



ترميم  
عبدالخالق  
جوادم

# INTENSIVE EMPLOYMENT

The COMMUNITY  
LIVELIHOODS  
PROJECT

Sana'a, Yemen



## CLEARING AWAY THE PRESENT TO EXPOSE THE BEAUTY OF AN ANCIENT PAST: USAID-funded project helps to restore a UNESCO World Heritage Site

By Patricia Leidl

It lies like a mysterious labyrinth in the heart of Sana'a, a city of almost two million inhabitants. Enclosed by a ring of bony mountains and sheltered by the stark blue of the desert sky, the capital of Yemen sprawls across a wide and arid plateau that soars 7,500 feet above sea level.

Although noisy, chaotic and filled with beggars, Sana'a's dusty, diesel-scented streets also hide what UNESCO describes as a 'living museum'. Eighth century cleric Muhammad ibn Idri put it even more succinctly: "Sana'a," he said simply, "must be seen".

Ibn Idri was referring to the Old City of Sana'a, the ancient heart of Yemen's impoverished capital. Known to foreigners simply as the "old city", it remains a quiet enclave of narrow cobble-stoned streets lined with vertiginous stone and wattle, multi-storied buildings that are essentially primitive skyscrapers. Their walls are decorated with stained glass windows, and Yemen's distinctive lace-like fretwork—idiosyncratic, odd and vaguely hallucinatory. Historians maintain that at 2,500 years old, Baba Al Yaman could conceivably be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.

### AN ANCIENT CROSSROADS

In antiquity, Old Sana'a was the stuff of legend: A wealthy crossroads between Africa, Egypt and the country's verdant south. Here caravans of traders would rest their camels, take refreshment, sleep, trade and then move on, bringing their rich merchandise of spices, textiles, gold, silver, myrrh and frankincense to meet the insatiable demands of ancient civilizations to the north. So prolific and critical was this Arab equivalent of the Spice Road that it gave rise to the mysterious Nabatean Culture that was eventually absorbed into the Roman Empire in 32 BC.

Herodotus, the peripatetic Roman historian and wanderer extraordinaire, once dubbed the country, "Arabia Felix" or happy Arabia. Today, Yemen is no longer particularly happy—nor is Old Sana'a any longer the beating heart of the Arab world.

Now, its once pristine streets are filled with rubble, trash and the usual detritus of human activity. Instead of gardens, multi-colored plastic bags festoon the community plots, while milk cartons, piles of broken drywall, and discarded concrete block constricted city streets forcing residents—many of whom are very old—to scramble over the jagged surfaces.

"It is terrible," says Mohammed, 73, who relies on a cane to hobble around. "I used to walk every where but I might as well be climbing mountains. I'm not a goat!"

### TEETERING ON THE VERGE

Eight months of a political crisis that has left the country teetering on the verge of economic collapse, has not left Yemen's "jewel" untouched. Residents face ongoing electrical and water shortages, intermittent trash collection and a growing mountain of refuse that clogs the narrow streets to the point where even water trucks are unable to pass.

This has rendered the water shortage even more acute—and expensive. Unable to fill their cisterns from trucks, many residents have to travel long distances and line up for hours at community taps or pay unaffordable prices for bottled water.

A flat lining tourism sector and a 50 percent inflation rate means many residents are either leaving the city for their ancestral villages or getting by on less and less. As many as 50 per cent of the country's young people are unemployed, which in turn increases the likelihood of the country slipping into armed violence during this very sensitive and volatile time. "Some of us are starving," says one man who refused to

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COVER: Youth beneficiary of USAID-funded intensive labor project takes a rest from his labors removing construction rubble from the Old City of Sana'a, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. ABOVE: distinctive facades common in the Old City. Many of these buildings are more than a 1000 years old.



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be named. “It is the crisis, yes, but it is also the result of corruption.”

“Some people are making a lot of money out of our suffering.”

But the city is slowly coming back. Now that Saleh has formally stepped down under a GCC-brokered deal, Yemen is poised to hold elections at the end of February.

