

# LEARNINGS FROM THE SIRAJ PROJECT, BUILDING DIGITAL RESILIENCE IN YEMEN

A Case Study of the Siraj Project from  
the SecDev Foundation



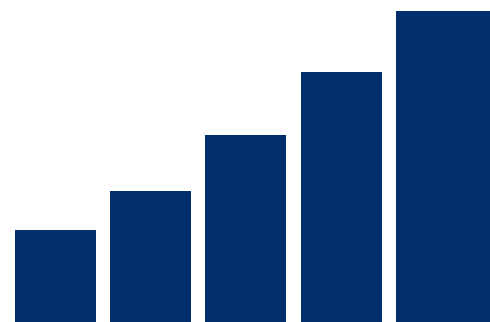
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**Creating Hope in Conflict:** A Humanitarian Grand Challenge (CHIC) is a partnership of the U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and Global Affairs Canada, and is implemented by [Grand Challenges Canada](#). CHIC identifies and accelerates innovations that save and improve the lives of those living in humanitarian crises caused by conflict.

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Photos courtesy of the SecDev team.



# INTRODUCTION

In conflict settings, information can be as lifesaving as food, medicine, or shelter. It shapes how people make decisions in moments of fear and uncertainty, whether to trust a vaccination campaign, attend an aid distribution, or avoid an online scam that preys on vulnerability [1]. When false or malicious information spreads, it can cost lives, eroding trust and deepening divisions [2].

Today, this threat is amplified by social media and emerging technologies that accelerate rumours and enable increasingly sophisticated manipulation, from deepfakes [3] to AI-driven campaigns [4]. For communities living with war and displacement, this “information disorder” is not abstract: it affects daily choices and makes it harder to distinguish truth from danger [5].

This fragile digital ecosystem magnifies existing vulnerabilities. As humanitarian organizations have warned, misinformation, disinformation and hate speech (MDH) not only distort people’s understanding of reality but also threaten to undermine humanitarian access itself, by seeding distrust in aid agencies, or by making it harder for local responders to reach those in need [6].



Recognizing the urgency of this issue, Grand Challenges Canada (GCC) has made MDH a priority within its humanitarian innovation portfolio, committing resources to support innovators tackle MDH as part of their broader mandate to improve lives in conflict zones [7]. Through its partnership with Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, under its Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge (CHIC) portfolio, GCC has developed research and this case study series to highlight the work of the portfolio.

[1] Internews, [Information Integrity](#), retrieved on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2025

[2] UN SG, [Policy Brief on Information Integrity on Digital Platform](#), 2023

[3] WITNESS, [Overview of TRIED: WITNESS' Truly Innovative and Effective AI Detection Benchmark](#), 2025

[4] UNESCO, [Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression](#), 2023

[5] International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), [How harmful information on social media impacts people affected by armed conflict: A typology of harms](#), 2024

[6] Humanitarian Alternatives, Lubiana Gosp-Server, [The crucial role of humanitarian communication in the fake news and “infoglut” era](#), 2025

[7] CHIC, [Navigating the Information Landscape: Misinformation, Disinformation, and Hate Speech in Humanitarian Contexts](#), 2024

The 2024 MDH Scoping Study, commissioned by GCC, provides a global blueprint. It highlights how most MDH interventions to date have been fragmented, reactive, and heavily top-down. The study calls for a new paradigm: community-owned, locally led innovations that build resilience rather than only reacting to harm. It stresses that accountability to affected populations and localization are essential if MDH responses are to be effective in humanitarian contexts [8].

Within this framework, GCC has funded innovations that move beyond crisis communication alone, investing in approaches that build tools, networks, and knowledge at the grassroots level. The SecDev Foundation's Siraj project in Yemen, the focus of this case study, exemplifies this shift toward locally grounded responses, while also sitting within a broader innovation focused on global–local cooperation. This case study focuses primarily on the locally led and youth-driven dimensions of Siraj, but it is important to situate the initiative within the broader innovation funded through the CHIC portfolio.



The wider project—Combatting Disinformation in Conflict Zones—tested a global–local cooperation model designed to improve situational awareness and response to digital harms in fragile contexts. Through this model, technical monitoring and analysis conducted by SecDev helped identify emerging misinformation trends and patterns of online harm, while local partners in Yemen interpreted and responded to these risks within their communities.

[8] CHIC, Anahi Ayala Iacucci, Scoping Study: Misinformation, Disinformation and Hate Speech in Conflict, 2024

This combination of global analytical capacity and locally grounded response created a feedback loop between detection and action, enabling faster and more contextually relevant interventions.

