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Piloting Humanitarian Biometrics in Yemen

Aid Transparency versus Violation of Privacy?

The World Food Programme's (WFP) use of biometrics in Yemen is a prime example of challenges related to the use of biometric solutions in humanitarianism. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is the worst in the world and it is deteriorating. More than 24 million people – 80 percent of the population – require some form of assistance, and of those more than 16 million are in acute need. For one of the major players in the humanitarian field, the WFP, the current emergency response in Yemen is its largest operation. Simultaneously, the WFP is a frontrunner in placing data and digital technologies at the centre of humanitarian operations. This brief explores the tension between the expanding use of biometrics to increase aid transparency and the respect for privacy.

Brief Points

- More than 16 million people are food insecure in Yemen and 3.5 million women and children require treatment for acute malnutrition.
- Political interference, limited access and aid diversion are obstacles to effective distribution of aid in Yemen.
- Donors are pushing humanitarian actors to introduce biometric solutions to increase efficiency, accountability, and traceability of humanitarian aid.
- There is a need for balanced approaches to counter fraud and aid diversion while safeguarding the privacy of beneficiaries.

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Introduction

Humanitarians are increasingly using biometric data such as fingerprints or iris scans in food assistance, refugee identity management, and cash assistance. This is part of a trend where humanitarian work is under pressure to prove efficiency, cut costs and increase accountability. To this end, humanitarian actors partner with the private sector to introduce technology to innovate registration and identification of beneficiaries. The World Food Programme (WFP) is at the forefront of this development, describing it as imperative to leverage technology to achieve efficiencies.

The WFP's digital assistance platform, SCOPE, is used to manage the registration of and provision of humanitarian assistance and entitlements for over 50 million beneficiaries worldwide. In Yemen, the WFP has applied a mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping approach to conduct remote phone-based data collection and food-security monitoring and has implemented a Commodity Voucher system as a transfer mechanism for beneficiaries.¹ In the government-controlled areas in the south of Yemen, the WFP has registered more than 1.6 million beneficiaries to date, but only 20,000 have been registered in Sana'a as the Houthi authorities in the north of Yemen have resisted the roll-out of biometric registration.² In response, the WFP has on several occasions scaled back its level of humanitarian assistance. The Houthis accuse the WFP of not being neutral and violating Yemeni law by demanding control over biometric data, whereas the WFP maintains that biometric registration is necessary to prevent fraud and ensure effective aid distribution. Civilian Yemeni are caught in the middle.

The Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen

Yemen is experiencing a humanitarian catastrophe. More than 16 million Yemeni face crisis levels of food insecurity and, of those, 3.5 million women and children require acute treatment for malnutrition, according to the UN. Of these 16 million, up to 80% live in the northern Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen on which this brief will focus, as well as along the Red Sea and the Aden area.

Although the humanitarian effort assisted close to 11 million people per month in 2020, this

constituted a drop from a 14 million average per month in 2019.³ This was mainly caused by a reduction in funding, which forced the closure of critical programmes, but other factors, including reduced partner presence, security challenges and political obstruction also played a role. These factors increase the push for biometric solutions to increase the efficiency and accountability of humanitarian assistance.

Challenges for Aid Distribution

According to the WFP, Yemen is one of the most complex and challenging contexts for humanitarian work. Humanitarian aid organizations report that bureaucratic impediments hindering the delivery of humanitarian assistance present a major challenge. Moreover, the geography of Yemen hampers access to rural settlements and, during the conflict, much of the already weak infrastructure has been destroyed. These factors create bottlenecks in all phases of aid distribution. Further, the insecure security situation impedes effective humanitarian assistance delivery. There are reports of violence against humanitarian personnel, including assaults, arbitrary detentions, harassment, and threats, as well as restrictions on humanitarian movements.⁴ Consequently, international aid organizations rely on local partners to carry out parts of the aid distribution.⁵ There are also challenges regarding delays and rejections of sub-agreements, and associated attempts by authorities to interfere in the programming process. Finally, there is a lack of reliable data, making it difficult to properly track and document changes. These factors impede effective oversight. The Houthis have been accused of political interference and diverting food aid into the key areas they control. The Houthis deny allegations of food theft, and the claims are hard to substantiate with hard evidence, although there have been occasional examples of larger quantities of humanitarian food on sale on the open market in Houthi-controlled areas.