For the most part, the fighting has calmed, the heavy artillery barrages stilled and Sana’a’s beleaguered residents tentatively hopeful that normal services will eventually resume. USAID is also doing its bit by injecting a massive infusion of cash and expertise to help jump-start the economy; strengthen the political process; upgrade the country’s ailing health infrastructure and employ youth and the very poor in cash-for-work projects designed to, among other things, bring Old Sana’a back to a semblance of its former beauty.

#### **AN EMPLOYMENT REPRIEVE**

Fatimah is one of those who are benefitting from short-term USAID-employment projects that are ramping up all over the country. At the age of 40, she is the sole breadwinner for eleven children who she is now bringing up on her own: her oldest is fifteen; her youngest seven months old. Her husband was killed in a car crash one year ago and before Fatimah began work on the USAID-funded Community Livelihoods Project (CLP) cash-for-work in Old Sana’a, hers was a life of continual anxiety and want. Dressed in a worn Abaya and a tattered niqab, her eyes nevertheless radiate warmth, strength and good humour.

“This job has been a life saver for us,” she says. “It is helping so much. It came at the right time because we could not find work.” The project, which is run by the CLP-funded Together Stronger, is employing 110 young men and women to repair 200 sidewalk sections, clean streets and plant 1,200 trees. The aim is to clear away the rubble and waste that has made parts of Old Sana’a an eyesore, in some cases impassable and a magnet for infectious diseases.

Together Stronger founder Mohammed Abdulqader is the urbane former businessman who created the NGO to help in his country’s development. The Foundation’s goal, he says, is not only to employ youth and transform Old Sana’a into the tourist Mecca it once was, but also to raise awareness of the importance of good stewardship, water conservation and the fact that the city is not only for Sana’aens to enjoy, but for the entire world. As well as street cleaning, the project will rehabilitate public gardens, teach residents how to recycle wastewater and conserve energy.

LEFT: A young beneficiary poses in front of graffiti in the Old City. RIGHT: Fatimah, 40 is the widowed mother of eleven children between the ages of seven months and 15 years. She is one of is one of 15 women benefitting from the intensive labor project in the old city. “I can now feed my children”, she says.



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“Did you know that the oldest continuously inhabited house in the world is right here in the Old City?” he says. “It is more than 1,400 years old and there are many others here that are almost as old.”

#### **LACK OF SERVICES**

Despite its beauty, historical significance and the fact that it is protected, Old Sana’a is beset by rapid urbanization, illegal construction, lack of water and crumbling infrastructure. “The government here is no longer very powerful,” notes Abdulqader. “We need donors to get behind more projects such as these to protect this beautiful place but also afford youth an opportunity to work.”



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Most of the beneficiaries Abdulqader maintains, are from low-income families struggling to make ends meet in the face of a political crisis that has paralysed the country for almost a year. “They’ve lost their jobs because of the crisis. They can’t feed their families and can’t even find low-skilled work because former employers are themselves struggling to survive.”

One of these at-risk youth is Mohammad, 24, who is of mixed African and Yemeni descent. Long despised as the lowest in the social pecking order, he too is grateful to find work. His daily cash-for-work income of \$10 per day now feeds and clothes brothers, sisters, and an ailing mother. His father died five years ago from a water-borne disease easily treatable if only his family had been able to afford medicines.

“I had nothing to do,” he says. “I was feeling so hopeless and depressed. Even if this is only short-term work it helps a great deal.”

“I’m the only person supporting a family of five”, says Mohammad, who also adds that since the age of 15, he worked in restaurants, construction, hotels and in other low-skilled labour. Handsome and with an infectious smile, like many of Yemen’s marginalized minorities, his family was too impoverished to send him to school.

The project, which kicked off in early December, is directly benefitting an estimated 104 workers. It will also provide relief for 95,000 Old Sana’a residents and merchants who will be able to sell their wares, and walk this hauntingly lovely city unhindered by the blight of construction waste, garbage and the fear of disease

LEFT: Two young workers benefitting from a USAID-funded intensive labor project chat to an elderly resident enjoying the winter sun.

RIGHT: Mohammad, 24, belongs to one of Yemen’s discriminated against minorities. Before working on this project, he was unable to feed his mother, five brothers and sisters



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LEFT: Two little girls dressed up for a Sana'a winter in the Old City. The USAID-funded Community Livelihoods Project is working with local NGOs to clean up the ancient UNESCO World Heritage Site.

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