



Children in Gaza Strip and early childhood educational sector

An experience of international cooperation



CRIC
CENTRO
REGIONALE
D'INTERVENTO
PER LA COOPERAZIONE

EUROPEAN COMMISSION



Humanitarian Aid

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Introduction

A year ago, after the implementation of the social-educational project involving the children of Rafah and Khan Younis, the need was felt to put together and reorder the experience acquired by the CRIC with minors, their mothers and the infant school teachers, in order to share the positive and negative results, together with operators, institutions and the local and international organisations operating with children in countries undergoing situations of chronic conflict.

The social and educational initiatives implemented by CRIC in the nursery schools of the Gaza Strip, funded by ECHO, have been designed around the theme of resilience, considered as the universal ability to cope, meaning being able to prevent, minimise or overcome the harmful effects of adversity.

Plenty of literature exists today on the effects of traumas, grief, losses, separations, ill treatment, aggressions, and in general all those situations that put a person's sanity of mind at risk. Far less, on the other hand, is the literature centred on factors that allow people to face up (react) to traumas, to recover and develop normally despite the fact that they are living in conditions of objective hardship. To be aware of the effects of a trauma and of the resources put in the field when addressing problematic situations is important because, by knowing and valorising the resilience factors of individuals and groups, better prevention can be put into place.

The ability of children to develop a reaction to adversities has interested psychology researchers ever since this field of study saw the light in the 1970s. By analysing minors in difficulty, psychologists have discovered resilience, the improvement of the elements that help overcome hardship, within the child, in those who look after them and, more widely speaking, in the social environment. The awareness of these elements helps plan measures focused on upgrading skills in the lives of children, according to a logic centred on the prevention of hardships, rather than curing already-acquired disturbances.

The presented study is an in-depth analysis, meaning an ongoing attempt to understand the conditions of the children who live in the Gaza Strip, in a context of permanent conflict, with the effects and traumas suffered daily, and the resources provided to ensure a resilience tutor able to prevent, minimise or overcome the harmful effects of adversity.

The study is split into different sections covering the various stages of the investigation. Starting with a historical description (chap. 1), it goes on to describe the situation of children in conflict contexts (chap. 2), infants schools in Palestine (chap. 3) and the work done by the CRIC in the Gaza Strip (chap. 4). The social and educational measures implemented during the last three years are then detailed, with a description of methodology and activities (chap. 5). Finally, chapter 6 shows recommendations, the result of the evaluation course undertaken, aimed at answering the questions as to whether measures have been successfully implemented (output – result) and whether they have achieved the expected results (impact).

The investigation was made by cross examining different sources of information, through the involvement of various parties engaged in infant education: institutions, teachers, parents and local and international organisations operating in Gaza in support of children.

Only with the contribution of informers in fact will it be possible to give meaning to the information which they themselves have helped determine: the decision-makers, directors and executives, engaged in programming, the experts, the privileged witnesses, the opinion leaders of the area in relation to specific needs, the operators with their baggage of knowledge and experiences, the recipients as bearers of requirements and beneficiaries of measures, and their families. To this must be added the importance of objective crosschecks, of the data and possibility of reading these according to the narrative and experience of those who experience them on a daily basis.

This is true above all as regards services and measures related to the individual, characterised by a high degree of intangibility in which production and supply blend together; based on aspects such as relations and communication, that are hard to define and measure; where the motivation of the provider and the satisfaction of the user remain closely correlated; which offer margins of flexibility with respect to what has been scheduled and to the expectations and needs to be catered for.

Depending on the actual needs of the nurseries, in terms of requirements seen, times and costs of completion, the evaluation project has been aimed at:

- checking the level of implementation of the social education projects implemented starting from 2002 in terms of achievement of the goals set;
- analysing the adequacy of the measures taken to cater for the needs and demands of the population;
- evaluating the social impact on the well-being of the children of operators and of families.

The first work stages were distinguished by a study of the literature existing on infancy and child growth, resilience theories and their affect on policies and practices in armed-conflict contexts.

Subsequently, the work team carried out some very in-depth scouting to delineate the reference context. A crucial role in this stage was played by the documents, end reports, *in itinere* internal assessment reports and external evaluation reports drawn up by experts in social educational projects in the Gaza Strip implemented by the CRIC since 2002. By means of the analysis of documents and interviews with stakeholders, it became possible to reconstruct the historical scenario in which the measures were implemented. This first investigation stage made it possible to outline how the system works (take a photo), understand the needs of the population under study, evaluate the correspondence between the expressed demand and the existing service system.

The next step was to contact operators, main actors in the planning process, and the beneficiaries through their families.

