



# A Report on a Psychosocial and Educational Support Programme Gaza Strip, Palestine 2022



FUNDED BY UNISON NI, UNITE THE UNION AND USDAW



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## Introduction

This is a report on activities delivered as part of a one-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 of New Pedagogy, a Palestinian NGO based in Gaza City. The project was funded by three trade unions: Unison Northern Ireland, Unite the Union and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW). It was delivered from 1 January to 30 June 2022 in co-ordination with four grassroots, community organisations in Gaza who are partners of the Canaan Institute.

The project had four main aims. The first was to provide psychosocial support to 400 children aged 7-12 years suffering from the acute effects of trauma caused by four wars in the Gaza Strip since 2008 and the grinding poverty created by a fifteen-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 such as Literacy, Numeracy and Science. The third aim was to deliver workshops to the children's parents with a view to extending psychosocial care into the household. The fourth aim was to build the capacity and skills of staff in the four partner organisations in Gaza that hosted and delivered the training. The project was delivered in four



*Psycho-social support workshop using arts and crafts. Canaan Institute, 2022.*

locations in Gaza: Jerusalem Association for the Development of Al-Mawasi – Khan Younis (southern Gaza); Heker Al Jame'e Youth Society - Deir El-Balah (central Gaza); Salateen Development Neighborhood Association - Beit Lahia (northern Gaza); and Bud Flower Association for Affection and Hope - Maghazi refugee camp (central Gaza).

In addition to the activities delivered to children, a total of 24 family workshops on providing psychosocial care were delivered in the four community centres. The workshops advised parents on how to recognise and deal with behavioural changes in children suffering the effects of trauma. This represented a joined-up approach to psychosocial 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 psychosocial needs of young people. The project take-up is summarised as follows:

## Gaza Project 2022 by numbers

Activities	Number of Sessions and Participants
Number of child participants	400
Number of facilitators per centre	3
Number of family workshops	24
Number of parents who attended psychosocial support workshops	200
Number of formal education sessions with children	288
Number of psychosocial sessions with children	288
Number of follow-up sessions with children and facilitators	24

## Project Need



Children playing in Bureij refugee camp in central Gaza, home to 34,941 registered refugees.

## Israel's siege of Gaza

Ten years ago the United Nations published an alarming report on the future of the Gaza Strip warning that without urgent remedial action, the territory would not be a liveable place by 2020 and its economy would become 'fundamentally unviable'. Far from receiving the infrastructural investment it so desperately needs, Gaza has been catapulted into a deeper humanitarian crisis exacerbated by an eleven-day Israeli offensive in May 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic and a funding crisis in UNRWA, the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees.

Gaza is a tiny, densely populated coastal enclave of 2.1 million people, of whom 1.4 million (over 70%) are registered refugees. Gaza's unemployment rate is one of the world's highest at 50 per cent and 62 per cent of its people are food insecure. The primary cause of this 'unliveable' environment is a highly restrictive Israeli blockade, now in its 15th year, which 'has devastated Gaza's economy, caused widespread destruction and left most people largely cut off from the outside world'. Ostensibly imposed on the basis of a security protocol to prevent rocket attacks on Israel, Amnesty International argues that 'the Israeli blockade does not target the Palestinian armed groups responsible for attacks – it collectively punishes the entire population of Gaza'. Michael Lynk, the former UN Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Territories, has condemned this collective punishment which he argues is 'clearly forbidden' under Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

## Four wars since 2008

Although Israel withdrew its settlements from Gaza in 2005, it continues to control the territory's borders, coastline and airspace and is internationally recognised as the occupying power with responsibility for the safety and welfare of civilians under its control. Yet, since 2008 Israel has launched four major military offensives on Gaza which have killed 2,700 Palestinian civilians and caused huge destruction to civilian property and infrastructure. The most recent offensive, in May 2021, resulted in 261 Palestinians killed, over 2,200 injured, US\$380 million in infrastructure damage and \$190 million in economic losses. But beyond the material hardship created by poor housing, malnutrition, sanitation and high unemployment is the silent epidemic of a mental health crisis. A 2020 UN report found that 22 per cent (410,684) of Gaza's population was in need of psychosocial support, of whom 270,000 were children. The constant exposure to conflict combined with the stress of living in highly-impooverished households has impacted children's mental health and school performance. Their education is already severely compromised with 286,645 students attending 278 UNRWA schools. This requires that nearly 70 per cent of schools either double- or triple-shift which means that one school building is shared by two or even three different school populations. This lack of school buildings is another consequence of import restrictions imposed by the blockade.



