

UNICEF oPt Monthly Update

July-August 2011

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Overview: Focus on Gaza

More than half of the 1.5 million people living in Gaza are children below the age of 18, who need special protection. These 800,000 children and adolescents continue to suffer disproportionately from the impact of the blockade and the failure of the peace process. Children face daily risks to their security and human dignity, including threats of death, injury, poverty and psychological distress. They also face threats for their future as challenges to the quality of education keep increasing.

While the number of Israeli and Palestinian children killed in the frame of the conflict dropped drastically during the first five months of 2011, the highest percentage of killings continues to take place in Gaza. Between January and May 2011, 8 out of the 9 children killed in the occupied Palestinian territory and Southern Israel were from the coastal enclave.

Poverty continues to affect Palestinian children more than ever. In 2009, 33.2 per cent of Palestinians were living in poverty, with 20 per cent living in deep poverty. As a result, 61 per cent of households were food insecure, and 76.8 per cent of children aged 9–12 months were anaemic, compared with 68.2 per cent in 2006.

Due to increased poverty rates, some Gazan children are even placing their lives at risk in order to support their families. They engage in dangerous labour such as working in tunnels under the Gaza-Egypt border, or collecting gravel and scrap metal in abandoned settlements and industrial zones near the Barrier between Israel and Gaza. In 2010, 26 children between the ages of 13 and 17 were shot and injured by Israeli security forces while collecting gravel, which can be sold to local factories since the blockade severely restricts entry of construction materials through the official crossings with Israel.

The situation of education has also worsened, in particular because of the blockade imposed on Gaza since 2007. In 2010/2011, there were 233,000 students enrolled in 394 government schools. The number of pupils in a class averages 39, and increases dramatically in densely populated areas. The optimum ratio is 30 students per classroom for basic and 35 for secondary according to government standards. Another 225,600 students were enrolled in 238 UNRWA run schools and 46 private schools.

LEARNING MADE EASY



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Gaza. A group of students engaged in extracurricular activities as part of the adolescent-friendly space initiative integrated in schools.

60% of Gazan children attend government schools. UNRWA schools teach basic education to refugee children, while government-run schools teach basic education up to ninth grade to non-refugee children and secondary education to all children, regardless of their refugee status.

The increasing number of children has forced 80% of government schools to run double shift in order to accommodate needs. 105 new governmental schools would be needed to cover for this double shift which has had deep impact on the quality of education. Class time had to be curtailed by one-third, extra-curricular activities were cancelled, learning achievements have plummeted and violence at school has increased. An estimated 500 additional classrooms could be built in governmental schools if restrictions on the entry of construction materials through the official crossings with Israel were lifted.

Meanwhile, children and adolescents continue to suffer from emotional duress and feelings of insecurity due to the on-going violence and limited recreational facilities and programmes. Children report anxiety, poor performance in school and aggressive behaviour as their main symptoms of stress. The number of children falling below their grade level and dropping out continues to rise. During the second semester of 2010, only 59 per cent and 47 per cent of students attending government-run schools passed their grade four unified Arabic and mathematics exams respectively.

This monthly update focuses on how UNICEF helps making schools 'Child-Friendly' to ensure that children go and stay in school, and are able to fully engage in society.

Making Schools Child-Friendly

The challenge in education is not simply getting children into school, but rather keeping children in school and providing them with quality education. If both quality and access are ensured, children who are enrolled in primary education are more likely to continue, complete the full cycle, achieve expected learning outcomes and successfully transition to secondary school. UNICEF has undertaken a comprehensive approach to help build a better school environment for Gazan students that enables them to stay and succeed in school.

Creating a protective environment

School records, children's assessment of their own schools, and recent studies revealed that children were exposed to continuous violence in schools. Violence is attributed to teachers, students, or Israeli security forces and/or Palestinian armed groups. Such violence not only negatively impacts the well-being of children, but also their school achievements.

Schools in Gaza have been under a constant threat by Israeli security forces or Palestinian armed groups. In 2011, there has even been an increase in reported incidents of attacks on schools. Between January and April 2011, eight schools were attacked affecting 3,000 students.

In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Palestinian Child law and the Education Law, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE), UNICEF and partners developed a non-violence in school policy. The policy addresses the issues of violence within school settings and establishes response mechanisms to provide safe learning environment in schools. This pilot policy has been rolled out in all government schools in Gaza since 2010. An assessment is currently underway in 20 Gazan schools.

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in schools

Fulfilling every child's right to water, sanitation and hygiene education remains a major challenge for policymakers, school administrators and communities across the oPt, especially in Gaza where water resources are depleted. To overcome this challenge, UNICEF is implementing a "WASH in schools" programme which aims at improving students' access to clean drinking water and to build improved sanitation facilities in schools, separate for girls and boys, which helps increase student attendance. As learning environment improves, children also learn on proper hygiene practices with a view to significantly reduce hygiene-related diseases.

THREATS TO CHILDREN

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Buffer Zone, Gaza. Adolescents putting their lives at risk by collecting gravel to help support their families.

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Rafah, Gaza. Palestinian children have difficulties accessing drinking water and decent sanitation facilities.

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Rafah, Gaza. Children suffering from deep poverty and poor living conditions, impacting on their learning outcomes.

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Adolescents active learning spaces

To help build a better environment for children in schools, UNICEF extended its community-focused Adolescent-Friendly Learning Spaces (AFS) initiative to schools. The idea is to develop AFS inside some schools, to make access easier for students and encourage attendance after school. UNICEF is currently supporting MoEHE in piloting this initiative in two schools in Gaza.

