments. Support their efforts in restoring services that have been disrupted in many local communities due to the ongoing war.
4. It is essential to communicate such experiences to the international community and support their outcomes by backing the implementation of agreements, especially those requiring funding for service restoration.
5. The women's mediation team should continue their efforts in operating the water network and not stop at the achievements they have made, as without them, the community will not reap the benefits of their dedicated work.
6. Donors should expedite their support for the maintenance and operation of the water network based on the accomplished agreements and help resolve a worsening humanitarian problem faced by the residents of Taiz city living under both main authorities.

References and Endnotes

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21. Interview with member of the mediation team, Ola Al-Aghbari, previous reference.
22. Results of interviews with members of the mediation team, previous reference.
23. Interview with Ryan Al-Shamiri, community activist and water issue observer, January 4, 2023.
24. Interview with Ola Al-Saqaf, community activist with limited involvement in the water issue, December 27, 2022.
25. Interview with community activist Ammar Al-Suwai, Taiz, January 5, 2023.
26. Interview with Rashed Mohammed, researcher and human rights activist, Taiz, January 5, 2023.
27. From the results of the views of the researchers who were interviewed for the purpose of the paper.

About Sheba and UNW

Sheba Youth Foundation: Sheba Youth Foundation is a youth-led civil society organization working as a unified team to empower youth and women to actively participate in development and peacebuilding in Yemen. It envisions a stable society where youth and women enjoy peace, development, and sustainable coexistence.



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UN Women: The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women is the leading global organization dedicated to promoting gender equality and empowering women. Its primary mandate is to accelerate progress in meeting the needs of women and girls globally. UN Women supports UN member states in setting global standards for achieving gender equality. It works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programs, and services necessary to effectively implement those standards, benefiting women and girls worldwide. The organization operates globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls, advocating for women's equal participation in all aspects of life.



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Introducing the researchers

Labib Shaif Mohammed Esmail: An expert, researcher, and trainer in the field of public policies, government, and civil society. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics, a Master's degree in Administration, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Policy Governance. He has served as the Director General of Research and Studies for over ten years and has led several consultancy centers and research institutions in Yemen. He has authored more than 25 published books, research papers, and policy briefs. He currently heads the Fourth House Consultancy Office.

Ola Al-Aghbary, Founder and Former CEO of Sheba Youth Foundation for Development. She is a member representing Yemeni youth at the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) works closely with the Office of The Special Envoy of The Secretary-General for Yemen. Ola works as a senior programs officer at the US-National Democratic Institute (NDI). She works as a local mediator between the conflict parties in Taiz City regarding public services issues such as the Water file in Taiz. She was invited by the UNOSESOG as a civil society member to participate in the track one political negotiation between conflict parties over road access in Taiz City. She works on the field of Peace and Development with many national and international organizations. Ola is a Law faculty graduate from the University of Taiz. [/ola-alaghbary](#)



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