

Yemen's Rural Population: Ignored in an Already-Forgotten War

blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2017/06/12/yemens-rural-population-ignored-in-an-already-forgotten-war/

6/12/2017

by Helen Lackner

#LSEYemen

This memo was presented at a workshop on 'Yemen's Urban–Rural Divide and the Ultra-Localisation of the Civil War' organised by the LSE Middle East Centre on 29 March 2017.



Nineteen million people live in Yemen's rural areas. More than 12 million of them are poor, and food insecure, while more than 5 million are on the verge of starvation and don't know where their next meal is coming from. What does this tell us about rural living conditions?

In the heyday of relative prosperity in the 1980s, rural Yemeni men brought back or sent substantial remittances from Saudi Arabia and beyond, invested them in 4-wheel drives, new houses, wells with diesel operated pumps, and turned their rain-fed sorghum and maize into irrigated fields of *qat* and citrus. Terraces were neglected as buying imported wheat was easier and cheaper while the cost of labour to maintain them was high. By the 1990s, men migrated to Yemeni towns and cities, worked in unskilled jobs, sending home smaller amounts which barely kept their families near the poverty line. Deterioration of living standards became a normal feature of life.

By the early 2000s, the main source of income of most rural households was men's urban labour. Rain-fed agriculture suffered increasingly frequent droughts and floods, smallholders' shallow wells dried up because of irregular rainfall and the lowering of the water table because of extraction by the few large landowners with boreholes. Shifting crops to *qat* was insufficient to compensate. Livestock husbandry suffered from high fodder

prices and climate change problems. Poverty worsened. Self-sufficiency in basic staples was a distant memory. The country imported 90% of its wheat, the highland staple and 100% of its rice, the staple of coastal regions alongside fish. In brief, rural people were almost as dependent on food imports as others, with one notable difference, the higher prices resulting from transport costs to remote locations on bad tracks.

While infrastructure improved, mainly roads and telecoms, access to medical services remained low as expensive; schools multiplied and most children, including girls, achieved primary education. Some made it to secondary school, and a few joined universities. However, the quality of education was very low and did not prepare most young people for the emergence of a new economy. Graduates from rural areas often just came home with little to show for their achievement. This led many rural youth to join the 2011 movement, in the hope that a new regime would provide jobs, income, improved living standards and self-respect.

The transition process initiated by the November 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council Agreement failed to provide any of these and resulted in deep disappointment.

For the rural population, the transition was characterised by continued deterioration in living conditions, fewer and worse paid casual jobs, lower incomes and thus worsening poverty. Deterioration also affected education while medical care became less affordable. Their staff remained unpaid and sought other means of livelihood.

March 2015 was the [moment when full-scale civil war and Saudi-led coalition air strikes](#) started. Since then rural, like urban, life has seen continuous worsening, with significant variations. Areas controlled by the Huthi–Saleh faction primarily suffer from air strikes on the various fronts (Midi and Haradh in Hajja, Sirwah in Mareb, Nehm in Sana'a, Metoon in Jawf, Dhi Naam and Qayfa in al Baidha, most of the areas around the Bab al Mandab in Taiz). Elsewhere the destruction of infrastructure, particularly bridges, slows down transport of food and increase its cost, which also suffers from road block 'taxation'.

In the 'liberated' areas, actual control is not with the internationally recognised government but with local groups. Insofar as there is any governance, justice or services, they are controlled by a range of groups including, in the best cases, pre-war councils and local administrations. In other areas control is by community organisations, usually led by their tribal elders. Where jihadi groups have influence, they control access to resources by setting up checkpoints and charging traffic. It should be noted that none of these exclude the other, as there is often cooperation and overlap between the different types of controlling groups. This has an impact on rural households' living costs as well as their potential for employment. The long-lasting saga of the payments of government salaries demonstrates that most government staff have remained unpaid, ignoring the fact that salaries are inadequate to sustaining households above the poverty line. In rural areas there are 3 types of government staff: education, health and military/security.

Throughout the country, rural life shares some common features. Reasonable rains in 2016 in some areas meant more food is available but average landholdings – of less than 1 hectare – leave people largely or entirely dependent on purchased food. In addition, smallholders growing commercial crops suffer from increased prices and reduced accessibility to inputs as well as similar constraints when selling their produce. Most importantly, in the absence of urban casual labour, the main employment opportunity for rural men is to join military units, whether *jihadi* (which pay better), Huthi–Saleh forces, or the internationally recognised government's army and its allied militias on the other (eg the Security belt, resistance groups).

With famine looming, the rural poor will be the first to suffer and die of starvation due to absolute shortages, increased prices and the lack of cash to buy food. Those in the most remote and inaccessible areas will be worst affected. While starvation already seen in the Tihama plain is also due to the fact that this area has been particularly poor for decades because of its specific political-economy, complacency about the situation elsewhere would be criminal.

The war is the prime cause of this disastrous situation and the leaders of the warring parties are responsible for it.

The Saudi-led coalition and its supporters, including the US and UK, share responsibility for the political and military situation, while the world at large does so for the humanitarian crisis, as is regularly [repeated by the UN humanitarian officials](#) as they appeal for funding to address the 4 famines anticipated this year, due to a combination of climate change and war factors. The need for immediate support to Yemen's rural population cannot be over-estimated, and that support should focus on helping them re-establish a viable rural economy.

Helen Lackner is Research Associate at the LMEI, SOAS. She has worked in all parts of Yemen since the 1970s and lived there for close to 15 years.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science