



UNLOCKING INNOVATION IN YEMEN: A POLICY BLUEPRINT FOR SUPPORTING HIGH-GROWTH ENTERPRISES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief explores the potential role of innovation-driven enterprises (IDEs) — high-growth ventures built around scalable models and technology — in contributing to economic resilience in Yemen. While IDEs are not yet prominent in the national economy, their emergence in other fragile contexts, including Somalia, Gaza, Rwanda, and Iraq, suggests they could present a viable contribution to economic recovery and diversification. Stakeholders should thus explore the conditions that could support the growth of such enterprises in Yemen, and what incremental policy reforms could begin to lay the foundation for innovation-led development.

Drawing on 19 stakeholder interviews and comparative international experience, the following policy brief examines the persistent barriers — including legal ambiguity, lack of early-stage capital, weak infrastructure, and gendered access constraints — that limit IDE emergence. It identifies opportunities for targeted, realistic interventions that

could support IDE development even within Yemen's current political and economic limitations. These include regulatory reforms, donor-backed financial tools, diaspora engagement platforms, and inclusive startup support initiatives.

While Yemen's recovery trajectory remains uncertain, developing an enabling environment for IDEs represents a pragmatic opportunity to support job creation, attract capital, and build economic resilience — particularly in more stable regions. The policy tools outlined here do not require sweeping reform; they can be piloted incrementally, adapted locally, and coordinated across donors and national actors. Unlocking this potential will depend on Yemen's ability to engage its entrepreneurs, leverage its diaspora, and create pathways for innovation to emerge even amid crisis.

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1. Introduction: Exploring Innovation Amid Constraint

Yemen's protracted conflict has devastated its economy, fragmented institutions, and sharply curtailed both public investment and private sector growth. With hydrocarbon revenues diminished and donor aid increasingly stretched, the space for large-scale development planning has narrowed. In this environment, policymakers are confronted with the challenge of identifying realistic, medium-term pathways to promote job creation, private enterprise, and economic recovery — particularly in relatively stable areas of the country under the control of the internationally recognized government (IRG).

Within this constrained landscape, stakeholders must expand the scope of their search beyond the traditional playbook in assessing options to stimulate growth. This should include examining the potential role of innovation-driven enterprises (IDEs) — high-growth ventures that leverage technology, creativity, and scalable models to deliver economic value. While IDEs are not widely established in Yemen today, their success in other fragile and conflict-affected states suggests that they could contribute meaningfully to economic diversification and employment in Yemen's evolving context.

This paper examines IDEs not as a prescriptive solution, but as a possible component of a broader economic resilience strategy. In doing so, it seeks to assess whether Yemen's current institutional, financial, and regulatory environment can enable such businesses to emerge and scale, and what reforms would be necessary to make this possible.

Stakeholder consultations conducted for this paper — including with entrepreneurs, private sector and civil society leaders, and government officials — pointed to three recurring themes:

1. A policy and legal environment that does not distinguish IDEs from traditional micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs);
2. A lack of early-stage capital, including venture finance and angel investment;
3. Severe infrastructure deficits, particularly in electricity and internet access, that inhibit digital business operations.

Given the scarcity of viable economic levers available, this paper suggests that supporting the growth of IDEs — under the right conditions — may represent one promising area for policy experimentation and donor support.

2. Background: Yemen's Economic and Institutional Landscape

Since 2015, Yemen has experienced one of the sharpest economic contractions in the world, with gross domestic product (GDP) declining by more than 50% and economic losses exceeding US\$66 billion.^[1] Foreign direct investment (FDI) contributes less than 1% of GDP, and the vast majority of financial transactions occur outside the formal banking system.^[2] The economy remains heavily reliant on informal trade, remittances, and humanitarian assistance.

The private sector is overwhelmingly composed of micro and small enterprises focused on subsistence activities. These firms face weak infrastructure, limited access to finance, and bureaucratic complexity. While some show ingenuity in adapting to crisis conditions, they generally lack the capital or institutional support needed to scale up or innovate.