From an analysis of all the material collected, discussed and processed, the fundamental questions were formulated, which went to make up the series of interviews with members of local institutions and organisations and with operators (teachers and educative advisors), as well as the framework of the focus group set up with parents.

COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The collection and analysis of data took place at different times and using different methods.

First of all, information was obtained through semi-structured interviews. The data collected underwent a quality type analysis: the text was studied in depth, and all types of verbal conten¹ were assessed. The priorities were also evaluated given by those interviewed to certain questions rather than to others, the repetitive parts and the missing parts. Subsequently, a statistical analysis was made of the data concerning the conditions of the nurseries in the Gaza Strip, collected during the last two years of social educational project implementation.

Finally, examination centred on the observation grids, in the form of a questionnaire, used by local operators during the year in progress to explore the needs of children, their ability to socialise, the organisation of areas and routines, the relations between children and teachers. Secondary data were also obtained and examined, through the search for statistical sources and documents available on the web.

¹ *All the interviews were video recorded, unwound and faithfully translated.*

THE INTERVIEWS

For the stakeholders, a little-structured interview was used, so as to direct the discussion towards a number of problem areas of special interest, leaving the person interviewed free to express his/her thoughts. This has made it possible to understand what the interlocutor thought about certain matters brought to his/her attention, but also to establish what he/she thought it most important to say in relation to specific groups of problems.

The interviews with operators (teachers and educative advisors) were semi-structured, with the aim of checking whether project goals had been achieved with respect to the actual needs of the nurseries, so as to identify errors or ratify what had been done. The common structure to each interview with the operators touched on the following topics:

- description of the child from a psychological point of view (behaviour and attitudes) in the various time phases (according to Intifada and post disengagement)
- questions relating to the projects implemented, asking for their opinion on the various phases of the project in which they took part, to understand what effect the project had on the educational structure split into its various human, material and methodological parts;
- open questions on their goals (the perception of the role of the teacher and the importance of infants' facilities in Gaza), which permitted verifying the educational and training courses followed by the teachers during project implementation.

Finally, at an historical time of internal crisis inside the Gaza strip when the civil population is subject to the heaviest attacks ever since 1948, we repeatedly asked all those who were interviewed the same question: "what sort of adults will today's children become?".

The history of palestine from 1948 to 2006

A REAL STORY

In 1948, all the inhabitants of Beer Assabaa were convinced by the authorities of other Arab countries to leave their homes just for some days or weeks, as they said, so as to avoid the threat of the coming Israeli invasion.

Like all the other families in the village, the Hammada family, too, left their home leaving all their properties behind and carrying their children in the arms. They walked for almost 45 km to the village of Jabalia, in the belief that they would come back after a short time. None of these families have ever been allowed to go back to their houses. They lost everything they had: homes, belongings, memories.

In 1967 Shareef Hammada was 13 years old; he was living in Jabalia refugee camp in with his family: mother, father, 3 sisters, two brothers. For several weeks people had been nervous and scared as the political situation in the country worsened and the threat of a new Israeli invasion became more and more real. One day, when the boy was at home, the Israeli militaries arrived with tanks and jeeps and through megaphones urged the entire population of Jabalia to leave their homes and gather in the near sewage pool "Berka Abu Rashed"; they also urged the policemen and fighters to hand over all their weapons.

**Gaza is a time-bomb.
You cannot close a
territory in which live
1.4 million persons
and drop hundreds
of bombs every day.**

*United Nations Office for Coordination
of Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egeland*

Many families left their homes as the soldiers were starting to shoot at the people and to beat them in the streets. Shareef's father refused to leave his home once again. He gathered his whole family in one room, to wait until it was all over. Suddenly a bomb hit the house. When Shareef woke up, he found his father, mother, and two sisters under the rubbles of the house; they had all died. The only survivors were himself,, his two little brothers of 5 and 10, and his 7 month old baby sister of , who was still in the arms of his mother. Shareef, his brothers and sister spent two days in their home before somebody could reach them. Their mother's family took care of them, but the little girl died a few months later. The family had been feeding the baby with water and sugar because they were too poor to buy milk for her.

Three years later, at the age of 16, Shareef left for Jordan and went to Jerash refugee camp, but life was very hard there for Palestinian refugees. They were not allowed to work and only very few hospitals were giving medical care to the sick people in the camps. He received a tent and started to work in the black labour market, and after earning enough money, he asked his aunt and brothers to join him. In 1977 he got married and built a small house in Jerash refugee camp. His wife took care of his brothers as if they were her own sons. Shareef worked hard, his brothers attended school and later went to University. One of them became an engineer and the other a professor at the Damascus University.

