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# A REPORT ON A PSYCHO-SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT PROGRAMME, GAZA STRIP, PALESTINE 2016



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PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT TO CHILDREN IN THE GAZA STRIP  
**2016**

# A Report on a Psycho-Social and Educational Support Programme, Gaza Strip, Palestine 2016



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## Introduction

This is a report on activities delivered in year one of a two-year project in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, jointly managed by the Centre for Global Education (CGE), a development non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Belfast, and the Canaan Institute for New Pedagogy, a Palestinian NGO based in Gaza. The project was funded by the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) Developing World Fund and delivered from January to May 2016.



*Children playing in Bureij refugee camp*

The project had two aims. The first was to provide psycho-social support to 400 children aged 7-13 years suffering from the acute effects of trauma caused by three wars in the Gaza Strip since 2008 and the grinding poverty created by a ten-year Israeli siege. The second aim was to supplement the children's education by providing community-based learning focused on core areas of the school curriculum. The project was delivered in four locations in Gaza: Bureij (central Gaza), Deir el Balah (central Gaza); Khan Yunis (southern Gaza); and the village of Moghraga, 10 km south of Gaza City.

These locations were chosen for project delivery as they are based in particularly impoverished and marginalised areas of Gaza where the Canaan Institute has developed strong links with community partners. The children in these areas have been severely impacted by the effects of conflict, particularly Israel's most recent war in Gaza, Operation 'Protective Edge', which spanned 51 days in July and August 2014. The project aimed to provide psycho-social support to children manifesting the severe effects of trauma using active learning, educational methods that supported structured play and group discussion activities. These activities enabled children to express psychological issues they were experiencing through art work, role play and theatre as well as one-to-one sessions with facilitators and psychotherapists.

The project also provided workshops to the parents of children enrolled on the project to guide them on how to best provide psycho-social support in the household. A total of 12 workshops was held in each community during the project to advise parents on how to recognise and deal with behavioural changes in children suffering the effects of trauma. This represented a joined-up approach to psycho-social care that involved local schools, community centres and families. In the recruitment of children onto the programme, each community centre liaised with the local school and discussed how the activities could best meet the educational and psycho-social needs of young people. This was the first of a two-year project and the year two activities will be delivered in the same four learning centres thereby embedding the learning outcomes from year one and strengthening the support to children.

### **Background to project**

It is important to present some of the context in which this project was delivered. A child aged ten in Gaza has already experienced three wars in his or her short life - Operations 'Cast Lead' (2008-09), 'Pillar of Cloud' (2012) and 'Protective Edge' (2014) – as well as a ten year economic siege. Operation 'Protective Edge' resulted in the highest number of Palestinian civilian casualties than in any year since 1967. 547 children were killed from a total of 1,462 civilian deaths and 'nearly 68 percent of the children killed by Israeli forces were 12 years old or younger'. According to Unicef, 370,000 children were left in need of 'psycho-social aid'. In the midst of the conflict in August 2014, Unicef's field officer, Pernilla Ironside, said: "There isn't a single family in Gaza who hasn't experienced personally death,



injury, the loss of their home, extensive damage, displacement'. The Israeli casualties in the same conflict totalled 67 soldiers and six civilians.

The infrastructural damage in Gaza caused by 'Protective Edge' included 18,000 housing units partially or completely destroyed and 73 medical facilities and several ambulances damaged. The United Nations reported that 22 schools were completely destroyed and 118 schools damaged by the conflict which has exacerbated a crisis in education in Gaza. In 2012, the United Nations published a report titled *Gaza in 2020: a liveable place?* which argued that 250 additional schools were needed to address the present

shortfall and accommodate a rising population predicted to increase to 2.1 million from the present 1.8 million by 2020. With the number of school buildings depleted further by 'Protective Edge', the education system is under unprecedented strain. 90 percent of schools in Gaza had to double shift - house two separate school populations in the same building every day - before the 2014 war so schools will now be under even greater pressure to accommodate rising pupil numbers.

The problems created by the creaking infrastructure of the education system are compounded by the psychological effects of war and poverty on children. In commenting on the multiple effects of war on Gaza's children, Pernilla Ironside said:



*A young girl collects water in Jabalia camp*

*“The impact has truly been vast, both at a very physical level, in terms of casualties, injuries, the infrastructure that’s been damaged, but also importantly, emotionally and psychologically in terms of the destabilizing impact that not knowing, not truly feeling like there is anywhere safe to go in Gaza”.*

The psychological effects of conflict on children manifest themselves in many ways including fear, tension, aggression, becoming withdrawn and silent, difficulties in concentrating in school, and increasing isolation from family and friends. These psychological problems are also related to the ‘pressure cooker’ environment of households under severe economic pressure as a result of Israel’s siege.