The broader investment environment is shaped by institutional fragmentation between areas under IRG control in southern Yemen, and the de facto Houthi authorities in the country's north. This schism precipitates significant macroeconomic volatility, dual exchange rates, competing regulatory regimes, and inconsistent and contradictory tax enforcement. In government-controlled areas, there is also an absence of functioning credit systems and coordinated economic planning, as well as deteriorated infrastructure and public services. These factors limit private sector confidence, increase investor risk, and deter longer-term investment.^[3]

Yemen ranks among the lowest globally on key indicators essential to business growth. The World Bank's Doing Business 2020 report on Yemen (Figure 1) presents a sobering assessment of the country's business environment, ranking it 187 out of 190 economies globally. Yemen's performance is notably weak in several areas, including dealing with construction permits (ranked 186th), accessing electricity (187th), and trading across borders (188th). Critical bottlenecks also exist in areas vital to entrepreneurial and tech-based firms, such as starting a business (ranked 156th), enforcing contracts (143rd), and accessing credit (186th), all of which constrain the ability of high-growth firms to establish and scale operations.^[4]

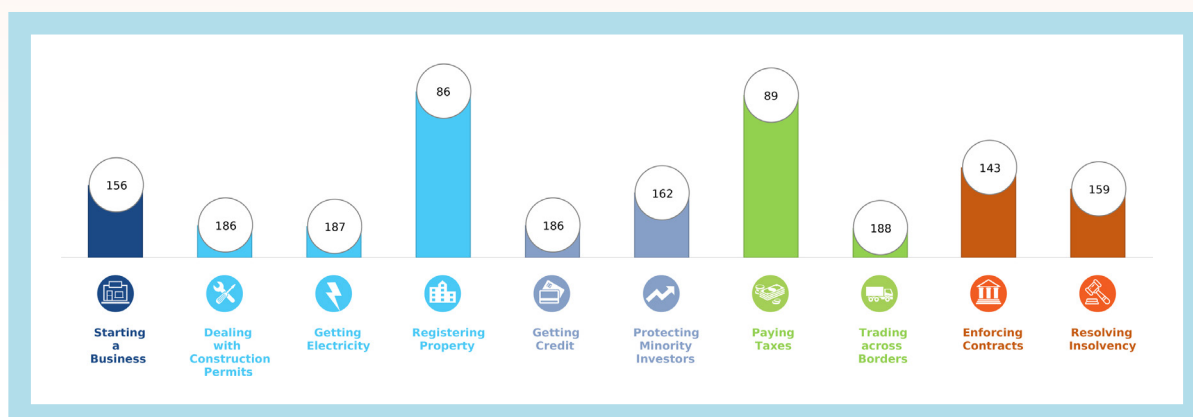
[1] World Bank, "Yemen's Economy Faces Mounting Crises: Report", June 26, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/06/26/yemen-s-economy-faces-mounting-crises-report>. Accessed January 16, 2025.

[2] World Bank, "Foreign direct investment, net inflows (% of GDP) - Yemen, Rep.", 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.WD.GD.ZS?locations=YE&page=1>. Accessed February 13, 2025.

[3] The World Bank, "Yemen Financial Market Infrastructure and Inclusion", January, 2025, <https://www.gtai.de/resource/blob/1855460/38773f04f9b81f8277f655faa11abffd/PRO202501151855458.pdf>. Accessed February 13, 2025.

[4] World Bank, "Doing Business 2020: Economy Profile Yemen", 2020, <https://www.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/country/y/yemen/YEM.pdf>. Accessed February 2, 2025.

Figure 1: Yemen's Ease of Doing Business Rankings



Source: World Bank (2020)

These challenges are compounded by the ongoing conflict, which has severely disrupted economic activities, leading to a significant contraction in GDP and widespread unemployment. The Yemen world bank report underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to improve the regulatory environment, enhance transparency, and foster a more conducive climate for business operations. Such reforms are critical for revitalizing Yemen's economy and attracting both domestic and foreign investment.

3. Understanding IDEs and the Policy Gap

IDEs differ from traditional MSMEs in that they are designed for growth, typically operate in high-value or technology-enabled sectors, and often seek external investment. Examples from other fragile settings include mobile payments platforms, agritech ventures, renewable energy providers, and digital services tailored to conflict-affected populations.

Yemen's current legal and policy frameworks treat all enterprises through the lens of MSME support. Investment Law No. 15 (2010) provides general business promotion measures, but lacks provisions specific to equity-based financing, venture capital, IP protection, or start-up registration systems.^[5]

The result is a policy blind spot. IDEs — where they exist — are forced to navigate structures built for small trade-based businesses. Stakeholders noted the absence of startup-differentiated licensing processes, early-stage financial or policy support, or legal recognition of angel- or venture-funding mechanisms. This contributes to financial exclusion, informal operations, and limited investor engagement.

