
Growing poverty in Gaza pushing children to work

In the run-up to the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child – a landmark international agreement on the basic human rights of all children – UNICEF is featuring a series of stories about progress made and challenges that remain. Here is one of those stories. GAZA STRIP, Occupied Palestinian Territory, 22 July 2009 – The sound of a lathe screams in the background as Nael Hasan al-Lada', 12, talks about his job in an auto body shop. He just started the job this summer, but already the young boy is helping to support his entire family of seven brothers and sisters.

Despite long hours and the dangers of working around heavy machinery, Nael is considered lucky in the poverty-ridden Gaza Strip. If he does well at learning the trade, the seventh-grader will likely leave school to work full-time.

"I want to help my father," he said, his few words drowned out by the noise in the shop.

Need drives children to work

Child labour is on the rise in Gaza and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. According to the 2004 Palestinian Child's Rights Law, children below the age of 15 are barred from working.

Still, hunger and need drive families to allow their children to abandon schooling.

Gaza's borders remain largely closed, and the entry and exit of goods is severely restricted. Six months after the end of Israel's 'Cast Lead' military operation here, restrictions on imports are making it virtually impossible for Gazans to rebuild their lives.

According to a report published in June by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), only 2,662 truckloads of goods entered Gaza from Israel in May of this year – a decrease of almost 80 per cent from the 11,392 truckloads allowed in during April 2007, just prior to the Hamas takeover of Gaza.

Impact of unemployment

The ICRC report warns that the closure of Gaza has pushed the unemployment rate to 44 per cent (as of April 2009) and caused a dramatic increase in poverty. Today, more than 70 per cent of Gazans live in poverty, with an income of less than \$250 a month for a family of up to nine.

The weekly wage of 20 shekels (equivalent to \$5) that Nael earns at the body shop is not enough to feed his family, he said. But his father, who used to work in Israel, has been unemployed for years. Nael's success at this difficult job is his family's only hope.

These trends are having an impact on Palestinian society. Palestinian literacy rates remain among the highest in the Arab world – especially for girls – at 99 per cent for both males and females. Nevertheless, learning achievement has declined along with primary school enrolment in recent years.

In 2008, for example, only about 20 per cent of the 16,000 sixth-graders in Gaza passed standardized tests in Arabic, English, mathematics and science, compared with around 50 per cent of their peers in Nablus and Jenin in the West Bank.

Support for education

UNICEF seeks to stem this tide by supporting child-friendly learning and quality education in Gaza. As of the end of June, UNICEF Gaza had distributed a wide range of supplies, including:

- 21 school tents and 520 School-in-a-Box kits benefiting up to 41,000 children
- 394 recreation kits benefiting 30,000 children
- 367 math and science kits benefiting up to 34,000 children
- Almost 100,000 notebooks
- 44,000 remedial folders for students in grades one to three
- Some 2,000 boxes of student stationary benefiting 80,000 students
- Stationary items for 2,000 teachers at 253 governmental schools

An additional 100 math and science kits were distributed to United Nations Relief and Works Agency, benefiting up to 5,000 refugee children.

"I am good in school," said Nael, who likes his religion class and wishes he could study at al-Azhar University in Cairo. He isn't afraid of the heavy machines at work, but is not anxious to enter the world of work.

"I wish that I had money so that I could stay in school," he said.