



# Global Information Society Watch

## 2016



## Global Information Society Watch 2016

Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

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# YEMEN

## HOW THE INTERNET IS GIVING YEMEN A CHANCE IN ITS DARKEST HOUR



KEYWORDS: **labour, access, science & technology**

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## Introduction

Yemenis have had more than their share of suffering since the last war broke out in late 2013. The death toll has recently exceeded 10,000,<sup>1</sup> and among the 27 million still living, about eight million are suffering from malnutrition, including three million women and children. The war has resulted in the mass displacement of over three million people.<sup>2</sup> Over half of the population is in need of immediate help due to food insecurity, with the majority lacking clean water and sanitation.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the economy, which was already quite weak before the war, contracted a further 28% in 2015, with annual inflation of 30%. Poverty has reached an unprecedented level, with over 37% of the population living on less than USD 2 a day.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, most Yemenis are deprived of the right to remain alive, let alone the right to health, education, employment and other fundamental economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs).

That being said, some shining examples of resilience, creativity and innovation have defied the odds and have advanced those rights in one way or the other. At the core of all these examples is the internet. This article highlights stories of young Yemenis who took it upon themselves to use the global network to protect and advance ESCRs amidst the carnage of war. Showcasing those stories demonstrates the positive role the internet can play during times of conflict and to possibly serve as an inspiration to others living in difficult conditions across the globe.

## The Yemeni context

Yemen's constitution has several references to the protection of ESCRs such as compulsory education for children, equal rights of women, and access to economic and commercial opportunity.<sup>5</sup> However, when it comes to reality on the ground, much of what is found in the legislation is not reflected. There is a lack of economic opportunity, as well as corruption, gender imbalances and illiteracy; almost all human development indicators in Yemen are among the lowest in the world.<sup>6</sup> Indicators on the gender gap, for example, have been consistently lowest in all aspects including the economy, education, health and political empowerment, placing the country at the very bottom for the last two years in a row.<sup>7</sup>

Despite having ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1987, Yemen has a poor record of implementing it. Being among the least developed countries in the world, it faces enormous challenges on several fronts ranging from food shortages to security, from corruption to social disparities. The situation has worsened since the popular uprising of 2011, which began a few months after the spark of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. The last official state report submitted by the state of Yemen to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was in early 2011. That report received substantial criticism by the committee for not addressing many of the demands requested in earlier committee reports.<sup>8</sup>

The Yemeni state's unwillingness or inability to fulfil its obligations stipulated in the ICESCR was manifested in the atrocities committed against peaceful protestors calling for better economic

1 Ghobari, M. (2016, 30 August). U.N. says 10,000 killed in Yemen war, far more than other estimates. *Reuters*. in.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-toll-idINKCN1150W4

2 UN News Centre. (2016, 25 August). UN rights chief calls for international probe into alleged violations in Yemen. *UN News Centre*. www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54754

3 www.unocha.org/yemen/crisis-overview

4 www.worldbank.org/en/country/yemen/overview

5 www.refworld.org/pdfid/3fc4c1e94.pdf

6 UNDP. (2015). Briefing note for countries on the 2015 UNDP Human Development Report 2015: Yemen. hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr\_theme/country-notes/YEM.pdf

7 WEF. (2015). Yemen: Gender Gap Index 2015. *WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2015*. reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/economies/#economy=YEM

8 CESCR. (2011). Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant: concluding observations of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Yemen. www.refworld.org/country,COI,CESCR,CONCOBSERVATIONS,YEM,,52d673874,o.html

conditions and for addressing corruption and unemployment. On 18 March 2011, 50 peaceful protestors were killed in Sana'a's Tagheer Square. This led to a series of acts of violence that continued until President Ali Abdullah Saleh signed the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative, which triggered a transfer of power to Vice President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi through a one-candidate presidential election. Upon winning the election after a considerably high turnout, Hadi formed a new technocratic government and supported the ongoing inclusive National Dialogue Conference (NDC), whose mandate was to come up with a new constitution that would protect and advance human rights and enhance democracy, decentralisation and the rule of law.<sup>9</sup>

However, the NDC along with the whole transition were disrupted in 2013 when the Houthi Shiite movement, which refers to itself as "Ansarallah", used support from former president Ali Abdullah Saleh to overthrow Hadi and his government through a military coup that allowed them to take over the capital and most of the country. Hadi called upon Saudi Arabia and other willing countries to wage a military assault against the Houthis to reinstate his authority, leading to a prolonged war that led to the fragmentation of the country along political and sectarian lines.<sup>10</sup> As is the case in most wars, truth was the first casualty, with dozens of websites blocked and media organisations shut down by the Houthis, who started a severe clampdown on dissidents.<sup>11</sup>