The Siraj initiative represents the locally led component of this broader system. The case study therefore focuses on Siraj to explore the lessons related to community ownership, youth engagement, and locally driven responses to misinformation and digital harm— areas identified by recent research as critical gaps in the humanitarian response to MDH.

These locally led and youth-driven dimensions of Siraj are also consistent with GCC’s broader learning on MDH responses and the findings of its 2024 scoping study, which emphasize the importance of localization and accountability to affected populations in addressing digital harm in humanitarian contexts.

The hope is that this reflection will help illustrate how international support and local leadership can work together to strengthen digital resilience in conflict settings, and why such approaches matter not only for Yemen but for humanitarian response more broadly in an era where information dynamics increasingly shape people’s safety and decision-making.



## METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The analysis is based primarily on a qualitative review of project documents produced by the SecDev Foundation and by Grand Challenges Canada during the project's implementation period (2021–2023). These included project proposals, grant documentation, monitoring and evaluation reports, and progress updates submitted as part of GCC's reporting requirements. Additional background materials were reviewed to situate the innovation within the wider MDH landscape, including the Grand Challenges Canada MDH Scoping Study and related research on information integrity in conflict settings.

The draft was also reviewed by representatives of the SecDev Foundation to ensure factual accuracy regarding project implementation and contextual details.

Quantitative data presented in this case study—including figures related to reach, participation, and outcomes—are drawn from monitoring and evaluation data reported by the SecDev Foundation through its final reporting to Grand Challenges Canada. These figures therefore reflect reported program data rather than independently verified impact measurements.

As a case study, this report does not attempt to provide a formal impact evaluation. Instead, it aims to capture operational insights, implementation experiences, and lessons for the humanitarian innovation community, illustrating how locally led approaches to digital resilience can contribute to addressing misinformation and digital harm in conflict settings.

١. تاريخ انشاء الموقع  
٢. التحقق من الفيروسات  
٣. التحقق من اي بلاغات

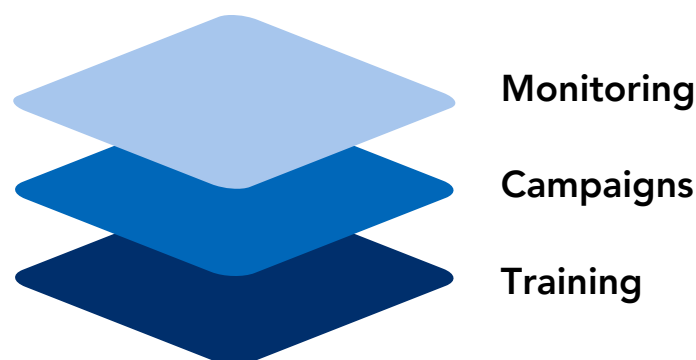


When the SecDev Foundation first considered bringing its digital safety expertise to Yemen, the challenge appeared daunting. The country was already experiencing one of the world’s most complex humanitarian crises [9], and the digital landscape was no exception. Rumours about humanitarian aid were fuelling mistrust in agencies [10]. Online scams were targeting desperate families. Women and girls were facing relentless gender-based harassment online [11]. And in a society where access to safe, reliable information could mean the difference between resilience and vulnerability, Yemenis had few tools to navigate these dangers.

SecDev had already piloted similar approaches in Syria through its SalamaTech initiative [12]. This experience underscored an important lesson: local ownership was the only way forward. Imported narratives or top-down corrections rarely resonated. What worked was equipping communities themselves to detect and counter harmful content.

Backed by Grand Challenges Canada’s Transition-to-Scale grant, SecDev launched Siraj with a clear vision: to build a youth-led, community-driven platform for digital resilience in Yemen. The project partnered closely with the Sheba Youth Foundation, a Yemeni civil society organization with trusted networks and deep local credibility. Together, they set out not only to track digital threats, but also to empower young Yemenis as agents of change.

The Siraj project unfolded in three interconnected layers: training, campaigns, and monitoring.



