

# Yemen: summary of investigations

## Background and Context

In November 2023, we were informed of the tragic death of our colleague, Hisham Al-Hakimi, after a prolonged period of detention by authorities in Yemen. Hisham, who was our Safety and Security Director in Yemen, had worked for Save the Children for nearly 20 years and his death was deeply shocking and devastating for his family, friends, and Save the Children colleagues in Yemen and beyond. Our thoughts remain with everyone who knew Hisham personally.

Staff had raised various concerns about the Country Office in the months before and after Hisham was detained. To get a better understanding of the management and culture within the Country Office, and the oversight of the Country Office by the Region and Centre in the months leading up to Hisham's detention, SCI commissioned two investigations:

- **November 2023** – SCI instructed an external law firm to conduct a legally privileged investigation into the steps taken by the organisation around Hisham's detention.
- **December 2023** – In response to wider concerns around the operational culture in the country office, SCI launched a management review into Save the Children Yemen to identify ongoing issues and areas for improvement. The management review was led by a panel of independent external experts, chosen for their breadth and depth of experience. The panel reported directly to the SCI Board.

We appreciate the patience of everyone who has been waiting for the outcomes of the investigation and management review. The investigation and review have now been completed and this update provides a headline summary of the key findings and the next steps being taken.

Our heartfelt thanks go to the people who provided input and were interviewed, including colleagues in Yemen, MENAEE and the Centre, former colleagues, and representatives from Members with close involvement in Yemen.

## Overview of Findings

We realise that many of you may have hoped that in undertaking these investigations, we would find an answer to the questions around why Hisham was detained and died. You know Yemen and will understand why it's been so difficult to establish how and why he died. We understand how disappointing this is and we share your frustration.

The reviews have, however, enabled us to take a deeper look into the culture within the Yemen CO and the MENAEE RO and we are committed to working with you all to fix the problems we know exist. We know the working environment and culture within the Yemen CO has negatively affected the wellbeing of staff in Yemen and the Region. We are committed to righting the wrongs, but we know we have let you down and for this, we are truly sorry.

The reviews were specific to events in Yemen and did not look at how other country offices or regions have been managed. This means that the conclusions and recommendations below are designed to address issues related to Yemen specifically. However, some of the challenges identified may also be applicable elsewhere and this work will therefore look to improve things across the whole of SCI, including as part of our programme to become fit for future.

In summary, the reports found that:

- A negative working culture had developed in the Yemen CO where SCI's values were not being properly "lived" or reinforced from the top. This left many staff feeling disillusioned and marginalised.

- SCI's incident management processes failed to meet the needs of the staff in Yemen.
- SCI's risk management processes were not followed in the CO and not enough consideration was given globally to managing the high level of risk in the country.
- There was a lack of transparency within the Yemen CO and MENAEE RO in SCI's recruitment processes, which eroded trust.
- Oversight in the MENAEE RO and centre failed and leadership across the organisation did not pick up on the deteriorating situation in Yemen quickly enough.
- An overreliance on programmatic KPIs undermined opportunities to operate according to our values.
- Senior staff within MENAEE RO and Centre failed to comply with some of SCI's policies and procedures, at the cost of staff trust, wellbeing, and team culture.

Overall, it was found that there were fundamental failures of leadership, process, and accountability that we must urgently address.

## What are we doing?

We are committed to making improvements to address the reports' findings. Work is ongoing to finalise and plan the specific actions we'll be taking. In the meantime, we have summarised the areas that we intend to prioritise.

### Leadership and culture

We must provide the best possible work environment for our colleagues, so they can feel safe, have trust in leadership, and be confident that their views are heard. It is also essential that our leaders reflect our values and set an example for our teams.

#### What we are doing already

- We have brought Yemeni children back to the heart of our work, centring our conversations on our mission and values.
- We've established an open-door approach so that staff can raise issues directly with the CD and SMT.
- Leadership is responding more quickly and effectively to issues raised by staff.
- We've re-empowered the CO SMT as a decision-making body, with greater staff representation.
- We are being more transparent with staff and regularly updating them, sharing relevant information and explaining decisions.
- We are focusing on wellbeing and listening to what staff need. We've brought in some changes such as reducing working hours, stopping out of hours emails, and accommodating travel needs.
- We are improving opportunities for cross-functional working, creating a stronger culture of accountability and collaboration between teams.

#### What we have left to do

- We will be looking at how we manage performance at leadership levels.
- We will reaffirm that SCI's values are key to our success and establish a culture where both "what we do" and "how we do it" are equally valued.
- We will take steps to develop a culture where staff are held accountable for identifying and escalating concerns.
- We will be open and transparent with staff and other stakeholders regarding the implementation of the necessary changes to address the findings of the reports.
- We will be re-issuing regular staff surveys in the CO to assess if things are improving.

### Oversight from the region and centre

We are committed to improving our support to country offices - something which is at the heart of our fit for future approach.

#### What we are doing already

- Region and centre have been responding to requests for support from the CO in a timelier manner, providing assistance (such as support with the banking crisis, mitigating risks from global political movements, and the ongoing changes in Yemen).
- More dialogue with senior leadership (such as all staff meetings with SCI SLT members) where staff have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- Greater focus on Yemen and keeping the situation high on the agenda with donors and public audiences.

#### **What we have left to do**

- We will be reviewing how we provide timely and quality support to country offices, especially those operating in a high-risk environment such as Yemen.
- We will assess whether current KPIs and management information reporting achieves the right balance between measuring risk, cultural and operational metrics.

### **Risk processes and reporting systems**

We must ensure our systems and processes enable colleagues to report concerns easily and that those concerns are understood and addressed swiftly. We know there have been breakdowns in our reporting process when it comes to Datix and that issues have not been addressed quickly enough.

#### **What we are doing already**

- We have established greater reassurances of confidentiality within the CO, meaning people have felt more able to report things directly (instead of anonymously).
- We are reviewing and strengthening our risk management processes, to ensure risks are escalated and brought together for consideration on a regular basis by senior management.

#### **What we have left to do**

- We will improve the way in which incidents are dealt with at the global level, with the aim of rebuilding trust in the incident management process.
- To the extent possible, we will be more transparent about the incidents we are seeing and what we are doing about them.
- We will strengthen our whistleblowing processes and train staff, so they are better equipped to manage concerns.

### **People processes and recruitment**

We know we need the right people, in the right jobs, leading with our values front and centre. Getting the right teams in place is critical.

#### **What we are doing already**

- We have been investing in staff retention and prioritising career progression for CO staff.
- We are reviewing and improving our HR policies based on CO staff feedback.
- We are reviewing national staff pay scales to ensure equity and fairness.

#### **What we have left to do**

- We will develop a stronger, more transparent approach to recruitment – embodied by our organisational values – that ensures we recruit the right people with the right skills and experience for the role.

### **Next Steps**

The above list is clearly not exhaustive. We are working to develop a detailed action plan to ensure that, before the end of this year, we will start to see more tangible outcomes and real change. We are committed to addressing the clear themes in the findings, in partnership with leadership and wider colleagues. We fully appreciate that the current situation in Yemen is complicated by the ongoing heightened instability, which is impacting our staff safety and security. We do not take your hard work and dedication for granted.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to children in Yemen.