[5] Republic of Yemen (2010). Investment Law No. 15 of 2010, Sana'a: General Investment Authority.

In particular, women-led IDEs face compounded barriers. Interviews revealed that when women entrepreneurs launch ventures, such as in digital services or social enterprises, they face limited access to finance, challenges in registering businesses, and persistent social constraints. Donor-backed inclusion initiatives have shown promise but remain disconnected from national strategies.

Figure 2: IDE and MSME Comparison

Factor	Innovation-Driven Enterprises	Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises
Aspirations	Designed for scalability and high growth; often aim for global/regional markets	Serve local markets; typically aim for stability or limited expansion
Business Model	High-growth, innovation-driven; often leverage technology and IP	Subsistence- or trade-oriented; rely on traditional models
Risk & Return	High risk, high return, front-loaded investment with longer payback horizon	Lower risk, lower return; quicker cash flow dependence
Capital Needs	Require venture capital, angel investment, R&D grants	Rely on microloans, SME credit lines, informal lending
Support Structure	Need incubators, accelerators, intellectual property (IP) support, legal frameworks, tax incentives	Need simplified registration, access to finance, market access, literacy training
Policy Priority	Ecosystem-building, innovation infrastructure, global competitiveness	Employment generation, financial inclusion, local economic resilience
Trajectory	Non-linear, exponential potential if early-stage barriers are overcome	Linear or static; typically small by design or constraint
Technology Use	Core to operations (digital-first, deep tech, etc.)	May adopt existing tech tools (digitally-enabled SMEs), but not tech-driven by design
Example Sectors	Fintech, biotech, renewable energy, AI, digital platforms	Retail, trade, services, small manufacturing, agriculture

4. Barriers to IDE Growth

Yemen's business environment suffers from overlapping mandates, lack of coordination between ministries, and an underdeveloped legal framework for innovation. For example, obtaining telecommunications approvals for digital startups can involve both the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of Communications, often resulting in contradictory decisions or delays.

There are no laws governing venture capital, startup equity arrangements, or intellectual property protection in the digital economy. Contract enforcement takes an average of 645 days and costs 30% of the claim value.^[6] Stakeholders cited examples of duplicated permits, revoked licenses, and disputes between national and local authorities that undermined operational certainty.

Yemen's financial system is also structurally misaligned with the needs of high-growth ventures. Banks prioritize low-risk instruments and government securities, avoiding startups entirely. There are no formal venture capital funds, credit guarantees, or regulated angel investor networks. IDEs rely on informal capital — remittances, family loans, or donor grants — with no viable growth-stage pathways.

One interviewee stated that banks prefer investing in traditional projects due to the perceived risk of innovative ventures, adding that the regulatory environment lacks even basic provisions for early-stage finance.^[7]

Collateral requirements for commercial credit remain prohibitively high. One entrepreneur noted needing as much as 30% upfront collateral for a high-interest loan from a commercial bank. This restricts access to growth capital and short-term working capital essential for operations.

Stakeholders from the private sector and entrepreneurship ecosystem reported the absence of dedicated government funding schemes for innovation, noting that existing financial support remains narrowly focused on traditional MSMEs.^[8] Even local investors with an appetite for innovation remain cautious due to Yemen's absence of legal protections for investors, limited access to due diligence tools, and a lack of well-vetted deal pipelines.^[9] Opportunities such as diaspora investment and crowdfunding are unexplored due to legal ambiguity and absence of digital finance frameworks.^[10]

[6] World Bank Group, "Doing Business 2020: Economy Profile Yemen", 2020, <https://www.doingbusiness.org/content/dam/doingBusiness/country/y/yemen/YEM.pdf>. Accessed February 2, 2025.

[7] Interview with a prominent private sector official in Taiz, March 12, 2025.

[8] Interview with Official at CAC Bank, March 10, 2025.

[9] Interview with Official in Taiz Chamber of Commerce and Industry, March 12, 2025.

[10] Ibid.

Power outages, unreliable internet, and limited logistics capacity are persistent challenges as well. Inconsistent electricity and bandwidth disruptions are particularly detrimental to digital business operations, given their impact on core functions. This makes infrastructure gaps one of the most fundamental barriers to maintaining consistent service delivery, especially for tech-enabled firms or e-commerce platforms. Some ventures attempting to deliver digital services were forced to suspend operations due to delayed telecom approvals or local authority disputes over fees.