[9] UNOCHA, Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2021. According to the report “Yemen remains [in 2021] the world’s largest humanitarian crisis and aid operation. The crisis is the result of a brutal armed conflict that escalated in 2015. In 2020, the conflict intensified, the number of frontlines increased from 33 to 49, bringing the number of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) to at least 4 million. Based on the 2021 HNO analysis, 20.7 million people – 66 per cent of the population – are estimated to need humanitarian assistance in 2021; 12.1 million people of whom are estimated to be in acute need”

[10] Internews, Rooted in Trust, National Fragmentation: marginalization, displacement and disinformation in Yemen, An Information Ecosystem Assessment, 2023

[11] Amnesty International, Yemen: “My life was completely destroyed”: Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Yemen, 2024

[12] DevSec Foundation, SalamaTech, Helping Syrians stay safe online since 2012, Retrieved on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025

At its heart were young people like Tasea. When she joined Siraj’s training sessions, she had little prior experience with structured digital safety work. But the program opened her eyes to the risks hidden in everyday online interactions, from misinformation that sowed confusion to harassment that silenced women. “Our training program in digital safety and disinformation had a real impact on me,” she later reflected, describing how it gave her both confidence and tools to protect herself and others. Tasea’s journey was not unique: seventy-one young Yemenis were trained as digital safety champions, each emerging with the capacity to identify misinformation, defend themselves against online abuse, and share their knowledge with peers. Many quickly took ownership of this mission, designing and leading their own awareness activities in communities where digital literacy was scarce, and misinformation often went unchallenged.

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**Our training program in digital safety and disinformation had a real impact on me.**

*Digital Safety Champion, Tasea - Yemen*

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These efforts blossomed into broader community engagement. Across Yemen, Siraj supported sixty-four activities, ranging from small in-person workshops to wide-reaching online campaigns. To anchor these initiatives, the team produced forty-nine localized learning materials — infographics, guides, and videos in Arabic — all tailored to Yemeni realities. The project’s five flagship campaigns tackled the most urgent digital harms: scams targeting vulnerable families, rumours undermining trust in humanitarian aid, and the pervasive online gender-based violence silencing women and girls. These campaigns not only raised awareness but also sparked conversations within communities that had long lacked the tools to openly discuss digital risks.

The final layer of Siraj’s work focused on vigilance and rapid response. Youth leaders acted as sentinels in the digital landscape, collectively tracking 182 cases of harmful content circulating in Yemeni spaces. Their monitoring allowed the team to move quickly, countering false narratives with corrective messages, or escalating threats when cases of harassment or abuse required intervention. In some instances, campaigns unexpectedly led to real-world protective outcomes, such as direct referrals for women facing online gender-based violence.



Together, these three layers created a cycle of learning, action, and protection, one that began with empowering individuals like Tasea and rippled outward into entire communities. What started as a training program evolved into a youth-led movement that reshaped how Yemenis understood and confronted digital risks, building resilience in a space where truth itself is contested.

The secret of Siraj’s success was its local foundation. By partnering with the Sheba Youth Foundation and mobilizing young leaders, the project spoke with voices Yemenis trusted. Campaigns were not abstract messages parachuted in from abroad, but grounded in cultural context, local dialects, and lived experience. Partnerships with community groups and online influencers further amplified reach, keeping delivery cost-effective while building legitimacy.

Siraj reflected SecDev’s core approach to digital resilience initiatives, in which local actors lead and international partners play a convening and enabling role—providing scaffolding, tested methodologies, and access to global expertise without displacing local ownership. SecDev’s role as a convenor was central to this model: the organization brought not only existing technical tools and content, but also a long-standing commitment to working through trusted local partners and ceding operational leadership to them. This foundation allowed Siraj to ramp up quickly by adapting SecDev’s extensive Arabic-language digital safety resources and community-led methodologies, developed over more than a decade in fragile and conflict-affected contexts through initiatives such as SalamaTech and Salam@.

The 2024 MDH Scoping Study [13] emphasized that most MDH interventions have relied too heavily on reactive or regulatory approaches, fact-checking after the harm has spread, or pushing top-down campaigns that often miss the mark. What is missing, the study argued, are strategies that focus on changing behaviours and building resilience at the community level.

This conclusion closely mirrors lessons learned by the SecDev Foundation through more than a decade of operational experience in fragile and conflict-affected settings. In contexts such as Syria, SecDev’s early work began as an emergency response to acute digital harms, but over time evolved into a recognition that many harms—including online gender-based violence—can be prevented in the first place through preventative capability strengthening, tailored to specific community vulnerabilities, risks, and information needs.

Siraj embodies this shift. By supporting Yemenis with tools to recognize and resist harmful content, and by embedding this knowledge in youth-led networks, the project moved beyond firefighting individual rumours. Instead, it began to reshape how communities think, act, and protect themselves online. In doing so, Siraj offers not only a local solution for Yemen, but also a model of the behavioural-change strategies that the humanitarian sector urgently needs to adopt in the face of MDH.