### **Gaza under siege**

Even before the 2014 conflict, the Gaza Strip was already in a state of economic collapse largely resulting from a decade long Israeli blockade imposed in 2007 which has reduced to a trickle the amount of food, aid and resources needed for day-to-day living from entering the territory. With tight Israeli restrictions on imports and exports, Gaza’s economy is in freefall and its society in the grip of a humanitarian crisis. Most of Gaza’s 1.8 million people are refugees largely dependent on food aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN’s humanitarian mission in Gaza.

The explicit aim of the blockade was made clear by Dov Weisglass, an advisor to former prime minister Ehud Olmert, when he said ‘The idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger’. The poverty experienced in Gaza is not the work of a natural disaster – a flood, drought, famine, earthquake or tsunami – but the result of a carefully calculated policy designed to make life untenable in Gaza. A ‘Red Lines’ document disclosed in 2012 showed that this policy included calculating the minimum number of calories needed by Gaza’s population to avoid malnutrition. Amnesty International is among many international human rights organisations that have deemed the blockade illegal under international law calling for it to be lifted without delay. In 2015, Amnesty said:



“Gaza’s suffering is unacceptable and must end now. Israel has an obligation to end its collective punishment of Gaza’s civilian population, and completely lifting the blockade is the right thing to do”.

## The Project

The Centre for Global Education / Canaan Institute project had two main aims:

- To provide psycho-social support services to marginalised young people in four locations in the Gaza Strip with the support of the local community, schools and families.
- To supplement the formal education of young people through community-based learning focused on core areas of the school curriculum.



### **Project Objectives:**

- To provide psycho-social support to 400 children aged from 7 to 13 years suffering acute effects of conflict-related trauma in the Gaza Strip;
- To supplement education provision to 400 children to enable them to reach their full potential in school;
- To deliver 48 training workshops (12 in each community) to the families of the children to enable them to provide 'joined-up' psycho-social support in the household;
- To co-ordinate project delivery in liaison with local schools in order to best meet the educational and psycho-social needs of young people;
- To deliver the project in partnership with four grassroots community centres in marginalised areas of the Gaza Strip;
- To provide training in facilitation to a total of 12 staff in the four centres to support their work with the children;
- To evaluate the programme and its impact on the facilitators and children.

### **Project Activities**

***The project had six stages of delivery that are described below:***

#### **STAGE 1: Enrolment of Children (January 2016)**





The 400 children enrolled on to the project were selected by the four community centres in consultation with surrounding schools and visiting psychotherapists working with children in each school. The project enrolled children manifesting the most acute forms of trauma and anxiety who were identified by teachers and psychotherapists. A key component of the project was its 'joined-up' approach to the children's therapy by involving their families, schools and the local community. This ensured that the education activities targeted areas of the school curriculum in which the children needed support as well as providing psycho-social therapy to address the causes of stress. The four community organisations involved in project delivery were:

- Never Stop Dreaming Center (Khan Yunis in southern Gaza);
- Heker El Jame Youth Association, (Deir el Balah, central Gaza);
- Palestinian Women's Development Center (Bureij, central Gaza);
- Rural Family Development Association (Moghraga, 10 km south of Gaza City).

## **STAGE 2: Training of Facilitators (January 2016)**

Three members of staff from each of the four centres were recruited to work with the children for the duration of the project. A significant project outcome has been the enhanced skills base of the four centres through the training delivered to their staff. All twelve facilitators were trained together by the staff of the Canaan Institute in the use of therapeutic play and learning activities that were designed to address the behavioural and learning needs of the children. The facilitators participated in an intensive five-day training course in Canaan from 3-7 January 2016 in preparation for their work with the children.



*Project facilitators*

### **The training included:**

- Facilitation techniques used to lead children in games and play, arts and crafts, and expressive mediums such as theatre, dance and rap.
- Training in the use of teaching activities designed to support learning in Arabic, English, Health and Science, and Mathematics which are key areas of the school curriculum.
- Active learning concepts, aims and methodologies consistent with good practice in development education.
- Facilitation methods used to support discussion on problems caused by trauma.
- Developing a teaching plan of activities and field work.
- Advice on liaison with schools during the project.
- Techniques to support the effective monitoring and evaluation of activities.
- The facilitators were given work contracts for the duration of the project and received mentoring from the staff of Canaan during the delivery of activities. This included assistance with the preparation of materials needed in the training.