Shareef became the father of five beautiful children and during the cold winter nights he used to tell them the story of their family, from the day they left the village of Beer Assabaa to the day his parents died, describing them their home country Palestine. His children grew up and all of them attended school receiving very good marks. After finishing secondary school, his oldest daughter went to enrol herself in Amman university in , but she was rejected on the grounds that she was Palestinian. She had to follow the procedures requested for foreign students, who also pay higher fees. Her father did not have the money to pay high fees. This happened during the years of the Oslo Agreements, when the hope for a better future was deep in the heart of every Palestinian. Shareef decided to return to Gaza with his oldest daughter to enrol her at the local university and give her the chance to study. When he arrived, the Palestinian Authority gave him a small piece of land in the north of the village of Umm al Nasser, where he started to build a home with his own hands. After some years, his wife and children wanted to join him and decided to leave Jordan and go to Gaza. By doing so, Shareef was particularly afraid of losing their Jordanian passports, but at the end he couldn't refuse any more. They decided to sell the house in Jerash and, as the tradition wants, write "house for sale" on the wall . His wife felt very sad about it, because in their children had been born and raised in the house, and all the memories of their life were connected in some way to it. Anyhow, she had to respect the will of her husband and so she decided to write the sign but only on the back wall, where nobody would notice it. As soon as they had enough money for the journey to Gaza, they left Jordan. At that time, Jordanian passport holders were allowed to cross the border with Israel only with a limited weight of luggage. The family wanted to bring all belongings, in order to furnish their new home in Gaza. They decided to distribute everything among them, so that they could cross the border one by one and meet later in Jericho, to later continue together to Gaza. They packed everything; fur-

niture, carpets, dishes, clothes, blankets, and the washing machine. The mother and the two little sons crossed first, followed by the oldest son and at last Aisha. When Aisha reached the Israeli border and the police weighted her luggage, they told her, that she was carrying to much weight and that she had to go back to Jordan. So she did. She went back to the Jordanian border, emptied the washing machine she was carrying from the blankets inside, put them in a plastic bag and took again the bus to reach the Israeli border. This time, fortunately, they let her pass. She reached her mother and brothers in Jericho, who were very worried, because she was late and they didn't have any phone to call each other. Nevertheless, at 8:00 p.m. they reached Gaza and finally knocked on the door of their new home and embraced their father.

A few months later, the second Intifada erupted. For Shareef it was a shock, because he re-experienced of terror and horror he had gone through in 1967. His village became again a target of Israeli military incursions and violence and his fear of not being able to defend his family was throwing him into panic. He started to dig a hole in the central room of his house, that could serve as a shelter during shootings and shelling. From that day on until now, every time that the Israeli army launches an attack, the whole Abu Rafee'a family gathers in the house and sit together in the shelter.

One year ago, in December 2005, Aisha applied for a job advertised by CRIC and started to work as educational adviser in 5 kindergartens in the North Gaza Strip. Her sensitivity and brightness astonished all those who met her. In January, the attacks on her village became more frequent. The village remained under curfew every night for several months, an artillery cannon was shooting on every moving thing and the surrounding area was continuously bombed. We asked Aisha, how they were living and she answered: "there is no single room in my home without holes, the light enters through every wall. At night I cannot sleep, because I think that if I will have to die, I prefer to stay awake till the last moment".

On the 28th of June, Israel started a new military operation, called "Summer rain", one of the bloodiest and violent attacks for many years. That day, Shareef gathered the whole family and gave each member a task – buy food supplies, candles, radio batteries – and afterwards they sat together in the shelter.

Twenty days later, Aisha came to see us at the office- She told us that since that day they have been living without electricity and water and that her father had sent her to see us, because he was afraid for our safety and to tell us, that he was praying each night for us.

FROM 1967 TO 2005

During the 1967 War, Israel occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, along with the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula.

“From 1967 to 1987, the Israeli military government arrested and detained more than half a million Palestinians in the Occupied Territories (at a time when the total population of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza was about 1.5 million); over 2,000 Palestinians were deported from the Occupied Territories; more than 1,560 Palestinian houses were demolished; and all forms of educational and cultural freedom were tightly circumscribed: schools were routinely closed, and more than 1,600 books were banned by the Israeli authorities in the Occupied Territories. Rallies, strikes, the distribution of petitions, the displaying of the Palestinian flag, and similar acts were systematically repressed.”¹

This was also the period when an aggressive settlement policy was carried out by successive Israeli governments: from 1967 through 1987, 135 settlements, for a total of 175,000 settlers, were built in the West Bank, together with 12 settlements with a population of more than 2,000 settlers in the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian population reacted by developing alternative institutions and leadership. A number of different Palestinian grassroots organizations emerged so as to provide alternative institutions and leadership, to enhance existing official Palestinian institutions that were struggling to provide education, health care, and other basic services.