[13] CHIC, Anahi Ayala Iacucci, [Scoping Study: Misinformation, Disinformation and Hate Speech in Conflict](#), 2024

# IMPACT



The Siraj project was designed to test whether a youth-led, community-based approach could shift behaviours in Yemen’s fragile digital ecosystem. The results were impressive - by the time the Siraj project closed in March 2023, its reach had surpassed all expectations.

In just 18 months, Siraj reached 495,826 people in Yemen with localized digital safety resources, a scale rarely seen in behavioural-change interventions in conflict settings.

Among these, 73,022 people reported improved understanding of digital risks, and 3,949 adults (1,546 women and 2,403 men) said they felt better protected from digital harms.

More than 430,000 people in Yemen actively engaged with the innovation, either through campaigns, trainings, or online platforms.

**495,826**

people reached in Yemen

**3,949**

reported feeling better protected from digital harms

**73,022**

reported improved understanding of digital risks

This engagement wasn’t limited to clicks or views. Siraj’s youth leaders delivered 64 awareness-raising activities, which included 34 youth-led community sessions, 19 radio segments, and 5 in-person workshops for youth leaders. These were complemented by five major online campaigns on digital victimization, scams, online gender-based violence, and misinformation, supported by 49 localized learning resources in Arabic. Together, these layers created a vibrant ecosystem of formal and informal learning, reaching Yemenis wherever they were — in classrooms, community centres, on radio, or on social media.

**64**

awareness-raising activities

**34**

youth-led community sessions

**19**

radio segments

**5**

in-person workshops

The numbers also reflect real behaviour change. Polling conducted during the digital victimization campaign showed a jump in distrust of scam websites from 25% before the campaign to 73% after. Likewise, in the online gender-based violence (GBV) campaign, 62% of respondents said online harassment had a significant impact on women’s mental health, while some survivors reached out directly to Siraj youth leaders for help, leading to referrals to appropriate services. Perhaps most telling of all: 100% of respondents in campaign surveys identified the Siraj Facebook page as a trusted source of digital safety information. In an environment where trust is scarce, this was a major achievement.

**50%**

increase in distrust of scam websites from before the campaign to after

**62%**

reported significant impact of online harassment on women’s mental health

**100%**

identified the Siraj Facebook page as a trusted source of digital safety information

But the true meaning of these numbers comes through stories like that of Tasea, one of Siraj’s youth champions. When she began her training, she was still using “modded” apps, unofficial versions of popular platforms that often-contained backdoors used by hackers to steal data. “Our training program in digital safety and disinformation had a real impact on all of us,” she recalled. “At first, it was hard to accept all these changes in daily digital practices, but during the training I got used to it. My first step was to stop using an alternative version of WhatsApp”.

To share what she had learned, she then created a WhatsApp group called Hashtag Digital Advice. “It started with just eight people, five family members and three friends,” she explained. “Right away, they were happy to get information that meant they could feel safer online, especially because it was coming from someone close to them. Soon they took steps like replacing WhatsApp Omar with the official app and installing antivirus apps”. What began as a small group soon spread through word of mouth, and Tasea found herself advising neighbours and friends, including helping her mother and sister install secure apps and password managers on their phones.

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*Digital Safety Champion, Tasea - Yemen*

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Tasea’s story illustrates how Siraj’s impact extended far beyond formal training sessions and campaigns. It seeded new habits in everyday life, reshaped how people thought about digital risks, and created ripple effects of protection within families and communities. In this way, the 495,826 individuals reached were not just passive recipients of information, but part of a broader transformation in how Yemenis understood and acted on digital safety.

Perhaps the most powerful impacts were those Siraj had not planned for. During online campaigns on gender-based violence (GBV), women reached out directly to youth leaders to seek help. Some were referred to support services, showing that the trust Siraj had built translated into real-world protective outcomes.

While Grand Challenges Canada’s funding ended in March 2023, Siraj’s legacy did not disappear. The platform and its resources were handed over to the Sheba Youth Foundation, which continues to share learning materials and maintain digital safety content. Many of the trained youth leaders still conduct awareness activities voluntarily, even without financial support.

Siraj also proved that behavioural-change interventions could be delivered cost-effectively. Localized content production, hybrid outreach (in-person, radio, online), and partnerships with influencers kept costs low while maintaining credibility.

Beyond direct beneficiaries, Siraj's monitoring exposed patterns of misinformation, from employment scams to disinformation about humanitarian food supplies, that informed humanitarian actors and raised awareness of threats targeting aid operations. In doing so, Siraj began to shift not just individual behaviours but also how the humanitarian ecosystem in Yemen perceives and responds to digital harm.