Humanitarian actors work with all the conflicting parties. The Houthis took control over state institutions in September 2014 and have since constructed a system of administrative control over the northern parts of Yemen which aid organizations must work with. The Houthi 'Supreme Council for management and coordination of humanitarian affairs and international cooperation' (SCMCHA) is – according to the

UN Panel of Experts – one of the most powerful entities in the Houthi-controlled areas, which again is illustrative of how humanitarian assistance is a key financial resource in Yemen.⁶ This entity is made up of powerful political actors who are awarded substantial discretion over the management of humanitarian assistance by the Houthi leadership. The Houthis have sought to move responsibility of the humanitarian crisis away from their policies, which has included a vocal and critical approach to the WFP, accusing the WFP of not being neutral in terms of humanitarian aid distribution. The Houthis have also accused the WFP of being corrupt by delivering sub-standard food and medicines to Yemen that are expired, using the funds on high salaries for international staff and operating expenses instead of helping the Yemeni.⁷ The WFP, on their side, argue that tons of food have had to be destroyed due to delays and denials of access, maintaining that the Houthis misrepresent the actions of the WFP.

Why the WFP Wants to Introduce Biometrics

The WFP has argued that the introduction of a biometric registration system would help prevent diversion and ensure that food reaches those who need it most. Biometrics is envisioned to simplify registration and identification of beneficiaries as many Yemeni do not have identification documents. In any case, biometric data is more reliable than paper documents that can be stolen or manipulated. The WFP also accentuates that biometric registration has the potential to reduce fraud by increasing the traceability of assistance. If beneficiaries are biometrically registered, it supports a high degree of versatility and the ability to quickly adjust relevant services in a volatile environment where conflict might force families to relocate on short notice. These benefits are in high demand among donors who worry about accountability, transparency, and documenting to their own populations that aid reaches the right beneficiaries. In the Yemeni context, the WFP has argued that the rollout of a biometric system would prevent the diversion of aid for profit and other purposes, including being used to support the Houthi's military campaign. The WFP has argued that without the introduction of biometric registration, the integrity of the WFP's operation in Yemen would be under threat, and it has on several

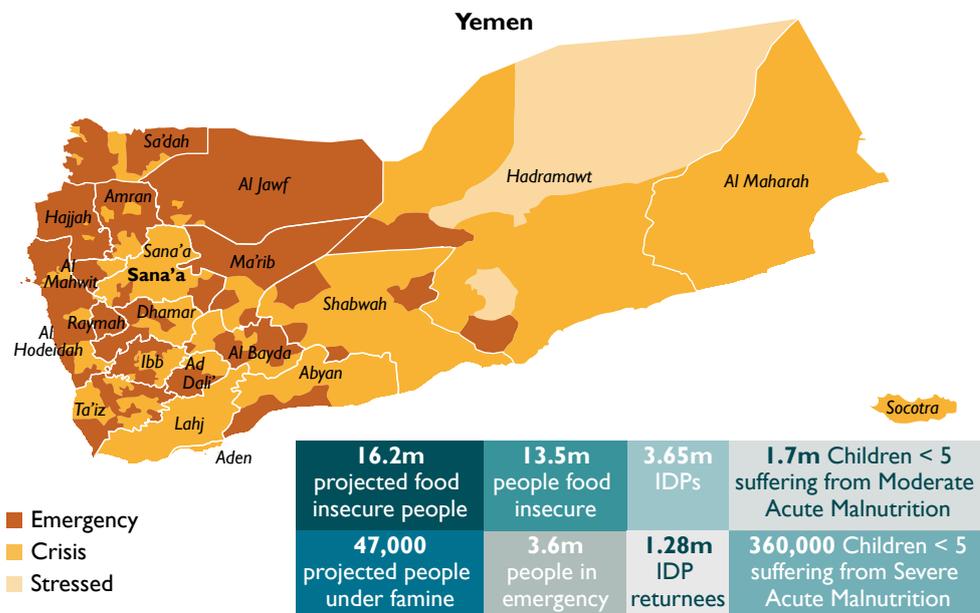


Figure 1: Emergency dashboard map of the crisis in Yemen. Source: World Food Programme (2021)⁹

occasions scaled down operations as a reaction to Houthi resistance to biometric registration.⁹

The Houthi's Reaction to Biometric Registration

Although the Houthis have agreed to allow biometric registration, they have resisted and delayed its implementation. Yet, whereas critics of biometrics often focus on data protection, privacy concerns, and issues related to false matches or the potential for exclusion, the Houthis focus on issues of sovereignty and control over information. The Yemeni case illustrates how a local non-state actor seeks to utilize the power inherent in control over data. The Houthis have legitimated their claims by arguing that the WFP is not a neutral actor, making it a matter of national security to refuse to hand over biometric data to the WFP. This has been refuted by the WFP, as well as by actors within the Houthi leadership.¹⁰