5. Comparative Lessons from Fragile States

While Yemen's challenges are acute, experiences from other fragile and conflict-affected states offer valuable insights into fostering innovation-driven enterprises under constrained conditions. These cases demonstrate that, even amidst instability, targeted interventions can catalyze economic resilience and growth.

5.1 Somalia: Mobile Money as a Financial Backbone

Somalia's rapid adoption of mobile money platforms such as Zaad and EVC+ stands out as a notable achievement in the absence of a formal banking system. Currently, over 70% of the population relies on these services for everyday transactions, savings, and remittances. This widespread usage has created an informal but essential financial ecosystem that underpins commerce and provides monetary stability within a largely dollarized economy.^[11]

However, the development of Somalia's mobile money sector was initially hampered by significant challenges. These included a lack of regulatory frameworks, inadequate telecommunications infrastructure, and pervasive insecurity, all of which impeded service delivery and hindered the establishment of user trust. The absence of a central regulatory authority compelled early mobile money operators to implement self-regulatory measures focused on fraud prevention and consumer protection. Moreover, poor connectivity in rural areas limited the expansion and adoption of these services.^[12]

To overcome these obstacles, private sector actors engaged closely with local communities, fostering trust through transparent operations and targeted customer education campaigns. Telecommunications companies made substantial investments in expanding network infrastructure despite ongoing security risks.^[13] Subsequently,

[11] Rachel Firestone et al., "A game changer—the prospects and pitfalls of mobile money in Somalia", World Bank Blogs, May 25, 2017, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/nasikiliza/a-game-changer-the-prospects-and-pitfalls-of-mobile-money-in-somalia>. Accessed January 22, 2025.

[12] World Bank (2018). Mobile Money in Somalia: Innovation in a Fragile Context. World Bank Publications. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/09/13/somalia-economic-update-rapid-growth-in-mobile-money>. Accessed January 27, 2025.

[13] Blumenstock, J. E., Eagle, N., & Fafchamps, M. (2016). "Risk and reciprocity over mobile phones in Rwanda." *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 65(1), 1-37. <https://www.theigc.org/sites/default/files/2011/09/Blumenstock-Et-Al-2011-Working-Paper.pdf>. Accessed January 28, 2025

international partners such as the World Bank and various UN agencies contributed by supporting the formulation of regulatory frameworks and strengthening the capacity of oversight institutions. Collectively, these efforts enhanced service reliability and bolstered consumer confidence in mobile money platforms.^[14]

5.2 Gaza: Building a Tech Ecosystem Amidst Conflict

Established in 2011 by Mercy Corps with support from Google, Gaza Sky Geeks (GSG) has become a cornerstone of Gaza's emerging tech ecosystem. The initiative has trained over 60,000 individuals in coding, entrepreneurship, and freelancing, with more than 50% of participants being women. By enabling many Gazans to secure remote work opportunities, GSG fosters innovation despite the region's ongoing conflict.^[15]

However, Gaza's tech ecosystem faces significant challenges, including frequent electricity shortages, restricted internet connectivity due to the blockade, limited access to capital, and the psychological impact of recurrent conflict. These factors collectively hinder sustained entrepreneurial activity, while the blockade severely restricts physical infrastructure development and access to international markets.

In response, GSG and its partners have adapted their approach by emphasizing digital skills that facilitate remote work, effectively circumventing physical movement limitations. They have established flexible learning spaces powered by solar energy and forged partnerships with international freelancing platforms to create remote income streams. Furthermore, psychosocial support and community-building initiatives have played a crucial role in maintaining motivation and fostering collaboration among entrepreneurs.^[16]

5.3 Rwanda: Strategic Investment in Innovation Infrastructure

Rwanda's Kigali Innovation City (KIC) illustrates a strategic, government-led investment in innovation infrastructure aimed at building an IDE-friendly ecosystem. The 60-hectare hub hosts universities such as Carnegie Mellon University Africa and technology firms, with the objective of nurturing talent and attracting investment to spur economic transformation.^[17]

[14] Puntland State of Somalia (2020). Financial Regulatory Framework Report. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099416011222112392/txt/Financial0Report0PFM0Project0202000Final.txt>. Accessed January 28, 2025.