What these results reveal is that Siraj was not just a digital literacy initiative, but a humanitarian intervention. In a country where rumours can deter families from seeking aid, where scams prey on the most vulnerable, and where online harassment can silence women's voices, Siraj provided tools that directly improved safety and wellbeing.

By building trust, strengthening protective behaviours, and creating pathways for survivors of digital abuse to access help, the project reduced real risks that compounded Yemen's humanitarian crisis. In doing so, Siraj demonstrated that tackling misinformation and digital harms is not peripheral to humanitarian response, it is central to protecting lives, dignity, and access to aid in conflict settings.



## GROWTH AND SCALE

From its inception, Siraj was designed as more than a one-off campaign. The project's model rested on a clear premise: build resilience by embedding digital safety knowledge within communities themselves. Rather than rely on foreign experts or external messaging, Siraj trained local youth leaders and partnered with Yemeni organizations — particularly the Sheba Youth Foundation — to create a platform that could outlive external funding. This approach proved effective, but it also exposed the challenges of scaling and sustaining community-driven innovations in fragile settings.

At its core, Siraj's model had three interlinked elements:

- Youth leadership: empowering 71 young leaders to act as digital safety champions.
- Community partnerships: working through trusted actors like Sheba Youth Foundation and local influencers.
- Localized tools: producing content in Arabic that directly reflected Yemeni realities.



This model made Siraj highly adaptable and cost-effective, particularly given the initiative's limited funding and short implementation timeframe. Its success was possible largely because of the hard-won lessons, methodologies, and institutional assets that the SecDev Foundation brought to the effort after more than a decade of work in Syria and six years operating across the wider MENA region on similar digital harm challenges.

Rather than building new systems from scratch, Siraj drew on hundreds of already-developed, Arabic-language digital safety resources and training materials—including highly specific guidance addressing online gender-based violence—which were further adapted and localized for the Yemeni context. The recurrence of similar attack patterns in Syria and Yemen generated significant multiplier effects: global monitoring identified shared harm vectors affecting both populations, often traced back to the same sources, allowing insights and baseline materials to be rapidly repurposed and refined. As a result, Siraj was able to reach nearly half a million people without heavy infrastructure or costly media buys, instead leveraging the credibility, networks, and leadership of youth and community groups.

When Grand Challenges Canada’s funding ended in March 2023, Siraj’s immediate activities slowed, but the foundations it had laid remained. The platform and content were formally handed over to the Sheba Youth Foundation, which continues to disseminate digital safety resources and host online content. Many youth leaders also continue outreach informally, volunteering their time to conduct awareness sessions in their communities.



These mechanisms reflect Siraj’s emphasis on local ownership, but they also reveal the limits of sustainability without continued resources. While demand for digital safety interventions remains high, no new donor commitments were secured at the close of the project.

As a result, Siraj currently survives on the goodwill of youth leaders and Sheba’s limited institutional capacity.

On paper, Siraj looked exceptionally cost-efficient. With CAD \$389,945 in funding over 18 months, it reached nearly half a million people. Yet the reports make clear that these numbers mask hidden costs. While this demonstrates local commitment, it also raises questions about scalability: replicating Siraj at larger scale, or in other fragile contexts, would require more robust financial planning to cover the true costs of time, partnership, and institutional overhead.

SecDev also absorbed substantial unbudgeted effort — from navigating complex international fund transfers to senior leadership time that was never charged to the project — all of which contributed to Siraj’s ability to deliver at scale. At the same time, partnerships with radio stations, community groups, and influencers often relied on goodwill rather than sustainable contracts.

Despite the funding gap, Siraj’s achievements position it as a strong candidate for scale-up. Reports from SecDev highlighted the potential to develop a replicable playbook for MDH interventions in fragile states, drawing on lessons from Yemen. With new investment, the model could expand geographically within Yemen or be adapted for other conflict-affected countries. It was, after all, shaped in other fragile contexts, and it can be adapted from here.

Two paths for sustainability have been suggested:

- Institutionalizing Siraj within Sheba Youth Foundation, building long-term capacity as a local centre for digital safety and misinformation response.
- Integrating Siraj into broader humanitarian programming, for example by embedding digital literacy training into health, education, or protection programs.

