

gaza field update

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Operational context

The continuation of the strict closure regime enforced on the Gaza Strip has decimated livelihoods, resulting in the impoverishment and de-development of a highly skilled and well-educated society. The lack of access to imports and restrictions on exports has further decimated the private sector, leading the majority of the population, who were once self-sufficient, to aid dependency. Prior to 2002, when the economy was functioning normally, only 10% of refugees were dependent on UNRWA aid - today that figure is 70%. The blockade has reduced Gaza to an institutionalized welfare state. Barring an unexpected change in the blockade policy the vicious cycle of unemployment, food insecurity and aid dependency will continue.

Although economic growth was reported in 2011 it was mainly due to donor-supported construction projects and the expansion of private construction, fuelled by the tunnel economy. The sustainability of this growth therefore remains highly uncertain. Evidence from the Palestine Trade Centre shows that private sector construction has peaked and will begin to decline in the near term. UNRWA GFO's reconstruction interventions are presently generating more than 27,000 full-time jobs among the local population in Gaza. However, based on the level of funding secured to date and unless donors continue to support for *UNRWA's Recovery and Reconstruction Plan* this figure would drop to 15,000 within 12 months and to less than 5,000 in the last quarter of 2013. As a result, the Gaza Strip remains extremely vulnerable to any reduction in aid flows, which threatens to leave hundreds of thousands of families facing food shortages and significant protection threats.

In the absence of significant economic opportunity and access to markets for ordinary people yearning to work, international assistance fills the gap between poverty and destitution.

Accomplishments

In line with the *UNRWA Recovery and Reconstruction Plan*, UNRWA GFO completed or will complete by the end of 2012 at least 2,000 housing units, 36 schools, and four health centres, in addition to several associated infrastructure projects. These interventions are meant to improve the living conditions and access to basic services for the refugee population in Gaza, ensuring adequate housing to most vulnerable households and further improving the quality of education in a context where 93% of schools are still running on double-shifts.

In February 2012, the GFO launched the pilot phase of UNRWA TV, the first Palestinian educational channel and the first satellite channel run by the United Nations in the Middle East. The channel provides 12 hours of academic lessons a day in math and Arabic and an original series which aims to reinforce good behaviour and universal values. A preliminary review of the pilot phase revealed that 41% of UNRWA students in Gaza (90,000 children) regularly watch the channel (70% regularly watch

TV generally). Among those who watch UNRWA TV, 81% (72,000) feel that there has been an improvement in their studies. Their parents corroborate this sentiment with 88% noting their children's educational achievements have improved since starting to watch UNRWA TV. When choosing what TV station to watch, parents give the highest priority to UNRWA TV (69%), followed by news (57%), sports (40%), and their favorite programme/series (35%).

The GFO now has nine medical centres operating according to the Family Health Model with early success being reported. A patient satisfaction survey conducted in Beit Hanoun reflected a 72% beneficiary satisfaction rate with 84% reporting more confidence in the new model. A preliminary evaluation of Beach Health Centre reflected a decline in the overall number of consultations per doctor, bringing UNRWA closer in line to international standards.

Challenges

The key challenge for the Gaza Field Office is to bridge the ever-widening gap between the predictable consequences of a man-made crisis and insufficient funding to deal with the humanitarian fallout from that crisis.

Based on current projections, UNRWA GFO's food aid program will be suspended or the ration size will be reduced for the first time since 2007 unless sufficient funds are secured. The average food insecure household in Gaza already dedicates 61% of its post-assistance expenditures to purchasing food: any reduction in food assistance will require already extremely vulnerable households to somehow fill that deficit in their household budgets, which will further exacerbate their food insecure situation and ability to cope. In the context of limited funding, 2012 emergency programming will address – at most - only refugees' most basic and acute humanitarian needs.

Additional funding and the lifting of the blockade on Gaza are needed to ensure access to adequate housing for refugee families. In 2011, UNRWA GFO paid USD 4.7 million in temporary housing cash assistance to approximately 3,400 families, many of whom will move into the 2,000 housing units being constructed. The lifting of the blockade would spark economic recovery and reduce refugees' reliance on UNRWA to access proper housing.

Beyond the direct impact on Gaza's people the blockade has a significant impact on UNRWA operations; as a direct consequence of Israeli import restrictions and requirements, the GFO incurred additional costs of \$5 million to import humanitarian materials in 2011.

As funding decreases the GFO has been making painful cuts to its services, for example reducing the Job Creation Program by more than 70%. The ongoing service cuts are creating a serious public credibility issue that should be of utmost concern to all.

Opportunities

The key to reducing aid dependency and a dignified life of refugees is a sustainable, functioning economy. The Gaza economy is export-based and thus ending the near virtual ban on exports is key to producing sustainable economic recovery. The transfer of products from Gaza to the West Bank or Israel (the historic trading partners for Gaza) is currently not allowed. As Gazan businessmen do not have trade partners in Europe or other markets, or the ability to freely travel from Gaza to build these contacts, exports must be allowed to the West Bank and Israel.

Revitalizing the economy through exports is also key to ensuring that the 250,000 refugee youth in Gaza (ages 15-24) have reason to continue clinging to hope for a better future. Although the vast majority of youth in Gaza are educated, employment opportunities are virtually non-existent, with youth unemployment at 47%. Without opportunities for employment to help their families, youth in Gaza are becoming increasingly vulnerable to manipulation by the spoilers of peace, undermining long-term peace and security in the region. However, these efforts require program expansion, backed up by political support to lift the blockade so the full potential of the refugee youth can be fulfilled.