### **Stage 3: Training Delivery to Children (February to May 2016)**

In February 2016, the training began with 100 children enrolled in each centre facilitated by three staff members. The children in each centre were divided into groups of 25 along age lines. Two groups of 25 worked on Saturday, Monday and Wednesday and the other two groups on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. This meant that 50 children attended workshops every day in each centre except Friday. Facilitators worked with each group over two periods in the morning from 9.00am to 11.00am and another group from 1.00 - 3.00pm in the afternoon.

The training activities used with the children aimed to strengthen their classroom performance in four core areas of the schools' curriculum:

- Arabic
- Mathematics
- English
- Health and Science

The sessions combined formal school learning with play which included games, role play, theatre, dance, cultural expression and art. The activities





A facilitator leading an activity with young people

were implemented using active learning methodologies and the outcomes of the children's work included: wall designs, dramas and songs, puppet and contemporary dance, stories, and art and embroidery. The facilitators used dynamic, interactive methodologies including drama, art, stories, poetry, rap and *Dabka* (traditional Palestinian song and dance). The activities focused on strengthening knowledge, skills and confidence in the areas of literacy, numeracy, talking and listening. The formal sector work was delivered in liaison with teachers in local schools who advised on the key areas of the curriculum that needed to be addressed in the work with children.



A presentation on 'nature' as part of the NIPSA project in Gaza 2016



Teachers could advise on subject areas in which children were particularly weak and needed additional support. The activities were evaluated with the children through oral feedback and written questionnaires at the end of the programme.



*Children playing as part of the NIPSA project in Gaza 2016*

#### **STAGE 4: Family Workshops (February to May 2016)**

A key part of the project activities involved the delivery of workshops to families of the children enrolled on the programme. The facilitators in each centre organised three workshops in each month of the project (12 in total) and they had a high level of take-up.

The workshops focused on:

- Continuing the psycho-social support of young people at home that built upon the training delivered by the facilitators in each centre;
- How to recognise symptoms of trauma;



- How to manage young people in times of crisis and stress;
- How to use play and therapeutic learning in domestic life to alleviate stress.

The facilitators consulted with parents on a one-to-one basis to help them monitor the progress of their child and identify areas of learning in which they needed specific support. Many parents struggle to manage children subject to stress and trauma and so the assistance provided by the community centres and schools is invaluable.



*Parents attending a family workshop aimed at strengthening psychosocial support for children in the household*

### **STAGE 5: Celebration Days (May 2016)**

Each of the four centres organised a Celebration Day in May 2016 to mark the end of year one of the project and celebrate the students' achievements over the previous four months. The Celebration Days were organised jointly by the facilitators and the children and family members were invited to attend. The days involved children performing song, dance, poetry, rap and role plays. They often performed songs and dance in traditional dress with the help of their facilitators. The Celebration Days also allowed family members to see the work carried out by the children in Art & Design, Mathematics, Health & Science, English and Arabic reflecting the high quality activities delivered by the facilitators.



*Children and facilitators gather for a celebration of their project.*

**The Celebration Days included:**

- Exhibitions of wall murals, art, craftwork and drawings;
- Theatre performances written and performed by the children;
- Songs and Palestinian traditional dance (*Dakba*);
- Poetry written and performed by the children;
- Puppet shows;
- Clowns and dance shows.

The performances were attended by the children's families, local community members, the staff of Canaan Institute and the board of directors of each community association participating in the programme.





## **STAGE 6: Monitoring and Evaluation (May to June 2016)**

The twelve facilitators attended an end-of-project evaluation day organised by the staff of the Canaan Institute. This was a day of reflection on the project outcomes and the methodologies and materials used in the project activities. The facilitators also evaluated the project with the young people to get their feedback on the activities that worked well and what they would change in future years. The evaluation process will help to improve the delivery of any future initiative delivered in Gaza by the Centre.

The feedback from the facilitators and young people suggests that they really enjoyed their participation in the project. The children benefited enormously from having access to quality facilitation in a structured learning environment. Their participation in the project will strengthen their performance in school next school year. And, for the facilitators, they learned new skills in facilitation and the use of active learning teaching methods in helping to address the effects of trauma in young people. These skills are lifelong and will benefit their organisations into the future.

## **Recommendations**

The Canaan Institute was asked to make some recommendations that would strengthen future delivery of education programmes in Gaza. They suggested:

- 1. It would be helpful to extend the project timeframe over the full school year to enhance its benefits to children and better complement delivery of the school curriculum.***
- 2. It would be useful to broaden the programme into new areas in Gaza where there are particularly acute forms of trauma and extreme social and economic need.***
- 3. It would be useful to have additional resources for stationery, arts and crafts, equipment and learning materials needed by the children on the programme.***

## Next Steps

The Centre for Global Education and Canaan Institute are preparing for delivery of the project in year two commencing in January 2017.

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