**1**

**Institutionalizing Siraj within Sheba Youth Foundation, building long-term capacity as a local centre for digital safety and misinformation response.**

**2**

**Integrating Siraj into broader humanitarian programming, for example by embedding digital literacy training into health, education, or protection programs.**

For now, these remain aspirations. Without renewed funding, Siraj continues in a maintenance mode, carried forward by volunteers and the residual trust it built. Yet its cost-effectiveness and impact make a compelling case for donors: with adequate investment, Siraj could be both sustainable and scalable, a locally led solution to a global humanitarian challenge.



# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES



Siraj's story is not one of unbroken success. Like any innovation operating in the middle of a protracted conflict, the project encountered sharp limits — limits that are as instructive as its achievements.

**Connectivity:** One youth leader described the frustration of working in a context where “the internet itself can disappear overnight.” Connectivity blackouts, shifting frontlines, and the ever-present risk of political repression made digital programming unpredictable. Siraj's campaigns sometimes had to be paused or reconfigured when local conditions changed, while online monitoring of harmful content risked attracting unwanted attention from authorities. These realities underscored a basic truth: digital resilience cannot be divorced from the fragility of the wider environment.

**Sustainability:** Although nearly half a million people were reached, much of that success depended on the voluntary work of motivated youth leaders and the institutional goodwill of the Sheba Youth Foundation. When funding ended, Siraj did not have the resources to sustain full programming, highlighting a gap between short-term innovation funding and long-term operational needs.

**Measuring Trust:** Humanitarian funders expect “lives improved” metrics, but measuring something as intangible as trust in information or resilience against disinformation proved difficult. While Siraj documented behaviour change — such as a 48% increase in distrust of scam websites — capturing deeper shifts, like whether women felt safer online or whether communities were less vulnerable to aid-related rumours, was harder. These gaps reflect a wider challenge in the MDH ecosystem: how to measure what really matters in information environments shaped by conflict.

Yet within these challenges lie important opportunities. Siraj showed that local ownership is not just possible, but powerful. By handing the platform to the Sheba Youth Foundation and by training 71 youth leaders, the project planted seeds that continue to grow even without funding. This demonstrates the potential of a community-led model in a space often dominated by top-down, externally driven interventions. For humanitarian actors, Siraj points to a new way of working: one that invests in communities as co-creators of solutions, not just as beneficiaries.

The project also opened opportunities beyond Yemen. Siraj’s monitoring of 182 harmful content cases provided humanitarian organizations with early warnings of digital threats, such as scams exploiting food insecurity or disinformation targeting UN agencies. This suggests a new role for community-driven MDH projects: acting as sentinels for the humanitarian system itself. If replicated at scale, such models could provide valuable intelligence to aid actors navigating volatile information landscapes.

Finally, Siraj’s cost-effective design offers an opportunity for funders. This suggests that investing in behavioural-change approaches to MDH is not only impactful but also efficient compared to the high costs of centralized communication campaigns or reactive fact-checking.

**“**  
**Even when the funding ended,  
the knowledge did not.  
We are still using it, and we  
are sharing it.**  
**”**  
*Youth Leader - Yemen*

Siraj’s challenges remind us that localization alone is not enough without sustained resources, stronger measurement frameworks, and donor commitment beyond pilot stages. But its opportunities are equally clear: a replicable, scalable model that humanitarian organizations can adapt to strengthen digital resilience in other conflict-affected settings. As one youth leader put it, “Even when the funding ended, the knowledge did not. We are still using it, and we are still sharing it.” That resilience, fragile yet persistent, is the true opportunity Siraj leaves behind.

# LESSONS LEARNED

Siraj's experience offers insights that extend far beyond Yemen, pointing to what the humanitarian ecosystem must understand and prioritize when addressing misinformation, disinformation, and harmful speech (MDH) in conflict settings. The following lessons are organized along the recommended structure.

## **1. What MDH Is: A Core Humanitarian Protection Challenge**

Siraj reaffirmed that MDH is not merely a communication problem, it is a humanitarian protection issue. False narratives about aid distribution, online scams targeting desperate families, and harassment of women and youth have tangible impacts on safety, dignity, and access to essential services. Tackling MDH is therefore about protecting people's lives and rights, not simply correcting digital inaccuracies.

## **2. Who Should Lead: Local Voices Are Essential for Credibility and Reach**

The initiative demonstrated that the most effective actors in MDH response are those closest to the affected communities. Youth leaders and local civil society organizations were trusted in ways that international actors rarely are. Their cultural fluency and lived experience enabled Siraj's messages to resonate, strengthened community engagement, and built legitimacy for the platform. The principle is clear: MDH interventions must be locally led to take root.

