

Brief Policy Paper

The Role of Local Mediation in Mitigating Water Governance Gaps in Conflict-affected Contexts

Lessons from Taiz governorate

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1. Executive Summary

In conflict-affected and fragile settings, limited natural resources—particularly water—often become direct triggers for social tensions and community-level conflicts. In Yemen, where protracted armed conflict has eroded public infrastructure, fragmented governance systems, and intensified internal displacement, water has increasingly become a scarce and contested resource.

This policy brief examines the experience of local mediation in managing water-related conflicts in three districts of Taiz Governorate: **Jabal Habashi, Al-Ma’afer, and Al-Shamayateen**. Drawing on a field-based case study, the brief documents how community mediation mechanisms—when designed with sensitivity to the local context and supported by follow-up arrangements—have contributed to containing conflicts, preventing escalation, and preserving social cohesion in an environment characterized by resource scarcity and weak formal institutional presence.

The brief concludes that local mediation represents a **low-cost, high-impact tool** in fragile contexts, provided it is not used as a substitute for the state, but rather as a practical bridge that helps address governance gaps and paves the way for more sustainable technical and developmental solutions. It also presents key lessons learned and policy-oriented recommendations for donors, organizations, and policymakers on how to support and adapt this approach in comparable contexts beyond Yemen.

2. Overview of the Yemeni Context for Non-Specialists

2.1 Yemen: Protracted Conflict and Depleted Resources

Yemen has been experiencing a prolonged armed conflict for several years, resulting in widespread collapse of public infrastructure and a sharp decline in basic services, including water supply and sanitation. With weakened state institutions, local communities have increasingly been forced to manage their daily affairs through self-organized arrangements, in the absence of effective regulatory frameworks.

2.2 Water at the Intersection of Scarcity and Conflict

Yemen is among the most water-scarce countries in the world. The conflict has further exacerbated this scarcity through the destruction of networks, disrupted maintenance, and rising operational costs. As demand has increased, water has shifted from being a public service to a competitive resource, turning it into a focal point for local conflicts.

2.3 Taiz as a Representative Case

Taiz Governorate represents a particularly illustrative case of the intersection between conflict, displacement, and water scarcity. It is one of the most densely populated governorates and hosts large numbers of internally displaced persons, placing additional pressure on already limited resources—especially in rural and peri-urban districts.

3. Why Is Local Mediation a Central Tool in Water-Related Conflicts?

In the context of limited state presence, local mediation has emerged as both a social and governance mechanism for managing everyday conflicts. The experience in Taiz demonstrates that the effectiveness of local mediation stems from three main characteristics:

1. **Rapid and Flexible Response:** Local mediation can intervene early and contain disputes before they escalate, drawing on social acceptance and existing community relationships.
2. **Contextual Relevance:** Mediation is conducted using the community's own language, norms, and social frameworks, which enhances local legitimacy and increases compliance with outcomes.
3. **Cost Efficiency and Sustainability:** Compared to costly emergency or technical interventions, local mediation represents a low-cost entry point that helps preserve social cohesion—an essential precondition for the sustainability of any subsequent solution.

However, this effectiveness is not automatic. It depends on how mediation processes are designed, their capacity to manage power imbalances, their inclusion of affected groups, and the extent to which agreements are linked to clear follow-up mechanisms.

4. How Was Mediation Conducted? (Summary of the Intervention Pathway)

4.1 From Initiative to Intervention

Across the three districts, mediation processes were initiated in response to escalating local tensions related to water distribution or operation of water sources. Local mediators—including community elders, members of local committees, and social actors—took the lead in initiating efforts to contain disputes.

4.2 Participating Stakeholders

Mediation processes involved multiple stakeholders, including:

- Representatives of host communities
- Representatives of internally displaced households
- Owners or operators of water sources
- Women directly affected by water scarcity
- In some cases, representatives of local authorities

4.3 Mediation Pathway

The mediation process followed a gradual sequence that included:

- Listening to the positions and grievances of all parties
- Identifying the root causes of the conflict and sources of tension
- Negotiating temporary or longer-term arrangements
- Reaching community-based agreements on water distribution or operation

4.4 Limits of Mediation

While many interventions succeeded in de-escalating tensions, the experience showed that the absence of follow-up mechanisms or weak management of power imbalances often undermined the durability of some agreements.

5. What Do the Experiences of the Three Districts Reveal? (Comparative Insights)

5.1 One Resource, Multiple Drivers

The cases demonstrate that conflicts do not stem from scarcity alone, but from its interaction with social and political factors—highlighting the limitations of stand-alone technical solutions.

5.2 Displacement as a Conflict-Reshaping Factor

Displacement reshaped power relations and generated divergent perceptions of entitlement to water, making its integration into mediation design a necessity rather than an option.

5.3 Inclusion of Women as a Quality Factor

Where women were meaningfully included, solutions became more realistic and compliance with agreements improved.

5.4 Follow-Up as a Decisive Link

Experience showed that simple and clear follow-up mechanisms made the difference between temporary de-escalation and more sustainable solutions.

6. Key Lessons Learned

- Local mediation serves as a practical bridge to address governance gaps.
- Water conflicts are governance-related as much as they are service-related.
- Integrating displacement and gender considerations is essential for mediation success.
- Follow-up mechanisms are critical to sustainability.

7. Policy Recommendations for External Actors

For International Donors

- Invest in local mediation as a complementary approach to technical water interventions.
- Support follow-up mechanisms and capacity-building for mediators.
- Require the integration of displacement and gender considerations.

For International Organizations

- Integrate local mediation into water and WASH programming.
- Develop simple, practical mediation tools.
- Support long-term local partnerships.

For Policymakers

- Recognize community structures as temporary governance actors in fragile contexts.
- Link local mediation to light, flexible formal frameworks.

8. Transferability Beyond Yemen

The Taiz experience offers adaptable lessons for other contexts affected by the intersection of conflict, displacement, and natural resource scarcity—particularly in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East—provided that local specificities are respected and models are not mechanically replicated.