[15] Gaza Sky Geeks, "The Impact of the Gaza Crisis on the Palestinian Tech Ecosystem", Mercy Corps, May 2024, https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/gsg-report2_compressed-5.pdf

[16] World Bank (2019). The Gaza Digital Economy: Opportunities and Constraints. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/472671640152521943/pdf/Palestinian-Digital-Economy-Assessment.pdf>

[17] Ministry of ICT & Innovation, Rwanda (2022). Kigali Innovation City Strategic Plan. https://www.minict.gov.rw/fileadmin/user_upload/minict_user_upload/Documents/Policies/ICT_HUB_STRATEGY.pdf

Rwanda had to overcome a limited domestic talent pool, scarce venture capital, and infrastructural deficits typical of a post-conflict environment. Skepticism about the viability of tech investments in Africa also posed hurdles for attracting foreign investors.

The government's clear vision and commitment to innovation created a stable policy environment supported by substantial public investment. International partnerships with educational institutions raised the skill level locally. Additionally, Rwanda implemented incentives such as tax breaks and streamlined business registration to attract startups and investors. The country also invested heavily in ICT infrastructure and governance reforms to ensure reliability and transparency.^[18]

5.4 Iraq: Leveraging Diaspora and Fintech for Economic Revival

Iraq's emerging fintech sector is gaining momentum as startups focused on digital payments and financial inclusion receive support from diaspora investors and regional accelerators. Initiatives like Iraq Venture Partners provide essential capital and mentorship to young enterprises, signaling the potential for technology to drive post-conflict economic revival.

Iraq faces persistent political instability, corruption, inadequate regulatory frameworks, and infrastructural challenges. The lack of financial inclusion and limited trust in formal institutions hamper fintech adoption. Diaspora engagement is complicated by fragmented governance and security concerns.

Iraqi fintech startups have leveraged diaspora networks to secure investment and technical expertise, bypassing domestic financial limitations. Accelerators and incubators play a key role in capacity building and navigating regulatory complexities. The government has started reforming regulations to accommodate digital finance, aided by international donors advocating for financial inclusion. Incremental improvements in security in key urban centers have facilitated more stable operational environments for startups.^[19]

[18] World Bank (2020). Rwanda Digital Transformation Profile. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/08165a76ca0f1ef688d2782dfaab3406-0400072022/related/Rwanda-DE4A-Summary-Report-final-for-feedback.pdf>

[19] Start-up Ecosystem Report- Iraq (2019), https://enpact.org/publication/iraq-country-report/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

6. Policy Options and Recommendations

Fostering innovation-driven enterprise development in Yemen will require more than financial support or regulatory tweaks. It demands a shift toward an enabling environment — one that recognizes IDEs as a distinct engine of growth and integrates them into broader recovery and development efforts. While Yemen's conflict and institutional fragmentation constrain the pace and scale of reform, targeted interventions in government-controlled areas — supported by donors, diaspora actors, and the private sector — can begin to lay the foundation for a more innovation-oriented economy. This section outlines nine interlinked policy priorities.

6.1. Establish a Legal and Regulatory Framework for Startups

- **Differentiate IDEs from MSMEs:** Current legal frameworks do not distinguish between traditional MSMEs and high-growth, innovation-driven enterprises. Introducing a distinct legal status for IDEs can facilitate tailored support mechanisms.
- **Introduce startup-specific registration pathways,** building on Investment Law No. 15 (2010) to enable streamlined licensing, online filing, and accelerated approval processes.
- **Create a venture-friendly legal environment** through updated regulations on equity-based financing, convertible debt, and equity-sharing for early-stage ventures.
- **Develop IP protection tools and legal support services for startups,** including private-led registration support and model contract templates for digital businesses.
- **Pilot regulatory sandboxes** in fintech, e-commerce, or clean energy sectors to allow startups to test models and innovative products and services in a controlled environment. This will encourage innovation while managing risk.

6.2. Unlock Early-Stage and Risk-Tolerant Capital

- **Establish a blended finance fund** with donor-backed first-loss capital to attract institutional and private investment in startups and social enterprises.
- **Introduce credit guarantee schemes** for banks to reduce perceived lending risk, focusing on innovation-linked sectors (fintech, agritech, clean energy).
- **Develop a diaspora investment platform,** allowing structured equity or debt channels for Yemeni nationals abroad, modeled on Lebanon and Somalia.
- **Facilitate peer-to-peer lending and crowdfunding** through legal recognition and oversight mechanisms, including sharia-compliant models.
- **Incentivize banks and microfinance institutions to launch startup credit lines** with relaxed collateral conditions and performance-based repayment options.