This pilot programme aims at improving the literacy and numeracy skills of students, and at fostering positive behaviours for male and female adolescents who are at risk of dropping out of school. The two AFS provide mathematics and Arabic language remedial sessions, but also expressive arts, sports and life-skills based education. More than 1,125 adolescents between the ages of 10-17, boys and girls, will benefit from this initiative.

Learning through enjoyment

To help improve learning outcomes, in July, UNICEF is implementing a remedial learning initiative targeting the 100 lowest performing schools. A total of 900 teachers and school principals will provide up to 44 hours of remedial classes in Arabic and mathematics, along with 44 hours of sports and recreational activities reaching 8,000 grade three to six students.

School Management Information System

Since 2009, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) has been developing a school management information system (SMIS) to generate disaggregated and up-to-date educational data for improved planning, policy development, and evidence based advocacy. Once completed, the SMIS system will provide MoEHE with a centralized database; will improve overall management, coordination and dissemination of educational data; and will generate integrated reports on education.

So far, SMIS has been implemented in 100 Gazan schools. Activities included training of trainers for 40 MoEHE staff members; orientation sessions for 2,500 teachers; installation of 60 computers in 60 government schools. The first stage of this project benefited approximately 2,500 teachers and 60,000 students, and their caretakers. The second stage, which will include rolling out the SMIS system in 350 schools (300 government schools and 50 private schools), will benefit approximately 9,000 teachers and 200,000 potential students and their caregivers.

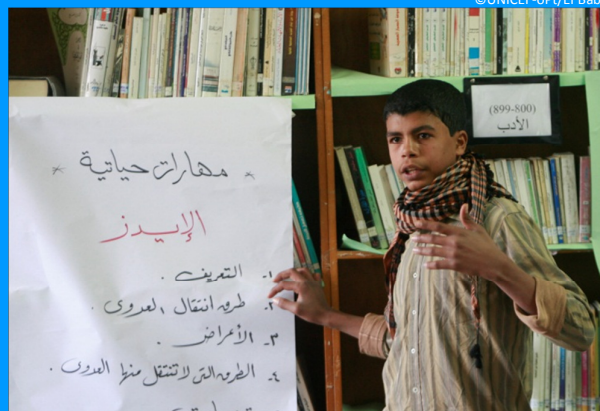
ACTION FOR CHILDREN

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Gaza. Fourth grade students engaged in remedial education sessions to improve their literacy and numeracy skills.

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Rafah, Gaza Strip. An adolescent participating in a peer to peer life skills education session on promotion of HIV prevention.

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Gaza. Girls participating in sports activities as part of the Adolescent-Friendly Learning Spaces in schools.

Gazan children enjoy a rare safe play area for the summer

Gaza, 22 July 2011 - Fourteen-year-old Sondos Bedawi from Zeytoun is rushing with joy and pride through the corridors of Ali Bin Abi Taleb government school. She has just finished an Arabic language session, moving on to the mathematics session where the facilitator has already laid out the special “maths kit” which they will be using for geometry. What is strange, though, is that Sondos looks very excited, even though summer holidays have just begun.

Summer math can be fun!

This is not the usual classroom that Palestinian students are used to. Adolescents of different ages are fully engaged and handed shapes, papers and scissors to put the mathematics lesson into practice. “This is not a normal class,” Sondos confirms. “We have fun learning and catching up on the things we might not be very good at in school, and we play different games. We also have sports and art sessions.”

Sondos is one of 150 adolescents benefiting from adolescent-friendly spaces (AFS) recently launched in two Gazan schools, supported by UNICEF and implemented by Ma'an Development Centre and Tamer Institute. The AFS provide adolescents with the opportunity to improve their skills and learn new ones, and it empowers young people to think critically.



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No safe place to play

More than half of the 1.5 million people living in Gaza, are children below the age of 18. The vast majority of them, if not all, do not have access to safe spaces to learn, interact with their peers and play sports. Many children are used to wandering aimlessly on the street, exposing themselves to traffic accidents. Earlier this year, a 10-year-old boy was killed while playing football and six children were seriously injured after an Israeli shell landed in a densely populated



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area. The AFS offer adolescents a safe alternative where they can learn and have fun.

Moreover, in a conservative society where girls are expected to stay at home, the AFS enable many of them to escape boredom and spend time productively out of their homes. Parents let their daughters attend sessions at the AFS knowing they will safely learn new skills that are critical for their development. Girls say they also have a lot of fun.

Girls want to learn and have fun

“Many of the adolescents here are from Zeytoun neighborhood,” says school director Huda Salah Al Najjar. “It is a poor area, and it has gone poorer due to the blockade and movement restrictions on Gaza.” At least now, boys and girls have a place where they can go three times a week while feeling safe, forgetting about difficulties at home and spending time productively.

Ruba Abu Daff, one of Ma'an Development Centre's life skills facilitators, testifies that adolescents are learning many new skills including communication and negotiation skills, which empower them and strengthen their self-confidence with their family, their peers and their teachers.

“I have finally started talking to my parents,” says 16-year old Ranya Al Hajeen. “I never talked at home, always worried and keeping everything to myself. But I found out how important it is to express myself, and now I am confident enough to speak out.”

School director Al Najjar says all sessions offered within the AFS are participatory and allow adolescents to engage fully: “We use practical examples, role playing and games so that adolescents can see that they are learning something useful, which they can use in their daily lives while having fun in the process”.