



## Psychosocial Assessment of Education in Gaza and Recommendations for Response

Report on the findings of an assessment conducted by Kathleen Kostelny, PhD and Michael Wessells, PhD of the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity

### Executive Summary

Between December 27th, 2008 and January 18th, 2009, the Israeli army waged a major military operation in the Gaza Strip, bombarding the territory from the air, ground and sea, and conducting a large scale ground incursion. "Operation Cast Lead" resulted in significant loss of life and damage to infrastructure. Moreover, military operations continue on a regular basis, notably in the areas near the border with Israel (the so-called buffer zone), resulting in death, injury and displacement. These operations occur against the backdrop of a severe, long-term blockade. While movement and access restrictions have long been a way of life in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), in 2006 restrictions imposed on Gaza escalated until just a short list of imports were permitted from 2007 to this day (with some modifications to the list in June 2010 following the international reaction to the army action on the Gaza flotilla). As has been well documented by the United Nations, the blockade negatively affects almost every aspect of life for the people of Gaza. It has also prevented the physical reconstruction and recovery of the Gaza Strip.

Although much has been made of the physical damage that remains unaddressed, equally important are the less tangible impacts of the prevailing humanitarian situation. In the aftermath of the war, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 25,000 to 50,000 people—including some 14,000 to 28,000 children—were in need of some form of psychological intervention to address the longer-term psychological effects that had resulted from the hostilities. WHO noted that: *The loss of care and protection of parents or primary caregivers, disruptions to daily life including school and play activities, and loss of adequate nutrition [meant] that children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to psychosocial distress.*<sup>1</sup>

A key sector to consider in this regard is education. Education is not only a basic human right, one that cannot be postponed or neglected during conflict or emergency, but also has a key role to play in protecting and sustaining the lives of children and young people. This is particularly true in the occupied Palestinian territory where generations have grown up living under military occupation, conflict and political instability. In the context of their ongoing statelessness, historic displacement and continued threat of forced displacement, education has a key role to play in equipping children and youth with the tools to succeed and to make positive contributions to a future Palestinian state. While data on the physical impacts of the military operations on the education system exist, less is known about the psychosocial impacts, and in particular how the psychosocial situation has affected access to and quality of the education sector, a sector vital to the recovery and rehabilitation of Gaza.

One year after the war, UNESCO sought to understand how the education system has been affected by the current situation in Gaza from a psychosocial perspective. In particular, how are learners, teachers, students and professors across the system coping? To answer this question, a large scale assessment that covered all levels of education and all the governorates in Gaza was conducted in the period December, 2009 to March, 2010. To provide a broad and deep picture of the strengths and challenges in the current education system, the assessment used a combination of qualitative methods and a quantitative survey that was administered by Palestinian researchers to a large, representative, multilevel sample of schools throughout Gaza. In all, 90 schools and four universities participated, with over 6,000 learners included in the sample. The survey does not seek to assess the situation relative to a previous baseline, but itself provides an inter-agency baseline that may be used to gauge the effects of future psychosocial interventions. The qualitative methods brought forward the voices and perspectives of those who make up the education system, asking how the situation has impacted them in their work and their learning, and probing what this means for the agencies that seek to support the education sector.

Overall, the assessment reveals worrying trends. While education remains highly valued among students, their families and teaching staff—indicative of the positive role it can play in helping children and youth heal and grow even in highly adverse conditions—the education system is clearly suffering under the current blockade and military campaigns.

The findings show that learners, as well as teaching staff, are functioning under immense strains and this strongly affects their abilities to learn and to teach. The key research findings can be summarized as follows:

- Learners at all levels of education experience problems such as nervousness, sadness, and fear of attack.
- Learners' ability to learn and perform well in school has decreased due to internal problems, such as inability to concentrate, and external problems, such as lack of electricity at home for studying. Challenges to learning and performance in school have increased across grade levels.
- Both teachers and learners reported that learners have lower learning outcomes in comparison to before the war.
- Teachers and other education staff such as counselors and directors experience significant challenges to their psychosocial well-being.
- Teachers consistently report that they need more support since they have been affected, are uncertain how to support students who have been affected, or are unable to manage their students' unruly behavior and learning difficulties.
- Overall, boys experienced greater problems in learning and performing in school than girls; whereas girls experienced greater challenges to their psychosocial well-being.
- Learners' psychosocial challenges are particularly severe at higher levels of education, where feelings of hopelessness are pervasive.
- At all levels, learners report that they lack the psychosocial support needed to enable full educational participation and high levels of achievement.

The data upon which these findings are based is presented in both quantitative form and in a narrative form that illuminates the agency and perspectives of learners and educators. Education policy makers and planners are encouraged to use both the data and findings to ensure coordinated, responsive psychosocial support and programming throughout the education system. Policy makers and planners are also urged to provide greater physical and psychological protection for educational facilities, students and staff not only in Gaza but also elsewhere in the oPt (notably in Area C and East Jerusalem) where the education system faces many challenges and constraints.

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF (2009). Page 2.