However, the power struggle between the Houthis and the WFP illustrates the importance of controlling the flows of humanitarian assistance, and underscores how aid is politicized and weaponized in the Yemeni context. Debates on privacy of beneficiaries, sovereignty, and power over information can be strategically placed to cover for contentious discussions over who decides on the eligibility of somebody to receive

aid in places where aid is a key resource. As a result of the Houthi resistance to biometric registration, registration devices will not be connected to the internet and the WFP has agreed to retain biometric data on a joint server room in Yemen, but beneficiary data is only accessible to the WFP. The details of the signed agreement between the WFP and the Houthis are confidential and, as such, also unknown to those whose data this concern. However, data-sharing arrangements between aid agencies and governance actors are not unique.¹¹

The Voice of the Beneficiaries

The struggle between the WFP and the Houthis has direct consequences for civilian Yemeni who depend on the flow of life-saving assistance. However, it will likewise have implications for beneficiaries if assistance is diverted, or if donors, due accountability concerns, decide to cut aid.

The main reasons for introducing biometric registration are to increase efficiency and limit fraud. However, biometric registration focuses on 'downstream fraud' on the level of an aid recipient rather than on 'upstream fraud' at the level of the wider supply chain where most fraud happens.¹² Simultaneously, the use of biometric identification places the greatest burden of biometrics on the most vulnerable. This includes

the threat of having data stolen or misused, but also that it seems unlikely that beneficiaries can fully grasp or foresee the (potential future) implications of sharing their data with the international humanitarian actors. In the case of WFP in Yemen, there has been reports of resistance and fear among beneficiaries concerning how the collected information would be used.¹³

The WFP emphasizes that beneficiary data is held in a secure system, and that the WFP has strict privacy policies regarding the sharing data with partners. The WFP shares beneficiary data with NGOs, governments, UN Agencies, and financial service providers as part of its programming, the details of which are confidential, which leaves the affected populations with little oversight over what is done with their data. For example, the WFP spurred critique from data protection activists when it announced it was working with a US company, Palantir, that is known for its work in intelligence and immigration enforcement.¹⁴ The WFP has emphasized that Palantir will not be given access to beneficiary information, but the debate illustrates the high stakes and the considerable insecurities related to partnerships in biometrics.

Duty to Protect

The WFP is aware of its duty to protect the biometric data of beneficiaries who could be at serious risk if this data is lost or stolen. Additionally, while it is voluntary to have your biometric information registered, critics question whether informed consent is possible when acceptance of biometric registration is a prerequisite for access to life-saving food and medical treatment. In this way, the use of biometrics highlights global inequalities. This issue is only further complicated by the fact that the Houthi movement, which has repeatedly and consistently demonstrated that it is unaffected by the flight of Yemenis, might itself begin collecting biometric data, or find ways to access and repurpose data collected by the WFP. This could include selling data for profit or using it for political purposes. The Houthi authorities are not powerless. They are also not politically neutral, but have priorities that do not necessarily correspond to those of impartial and neutral programming, which prioritize the most vulnerable to food insecurity such as women, girls, households headed by one person, and people with disabilities. However, whereas the Houthi's diversion of aid has been

used to argue in favour of biometric registration, one could argue that in a contentious context such as the Yemeni, the threat of biometric registration to the individual beneficiary, both short-term and long-term, should be given more weight.

Conclusion

Humanitarians are under pressure to not only be efficient, but also to be able to document that aid reaches the most vulnerable beneficiaries. Although the UN uses its strongest vocabulary on the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, referring to childhood in Yemen as ‘a special kind of hell’, the humanitarian response is underfunded.¹⁵ The discussion on efficiency of aid is not an abstract discussion – it is a discussion on how many lives to save.

This is an important backdrop to the debate around the introduction of biometric registration in Yemen. Humanitarian organizations working in Yemen have repeatedly voiced concerns over interference, diversion of aid, and restrictions that make it difficult, if not impossible, to fulfil their mandates. The conflict between the Houthis and the WFP, where the WFP made it clear that the organization was prepared to withdraw at least partially if the Houthis did not agree to biometric registration, illustrates that biometric registration is not a purely voluntary act. But at the same time, the humanitarian disaster in Yemen illustrates the fundamental problem of what humanitarian organizations are supposed to do when operating in a context where a local actor demonstrates the ability to manipulate the system, and systematic fraud is documented.

The issues pointed to in this brief cannot be solved with more effective data management or a new technology platform. They point to fundamental inequalities and hierarchies in

knowledge and access to power. At the bottom of this hierarchy are the beneficiaries. While the dilemmas related to efficient and transparent aid distribution are complex, the introduction of biometrics should take care not to impose additional risks for those already most vulnerable. ■

Notes

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THE PROJECT

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