## **3. What Approach Works: Behavioural Change, Not Reactive Messaging**

Siraj showed that reactive factchecking alone cannot counter MDH. Instead, sustainable impact requires equipping people with the skills to interpret information, avoid scams, and stay safe online. Behavioural change strategies proved far more effective, as shown by the 48% increase in distrust of scam websites following a Siraj campaign. People were not only receiving information, but they were also altering their digital behaviours.

## **4. What Systems Benefit: MDH Work Strengthens Humanitarian Response**

An unexpected finding was how community-level MDH monitoring supports the broader humanitarian system. By tracking 182 cases of harmful content, Siraj identified emerging threats, from scams exploiting food insecurity to disinformation targeting aid agencies. This localized intelligence helped anticipate risks and protect humanitarian access. MDH interventions, when embedded in communities, can act as early-warning systems for humanitarian responders.

## **5. How to Measure: Look Beyond “Lives Improved” to Capture Resilience**

Siraj highlighted the difficulty of measuring outcomes like trust, digital confidence, resilience, and reduced vulnerability to harmful content. While quantitative data (reach, engagement, knowledge change) is important, it does not fully capture shifts in behaviour, norms, or digital wellbeing. The field must develop better evaluation frameworks that incorporate qualitative change, the very outcomes most critical for MDH resilience.

## **6. What Funding Realities Exist: Sustainable MDH Work Requires Realistic Investment**

Although Siraj achieved extraordinary reach, much of the success depended on volunteer youth work and in-kind contributions from local partners. This reveals a broader sector issue: MDH work cannot scale if funders rely on short-term or under-resourced models. Real sustainability demands investment in staff time, monitoring systems, partnership development, and organizational infrastructure, not just content production or campaign delivery.

## **7. What Remains After Funding: Knowledge, Networks, and Capacity Endure**

One of the most striking lessons was that local capacity outlives grant cycles. Even after GCC funding ended, Siraj-trained youth champions continued sharing resources, guiding peers, and organizing awareness activities voluntarily. This underscores the power of investing in human capital and community networks. When MDH interventions build skills and ownership, they leave a durable foundation that persists long after external funding ends.

Together, these lessons point toward a model of MDH response that is locally led, behaviour-focused, integrated into humanitarian protection, and sufficiently resourced for long-term sustainability. Siraj shows that even in one of the most fragile digital ecosystems in the world, meaningful and lasting impact is possible when innovation is built with communities, not simply delivered to them.



## THE FUTURE

Siraj was always intended as a beginning, not an endpoint. While the project’s formal funding cycle has closed, its achievements have sparked new conversations about how humanitarian actors can prepare for the next wave of misinformation, disinformation, and harmful speech (MDH). The way forward lies in building on Siraj’s foundation, both in Yemen and across the sector.

The Sheba Youth Foundation, now custodian of the Siraj platform, has continued to maintain resources and support youth leaders, but its capacity remains limited without external funding. Although Sheba demonstrated strong local leadership and deep community trust, the realities of humanitarian funding played a major role in shaping the partnership structure [14].

CHIC funded the initiative through the SecDev Foundation as part of a broader global–local model that combined technical expertise with locally led implementation. In this approach, SecDev contributed analytical and technical capacity—such as monitoring digital harm trends and developing response strategies—while local partners like the Sheba Youth Foundation played a critical role in community engagement, dissemination, and locally grounded response. This structure enabled the project to draw on complementary strengths across the partnership.

At the same time, the experience highlights an important consideration for funders exploring similar models in the future: ensuring that sufficient resources and support flow to local partners who are central to implementation. As global–local collaborations become more common in MDH responses, funders may wish to consider funding structures that more directly strengthen and resource the local organizations responsible for community-level engagement and sustainability.

There is also scope for geographic and thematic expansion. The Siraj playbook, training local leaders, producing contextualized content, and tracking harmful content, could be adapted for other fragile contexts where communities face similar threats. Within Yemen, the model could expand into rural areas, where connectivity is lower, but misinformation often spreads unchecked via radio or word of mouth. Thematically, the approach could evolve to confront emerging risks, such as AI-driven disinformation and deepfakes, which are likely to play an increasing role in digital harm.

[14] SecDev Foundation, [Siraj, Combating digital harms amid humanitarian crisis: a pilot project empowering Yemeni youth](#), Retrieved on November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025

At a global level, Siraj points toward several futures for the humanitarian sector. **First, integrating MDH responses into core humanitarian programming.** Just as protection and health programming are mainstreamed across humanitarian responses, digital resilience and MDH must no longer be treated as add-ons. The next generation of humanitarian projects will need to bake in digital safety as a basic requirement for safeguarding populations.