Although the internet penetration rate in Yemen is just over 24%,<sup>12</sup> the Houthis have taken a rather hard-line approach against journalists and bloggers who used the internet to publish dissident content. According to an activist in Sana'a,<sup>13</sup> anyone caught with digital content on their mobile phone, tablet or laptop criticising the Houthis risks extrajudicial actions from kidnapping to even outright assassination. A couple of journalists were killed by airstrikes when used as human shields in fortified military

compounds.<sup>14</sup> It has been evident that most of the voices critical of the Houthis are either abroad or are based in territories loyal to the Hadi regime. Similarly, the activist said that those who express support of Houthis or Saleh in Hadi-controlled regions risk life-threatening repercussions.

### Carmen Cakes: Women entrepreneurs refuse to give up

Articles 6 and 7 of the ICESCR deal with the right to work and working conditions. Those rights were severely impacted by the war in Yemen, which led to the bankruptcy of many businesses, and many people lost their only source of income. Among those threatened with closing shop was Carmen Cakes, an online business on Facebook selling all sorts of creative bakery products for weddings, birthdays and other occasions. Safa'a and Afnan Al-Aghbari, two young Yemeni sisters who live in the capital Sana'a, founded Carmen Cakes in 2011 to earn income online by using their creative baking skills. The company received good publicity when Safa'a gave a talk at TEDxSanaa describing how she and her sister started their business and what they had to go through to thrive in a rather culturally restrictive society.<sup>15</sup>

In February 2016, however, the businesswomen were forced to suspend their services due to the raging war. "The war has impacted our business severely. Exported material we used for our products had doubled in price. Additionally, leaving the house to get decoration items, for example, has become difficult given the state of insecurity that we lived through," Safa'a said in describing the difficulties her business had to endure.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the two entrepreneurs revived their business in July, as indicated in this strong and emotional Facebook post, through which they expressed their appreciation to all their customers for staying with them throughout the years: "At last, we came back again to receive your orders and be part of your happy occasions. We came back with persistence and enthusiasm to resume our service and give you our very best."<sup>17</sup>

9 Al-Saqaf, W. (2014, 7 April). *Breaking digital firewalls: analyzing internet censorship and circumvention in the Arab world*. Örebro Studies in Media and Communication. [oru.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:710477](http://oru.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:710477)

10 Sharp, J. M. (2015, 26 March). Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention. *Congressional Research Service*. [digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadoc700733/m1/1/high\\_res\\_d/R43960\\_2015Mar26.pdf](http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadoc700733/m1/1/high_res_d/R43960_2015Mar26.pdf)

11 Ghattas, A. (2015, 30 March). News and Search Websites Blocked in Yemen as Conflict Escalates. *Global Voices Online*. <https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2015/03/30/news-and-search-websites-blocked-in-yemen-as-conflict-escalates>

12 Internet World Stats. (2016, 30 June). Yemen Internet usage, broadband and telecommunications reports. *Internet World Stats*. [www.internetworldstats.com/me/ye.htm](http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/ye.htm)

13 Anonymous source, who requested to remain so for fear of repercussions.

14 RSF. (2015, 28 May). Two journalists killed in air strike while held hostage. *Reporters without Borders*. <https://rsf.org/en/news/two-journalists-killed-air-strike-while-held-hostage>

15 [tedxtalks.ted.com/video/Sweet-success-doesnt-come-easy](http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/Sweet-success-doesnt-come-easy)

16 Electronic interview with Carmen Cakes co-founder Safa'a Al-Aghbari, 15 August 2016

17 Ibid.

Instead of giving up and moving out of Yemen to a safe place like many others did, Safa'a and Afnan demonstrated resilience and proved that they could make it in the midst of the war in one of world's most impoverished countries. According to Safa'a, it is an obligation for citizens in such tough times to fight for their ESCRs despite the violence. And that meant resuming her business anyhow, knowing it would certainly not be easy.

She attributes her decision to resume her business activities mainly to the internet. She indicated that the internet and social media have indeed opened up opportunities for those who want to make a living under almost any circumstances. "Having a page on social media absolves you from having an actual shop while facilitating the process of paying and ordering," she said.