6.3. Build Startup-Focused Infrastructure

- **Expand internet access** via public-private partnerships (e.g., subsidized satellite internet providers such as Starlink) in underserved governorates.
- **Deploy off-grid energy solutions**, especially solar power, for innovation hubs and business incubators, modeled on initiatives in Rwanda and Ethiopia.
- **Improve logistics infrastructure** through simplified customs processes, better last-mile delivery options, and integration with e-commerce platforms.
- Encourage local governments and business chambers to **designate “startup zones”** with subsidized utilities, infrastructure access, and basic amenities.

6.4. Develop Human Capital and Entrepreneurial Skills

- **Launch youth-targeted incubation programs** focused on digital skills, start-up finance, and e-commerce — integrating virtual training tools (e.g., Coursera, Edraak, Udacity).
- **Facilitate diaspora mentorship networks**, pairing experienced Yemeni professionals abroad with local founders through structured advisory channels.
- Build partnerships with regional tech hubs (e.g., Amman, Cairo, Dubai) to **create cross-border training pipelines** for Yemeni entrepreneurs and startup employees.
- **Promote digital-first employment** by supporting remote work platforms, freelancing models, and startup-outsourcing partnerships to increase global market access.

6.5. Strengthen Corporate-Startup Collaboration

- **Support corporate-led innovation programs** to engage local startups in supply chains, R&D, and co-development of services — particularly in energy, logistics, and financial services.
- Provide incentives for corporations to **launch supplier development schemes** for SMEs and IDEs, including prepayment models and market access agreements.
- Encourage corporate sponsors to **finance innovation competitions and accelerators**, particularly in underdeveloped or post-conflict areas.

6.6. Improve Institutional Coordination and Governance

- **Create an Innovation and Entrepreneurship Council (IEC-Yemen)** comprising public, private, and civil society actors, with a mandate to align strategy, funding, and legal reforms.
- **Launch a digital one-stop shop** for startups, integrating registration, tax filing, licensing, and legal advisory access.
- **Train government officials** — particularly in local chambers and ministries — on start-up policies, venture finance, and regulatory agility through donor-backed capacity-building programs.

6.7. Expand Market Access and Trade Opportunities

- **Develop regional mobility agreements** with Jordan, Egypt, and Gulf countries to allow Yemeni startups to access accelerators, investors, and trade expos.
- **Support cross-border digital payments infrastructure**, including multi-currency gateways, digital wallets, and remittance-linked credit tools.
- **Simplify customs and export procedures** to support participation in regional value chains, especially for agritech and light manufacturing IDEs.
- **Promote trade diplomacy through business councils and chambers**, linking Yemeni startups with Gulf-based supply chains and B2B networks.

6.8. Foster Inclusive and Gender-Responsive Innovation

- **Establish women-focused incubators and accelerators** that provide not just finance, but mentorship, market exposure, and legal assistance.
- **Launch inclusive visibility campaigns** that spotlight women and youth founders through public media, online showcases, and investor matchmaking events.
- **Align donor-backed capital with frameworks** such as the 2X Challenge, targeting investments that directly benefit women-led enterprises.
- Review business laws to **eliminate procedural barriers for women**, such as limitations on ownership, licensing, or formalization.

6.9. Promote Applied R&D and Sectoral Clusters

- Create innovation hubs in priority sectors like agritech, clean energy, and digital finance, co-located with universities or vocational institutions.

- Provide R&D grants and seed funding to startups engaging in localized problem-solving, especially in climate resilience, water, and logistics.
- Facilitate research-commercialization linkages between universities and startups through challenge grants and joint ventures.

RETHINKING YEMEN'S ECONOMY

The Rethinking Yemen's Economy (RYE) Initiative and its associated Development Champions Forum aim to contribute to and support the advancement towards inclusive and sustainable development and peace by seeking to achieve the following: a) the enabled inclusive engagement of Yemenis in economic peacebuilding; b) an improved understanding of crucial policy areas related to economic peacebuilding and development in Yemen. The RYE initiative is implemented by DeepRoot Consulting, the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and CARPO. It is funded by the European Union.

For more information and previous publications: www.devchampions.org

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Implementing Partners

The project is implemented by a consortium of the following three partners:



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