**Second, the sector must prepare for technological escalation.** As AI-driven content floods social media and disinformation campaigns become more sophisticated, localized initiatives like Siraj will need to be equipped with new tools and partnerships. This suggests a future where human-led community networks are paired with technological innovation, combining the credibility of local voices with the speed and scale of automated detection systems.

**Finally, Siraj signals a broader cultural shift.** It shows that communities are not passive victims of disinformation but active agents of digital resilience. The future of humanitarian MDH work lies in trusting, resourcing, and amplifying those local capacities, whether in Yemen or elsewhere.

The path forward is not without obstacles. But Siraj demonstrates that even in one of the world's most challenging contexts, digital resilience can be built, cost-effectively, sustainably, and with deep local ownership. For donors, this is an opportunity: investing in MDH innovations is not only about countering falsehoods, but about enabling safer access to aid, protecting vulnerable groups, and strengthening the humanitarian system itself. In the years ahead, the challenge for funders and implementers will be to move from pilots to permanence, from isolated successes to systemic change. Siraj has shown the way; the task now is to ensure its lessons and momentum are carried forward into a future where truth and safety online are recognized as humanitarian imperatives.



## CONCLUSION

The Siraj project demonstrates that even in the most fragile contexts, communities can build resilience against misinformation, disinformation, and harmful speech when they are trusted, resourced, and empowered. By training youth leaders, creating localized campaigns, and establishing rapid-response mechanisms, Siraj reached nearly half a million Yemenis, reshaped digital behaviours, and built a foundation of knowledge that continues to be useful to communities even without ongoing financial resources.

Yet Siraj also highlights the limitations of short-term innovation funding. Its scale was achieved through extraordinary local commitment, much of it volunteer-led, and its sustainability is fragile without renewed support. Further, Siraj's rapid scale-up depended on SecDev Foundation's proven toolbox of methodologies and already existing Arabic-language resources, which were rapidly and effectively adapted to the Yemen context. For funders, the lesson is clear: countering MDH in conflict zones requires long-term investment, realistic costing, and integration into humanitarian systems. For implementers, the takeaway is equally important: effective MDH work depends on local ownership, context-sensitive design, and embedding behavioural change strategies at the heart of programming.

As the humanitarian system grapples with the rising tide of information disorder, from AI-driven disinformation to online gender-based violence, Siraj offers a hopeful precedent. It shows that, even with modest resources, it is still possible to protect digital spaces, safeguard humanitarian access, and empower communities to defend themselves. The challenge now is not whether this model works, but how to scale and sustain it.

Ultimately, Siraj's story shows that in an age of information disorder, empowering communities to protect themselves online is not just innovation — it is humanitarian action.

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>For Funders</b>	<b>For Implementers</b>
<b>Recognize MDH as a core humanitarian issue</b>	Integrate MDH into funding priorities alongside health, protection, and livelihoods; treat digital safety as lifesaving.	Frame MDH interventions as protection activities, not just communications, to strengthen access and safeguard communities.
<b>Invest in behavioural change, not just reactive messaging</b>	Support long-term, locally led programs that shift digital habits, rather than one-off fact-checking projects.	Design campaigns that build skills and resilience, focusing on everyday practices people can adopt to protect themselves.
<b>Prioritize localization and local ownership</b>	Increase direct funding to community-based organizations and ensure sufficient resources reach local partners.	Partner with trusted local actors, adapt content to cultural contexts, and empower youth and women as digital leaders.
<b>Cover the real costs of sustainability</b>	Sufficiently budget for staff time, organizational overhead, and partnership management, not just activities.	Be transparent about resource needs; plan for sustainability by factoring in stipends, organizational capacity, and ongoing
<b>Develop better measurement frameworks for MDH</b>	Support the creation of tools and indicators that capture qualitative shifts (trust, resilience, safety) alongside quantitative	Collect stories of change and combine them with polling and surveys to show impact on both numbers and lived experiences.
<b>Leverage MDH projects as humanitarian early-warning systems</b>	Fund MDH initiatives that also provide insights into threats targeting aid operations.	Share monitoring findings with humanitarian actors to strengthen collective situational awareness and response.
<b>Move from pilots to permanence</b>	Commit to multi-year funding cycles for proven MDH models like Siraj; encourage replication across geographies.	Develop playbooks and operational frameworks that can be adapted in new contexts, ensuring scalability and replication.



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