Not only was the internet a source of income for Safa'a and Afnan, but it was also a source of information about how to start a business and sustain it during the darkest of times in the country. Safa'a further stated that just as the internet helped empower her through Carmen Cakes, it also has the potential to empower other women who wish to initiate their own small business enterprises. Safa'a believes that she has the obligation to provide training, consultancy and advice to other emerging businesswomen so they can improve their managerial and online skills and have successful projects that serve them and their country well.

However, it is important to note that Safa'a and Afnan are rather the exception and not the norm in the Yemeni context. This is because they were supported by their family and given the opportunity to pursue higher education and, most importantly, have access to the internet. Most are not as lucky, given that 45% of the female population in the country remains illiterate and can therefore not use the internet effectively even if they were offered access.<sup>18</sup>

The example of Carmen Cakes shows that if given a chance, Yemeni women are capable of protecting their economic rights and pursuing a better life using available, albeit poor, internet services – which have been largely underestimated and underutilised for various reasons.<sup>19</sup>

## Access to the internet as an ESCR

The situation in Yemen reached a critical point in early 2015. A country-wide internet shutdown for an hour and a half occurred on 2 April 2015, probably due to power outages or equipment failure.<sup>20</sup> A number of activists and engineers who found themselves on the brink of being disconnected from the world worked together to establish a network of nodes that could keep them connected using internet satellite services, which was possible even in the case of a nation-wide internet shutdown. The aim was to protect the rights of individuals to communicate and socially interact with people they care about. It was also to help preserve citizens' rights to access critical information needed for survival, such as nearby emergency centres, hospitals, pharmacies, and help units run by international humanitarian organisations such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Committee of the Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders. The initiative later evolved into its own not-for-profit organisation named the Yemeni Organization for Development and Exchange of Technology (YODET), whose main objective is to provide free Wi-Fi internet access for emergency and humanitarian needs.<sup>21</sup>

YODET's founders seem to agree with the conclusions reached by Juan Carlos Lara, who said in a comprehensive study on internet access and ESCRs that the realisation of ESCRs, especially in a framework of progressive achievement, is closely linked to the internet.<sup>22</sup> Having that as a point of departure, it is important to recognise and appreciate efforts such as those of YODET because they strive to keep citizens connected to the internet, especially during times of uncertainty.

Yemeni engineer Amr Mustafa, one of the founders and core YODET team members, said his organisation provides internet access as a way for Yemenis to benefit from technological advancements.<sup>23</sup> Amr is among a number of progressive minds that view internet access as a fundamental human right and providing access to it as a way to lead better lives. He pointed out the importance

18 CIA. (2015). *The World Factbook*. [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.html)

19 Al-Saqaf, W. (2013, 25 November). The Internet as a Catalyst for Change in Yemen. *Global Voices Online*. <https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2013/11/25/the-internet-catalyst-for-change-development-ict4d-transparency-in-yemen>

20 Peterson, A. (2015, 2 April). Another casualty in Yemen: Internet stability. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2015/04/02/another-casualty-in-yemen-internet-stability>

21 [www.ynext.org/heading/who-we-are](http://www.ynext.org/heading/who-we-are)

22 Lara, J.C. (2015, September). *Internet access and economic, social and cultural rights*. Association for Progressive Communications (APC). [https://www.apc.org/en/system/files/APC\\_ESCR\\_Access\\_Juan%20Carlos%20Lara\\_September2015%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.apc.org/en/system/files/APC_ESCR_Access_Juan%20Carlos%20Lara_September2015%20(1).pdf)

23 Electronic interview with YODET team member Amr Mustafa, 17 August 2016.

of YODET's projects to young girls in particular, because they can benefit from the free service to bridge the digital divide in Yemen.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to providing internet access, YODET is also involved in training young Yemenis on how to use the internet to seek useful and timely information, such as first aid procedures and emergency protocols, which may be a matter of life or death during a conflict. While YODET does not work in the field of formal education, Amr believes that its training programmes align well with Article 13 of the ICESR on the right to education. "We perform training and capacity-building programmes that bridge the gap between the educational system outcome and the needed skills for work," he explains.

YODET's efforts seem to be filling a potential gap that emerges in situations of conflict where the telecommunication sector is at risk of total collapse. While this may be important for Yemen, other countries, including more stable ones, could benefit from such an example by empowering grassroots organisations to partially fulfil the role that should have been played by the authorities. Such a contingency measure is of immense value to protect citizens' right to communicate, for example, in the aftermath of an unexpected natural disaster.