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*Zeitoun Preparatory Schools for Girls, an UNRWA school located in a southern district of Gaza City, opposite a government building destroyed in 2012's Operation 'Pillar of Defense', one of four Israeli military offensives on Gaza since 2008.*

## COVID-19

The vulnerabilities of Gaza's mostly refugee population have been preyed upon by the COVID-19 pandemic both in terms of its impact on an already overwhelmed health service and downward pressure on the economy and incomes. Medical Aid for Palestinians has reported 248,631 COVID-19 cases and 1,964 deaths in Gaza with pandemic mobility restrictions impacting access to healthcare and emergency nutrition services. 53 per cent of households experienced a drop in their monthly income as a result of COVID-19 with 51 per cent of workers in Gaza employed in the informal economy which made them more vulnerable to temporary or permanent redundancy during the pandemic.



*A home visit in Gaza during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 as part of the Centre for Global Education / Canaan Institute project.*

As COVID-19 has deepened the dependency of Palestinian refugees in Gaza on UNRWA services, the agency is experiencing an existential funding crisis with Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA's Commissioner-General, announcing in November 2021 that it was unable to pay all 28,000 of its staff, the majority of whom are Palestinian refugees. Although most of the cuts to UNRWA's budget by the Trump administration were restored by Washington, this has been off-set by cuts in funding by other donors. UNRWA spokesperson, Tamara Alrifai suggests that the agency 'is under intense politically motivated attacks that seek to question its legitimacy and undermine its added value, in an attempt to weaken the rights of Palestinian refugees'. 'The chronic underfunding of UNRWA', she argues, 'has created immense distress to the agency, to the staff and to the refugee community'.

## Background to the project

Following Israel's military attack on the Gaza Strip in May 2021, the Centre for Global Education received an appeal for emergency support from our partner in Gaza, the Canaan Institute. They saw a huge spike in the number of severe mental health cases in Gaza, particularly among young people who were traumatised by a mix of factors including displacement, bereavement, home demolitions and poverty. The Canaan Institute requested the resources to deliver a psycho-social and education programme in four locations in Gaza to help young people manage the effects of stress. CGE circulated a funding proposal to local trade unions based on the needs identified by the Canaan Institute. Three trade unions immediately agreed to contribute to the costs of the programme: Unison NI, Unite the Union and USDAW. This report outlines the activities supported by the project.

## Psychosocial and Education Support in the Gaza Strip

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

- To supplement the formal education of young people in a community setting to enhance their knowledge, skills and understanding in key areas of the schools' curriculum.



Arts and crafts session. Canaan Institute, 2022.

- To provide psychosocial support to young people to help them manage the trauma and stress caused by sustained exposure to extreme poverty and conflict.

- To deliver workshops to the children's parents with a view to extending psychosocial care into the household.
- To build the capacity and skills of staff in the four partner organisations in Gaza that hosted and delivered the training using active learning, participative methodologies.

## Project Objectives:

- To provide psychosocial support to 400 children, aged 7 to 12, suffering acute effects of conflict-related trauma in the Gaza Strip;
- To extend formal education provision in a community setting to 400 children through activities focused on the key curriculum areas of Arabic, English, Science and Numeracy.
- To provide the parents of the children with the skills and confidence to provide psychosocial support to the young people at home;
- To co-ordinate project delivery in liaison with local schools and psychotherapists to ensure a 'joined-up' approach to child welfare and education.
- To deliver the project in partnership with four grassroots community centres in different geographical locations in the Gaza Strip;
- To provide training in facilitation skills to a total of 12 facilitators (3 per centre) in the four centres to enable them to deliver development education activities to 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: Training of Facilitators (January 2022)



*Facilitator training led by the Canaan Institute as part of stage 1 of the project in January 2022.*

The project was launched and contracts signed by the Canaan Institute and the four community organisations on 16 January. Three members of staff from each of the four community centres received

20 hours of intensive training in development education methodologies from 23-26 January 2022. The training was delivered by staff from the Canaan Institute using interactive, group-led and participative activities designed to enhance the educational performance of children and provide psychosocial support. A significant project outcome has been the enhanced skills base of the four centres through the training delivered to their staff. The training was delivered by the staff of the Canaan Institute and included:

- Facilitation techniques used to lead children in formal education sessions, arts and crafts, and expressive mediums such as theatre, dance and role play.
- Training in the use of teaching activities designed to support learning in Arabic, English, Science and Mathematics which are key areas of the school curriculum.
- Active learning concepts, aims and methodologies consistent with good practice in development education.
- Skills in leading activities that support psychosocial wellbeing and improving mental health such as trauma dumping using art and one-to-one discussion.
- Developing a teaching plan of activities and field work.
- Advice on liaison with schools during the project.
- Guidance on managing administrative tasks related to the project.
- Techniques to support the effective monitoring and evaluation of activities.

## STAGE 2: Recruitment of Children (January 2022)

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 psychosocial therapy to address the causes of stress. The four community organisations involved in project delivery were:



Psychosocial support workshop. Canaan Institute, 2022.