### Promoting the right to access science and technology literature

Article 15 of the ICESCR stipulates that the rights to access and pursue scientific research and creative activity are to be protected. Hashem Al-Ghaili, who is a 26-year-old prominent molecular biotechnologist from Yemen, clearly demonstrates through his Facebook page called "Science Nature Page", which has become known worldwide. Created in August 2015, the initiative shows that one person can have an enormous impact that aligns well with the aforementioned ICESCR article. Hashem saw his page grow in just over a year to be one of the world's most popular science pages on Facebook. By August 2016, the page had over 5.4 million fans and its videos were viewed a total exceeding a billion times by people from around the world. Hashem is based in Dubai and works for Futurism Media, a platform dedicated to sharing science and technology news with the general public. He produces many videos himself and many of his videos have over a million views.<sup>25</sup> Through his work, Hashem is advancing the mission of Futurism, which is to empower readers and drive the development of

transformative technologies towards maximising human potential.<sup>26</sup>

While Hashem's work demonstrates a rather spectacular and remarkable Yemeni success story abroad, he acknowledges that he may have not been able to achieve the same had he been in Yemen. When asked whether he aims through his work to protect ESCRs in Yemen, he answered by saying that "currently ESCRs in Yemen do not exist. You can't protect something that doesn't exist."

As someone who works for a media company in Dubai, Hashem stressed that the private sector in Yemen, if given the opportunity, can help initiate programmes that educate the public about their ESCRs. Once people understand and realise their ESCRs, he believes that "they will choose to demand and protect them." He believes that social media and videos can serve as "powerful tools" that can assist him with such advocacy in the future.<sup>27</sup>

While Hashem is already giving Yemenis the opportunity to learn about science and technology via his Facebook page, he hopes to do even more. He said that among his future plans is to pursue a project in which he can be involved in the training of Yemeni youth to acquire many of the skills he has in video design, research and presentation on social media. If an offer of a project grant comes his way, he said he is certainly willing to make it a reality.

In his own way – and by promoting access to science and technology research and ideas – Hashem is an example of the Yemeni potential in using the internet to advance ESCRs not only in Yemen, but across the globe.

### Conclusion

The examples used in this article demonstrate that while, on the one hand, the war in Yemen has negatively affected ESCRs, on the other hand it has demonstrated how important the internet is in advancing those rights. This was clearly manifested by Carmen Cakes' ability to use Facebook to resume its business activity and by YODET's efforts to prevent a possible isolation of Yemen from the rest of the world. In addition, the use of social media in delivering science and technology content to youth in Yemen and the region was demonstrated by Hashem's popular Facebook page

As Yemen is undergoing a challenging time on all fronts, it is imperative to support such initiatives, even if they are managed by individual or small-scale organisations, because they have the capacity

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> [www.facebook.com/ScienceNaturePage/about](http://www.facebook.com/ScienceNaturePage/about)

<sup>26</sup> [futurism.com/about](http://futurism.com/about)

<sup>27</sup> Electronic interview with Hashem Al-Ghaili, founder of the Science Nature Facebook page, 21 August 2016.

to advance and protect ESCRs should the state fail to do so. Large-scale projects that are implemented on a national or regional scale via international development agencies or governments, albeit important, are certainly not enough to advance ESCRs, particularly during times of conflict.

Additionally, those initiatives cannot happen unless more people use the internet, which in turn requires developing infrastructure, raising literacy levels, and providing training opportunities. Doing so would naturally lead to a higher probability of using the internet, which in turn, can further advance ESCRs.

### Action steps

Action steps that can be taken in light of these stories can be summed up in the following way:

- Provide funding opportunities so that successful entrepreneurs in Yemen can transfer their skills to others using the internet.
- Build the capacity of grassroots organisations dealing with internet access so that they continue to enhance their services and scale up the extent and quality of their coverage.
- Encourage female business entrepreneurs that use social media and other online tools to share their experiences by providing sufficient support in the form of material and fiscal resources.
- Have broader coverage in traditional and social media of success stories that demonstrate the use of the internet for the advancement of ESCRs so that they can inspire others to follow suit.
- Promote collaboration between competent Yemenis abroad and their counterparts in Yemen to share skills and experiences. This would eventually help create an ecosystem that encourages technological creativity and innovation inside Yemen.
- Help the government in its effort to provide greater access to the internet through a long-term ICT strategic plan that involves, as one of its pillars, the enhancement of ESCRs themselves.

# Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an “inventory of things” that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers’ rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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