- Jerusalem Association for the Development of Al-Mawasi - Khan Younis (southern Gaza);
- Heker Al Jame'e Youth Society - Deir El-Balah (central Gaza);
- Salateen Development Neighborhood Association - Beit Lahia (northern Gaza);
- and Bud Flower Association for Affection and Hope - Maghazi refugee camp (central Gaza).

### STAGE 3: Training Delivery to Children (February - May 2022)

On 6 February 2022, 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 attended classes on Saturday, Monday and Wednesday and the other two groups on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday; Friday was a rest day. This meant that 100 children in each centre attended 12 workshops every month with six of the sessions focused on formal sector learning and six sessions on psychosocial support. Facilitators worked with each group over two periods each day from 9.00am to 11.00am in the morning and 12.00 - 2.00pm in the afternoon. In total, 576 sessions were organised across all four centres over the duration of the project. 288 sessions focused on formal sector learning and 288 focused on psychosocial support activities using structured play, art, theatre, role play and other expressive mediums.



*A facilitator leads children in a group learning activity. Canaan Institute, 2022.*

The education 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 project's play and cultural activities included games, role play, theatre, dance, cultural expression and art. The activities were implemented using active learning methodologies and the outcomes of the

children's work included: wall designs, dramas and songs, puppet theatre, 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. 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. A total of 32 workshops were delivered to the parents of the children across the four communities on psychosocial care with a total of 200 women attending.

## Psychosocial Activities

The project prioritised psychosocial activities that enabled the children to share the difficult and troubling feelings and emotions caused by the constant threat of conflict in Gaza and the daily grind of poverty. This is often exacerbated by a difficult domestic life where one or both parents may be out of work and struggling to make ends meet. This can cause a 'pressure cooker' environment that creates anxiety, stress and tension for children and can manifest itself in the children's behaviour which can range from aggression and fear to becoming withdrawn and silent.

The psychosocial activities supported by the programme included:

- Games and structured play activities;
- Free expression activities and a psychological 'dump' exercises;
- Drawings and art work;
- Popular cultural tradition activities;
- Puppet theatre.



*A group sport activity as part of the project in 2022. Canaan Institute, 2022.*

## STAGE 4: Family Workshops (February to May 2022)

A key part of the project activities involved the delivery of workshops to families of the children enrolled on the programme. The facilitators across the four centres organised a total of 24 psychosocial support sessions that were delivered to 200 parents.

The workshops focused on:

- Continuing the psychosocial support of young people at home that built upon the training delivered by the facilitators in each centre;
- How to recognise the 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. Canaan Institute, 2022.*

The facilitators monitored the behaviour and progress of the children in responding to the psychosocial activities during the project and regularly met with parents to discuss the individual needs of each child.

## STAGE 5: Celebration Days (May 2022)

Each of the four centres organised a Celebration Day in May 2022 to mark the end 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 dancing at a Celebration Day at the end of the project in May 2022. Canaan Institute, 2022.

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.



Arts and crafts produced by the children as part of the 2022 project.

## STAGE 6: Monitoring and Evaluation (January to June 2022)

Throughout the delivery of the project, the staff of Canaan carried out 24 educational and peer support visits to the four partner organizations to assess delivery of the programme and support the work of facilitators. These visits dealt with monitoring and evaluation, administrative issues such as how to securely store data records on parents and children, providing advice on workplans and the delivery of activities.

The twelve facilitators also 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. A major strength of the programme is the provision of lifelong learning skills to facilitators which will strengthen their professional development.



*A facilitator leads a workshop with children using puppet theatre as part of the 2022 project in Gaza.*

## Project Outcomes

The main outcomes of the project activities were as follows:

- 400 children have developed skills in talking, listening and discussion, and are more confident in expressing themselves through a range of mediums including role play, art and theatre.
- Children have received support in managing stress and trauma as a result of the psychosocial activities delivered by the project.
- Children's relationships at school, at home and in the community have developed significantly and positively, as a result of psychosocial support.
- The project has resulted in a noticeable improvement in children's desire to understand and learn basic school subjects using active learning methods.
- The children's parents are now more confident and positive in extending psychosocial care at home as a result of the project's parental workshops.
- The 12 project facilitators have learned lifelong skills in using active learning methodologies and providing psychosocial support that will benefit themselves and their organisations.
- Parents expressed a high level of satisfaction with the learning and psychosocial outcomes of the programme which have had a positive impact on the children's emotional and educational wellbeing.
- The four community associations developed strong working partnerships through the participation of their staff that will endure beyond the project.



*An arts and crafts workshop. Gaza, 2022. Canaan Institute.*

### **Recommendations to Enhance Future Projects:**

- Implement community-based initiatives using activities that enable children and their parents to work together.
- Organise recreational day trips for both parents and their children during the project.
- To provide additional stationery for each child on the programme.
- To organize a summer camp during the programme.
- To extend the duration of the project beyond six months per annum.

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Arts and crafts produced through the project. Canaan Institute, 2022.

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