The project of non-violent resistance increasingly moved from a strategy of protest, non-cooperation, and steadfastness towards a strategy designed to establish viable, long-term alternatives to the occupation regime.

“The existence of these alternative institutions goes a long way towards explaining the relative success and longevity of the Intifada that began in December 1987.”²

In December 1987, the Palestinian population upraised against Israeli occupation, starting the period of the First Intifada, known as the “battle of stones against weapons”, which lasted 5 years.

The Palestinian Human Rights Information Centre estimates that from the 9th of December 1987 to the 31st December 1993, 130,472 Palestinians were injured and 1,282 were killed, among the dead 332 were children. People were shot, beaten, tear-gassed, or burned to the extent that they suffer from permanent

¹ *AFSC Middle East Resource series Middle East Task Force / Fall 2005 Palestinian Non-violent Resistance to Occupation Since 1967*

² *Ibidim*

disability. Approximately 57,000 Palestinians were arrested, many of them were tortured; over 481 were deported, and 2,532 had their homes demolished.

B'Tselem reports the following charts, referring to the period from December, 9, 1987 to October, 13, 1993.³

Palestinians killed in the Occupied Territories (including East Jerusalem)				Israelis killed in the Occupied Territories (including East Jerusalem)		
Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces	Among them: Minors under age 17	Palestinians killed by Israeli civilians	Among them: Minors under age 18	Israeli civilians killed by Palestinians	Among them: Minors under age 17	Israeli security forces personnel killed by Palestinians
1070	237	54	13	47	3	43

Life conditions were not easy, the Israeli army was present in the Palestinian territories and controlled social and public services like schools, hospitals, police and fire stations, power stations, see, water etc. run by Palestinian employees but managed by the Israeli army. The daily life of civilians was also controlled by the Israeli army. Flying checkpoints were present in each village and quarter, people were stopped and asked to show documents. Curfews were imposed on the population. At that time media were represented mainly by Israeli TV and newspapers, both Israeli and Palestinian. The Israeli army often used TV to send collective messages to the Palestinian population. Messages consisted in warning the population not to participate in resistance movements and not to interfere with military operations. Often at night, male civilians aged between 16 and 50 were summoned by megaphone to gather in a specific place, where the Israeli army would take their identity cards and hold them for several hours before giving back the documents and meantime the army would warn them again in a stronger and more persuasive way.

Every night, from 7 p.m. to 4 a.m., the population in the Gaza Strip was confined to their houses. In a study carried out by the Gaza Community Mental Health Program on Collective Punishments and Mental Health it has been highlighted that curfew led

to negative psychological effects among children: 66.1% children began to fight each other, 54% were afraid of new things, 38% started to develop aggressive behaviour, 18.9% started to suffer from bed-wetting and 2.3% had speech difficulties.

The popular committees, established in the years before, became

³ http://www.btselem.org/English/Statistics/First_Intifada_Tables.asp

vital institutions, that provided a social support system able to reduce the consequences of war on people.

Palestinian resistance consisted mainly in acts of civil disobedience that were non-violent, such as refusal to pay taxes, shortened workdays by shopkeepers in East Jerusalem and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, self-sustaining projects such as household economies and "victory gardens," economic boycotts, attempts to keep schools and universities open and functioning, work stoppages, slowdowns, and strikes.⁴ Youth groups organized neighbourhood watches, particularly around refugee camps and isolated villages. Welfare and relief services were organized for the families of those who were out of work or who had been killed, imprisoned, or deported. Specialized committees were established, often by women and children, to replace locks on shops that had been broken by Israeli troops. Members of the Medical Relief Committees violated curfews to enter camps and other areas where Palestinian residents were in desperate need of medical care. Local committees provided education during the many months, when Palestinian schools and universities were systematically closed down by Israeli authorities. The Madrid talks of 1991- 1993 marked the first time that an official Israeli delegation sat down with a Palestinian negotiating team, albeit as part of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. A different set of secret negotiations led to the Palestinian-Israeli Accord of September 1993, known as the Oslo Accords.

The accords call for the partial withdrawal of the Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip and West Bank and affirm the Palestinian right to self-government, through the creation of the Palestinian Authority. Palestinian rule would last for a five-year interim period, during which a permanent agreement would be negotiated (beginning not later than in May 1996). Permanent issues, like Jerusalem, refugees, Israeli settlements in the area, security and borders, were deliberately excluded from the Accords and left to be decided later.

The two parties signed letters of Mutual Recognition - The Israeli government recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people while the PLO recognized the right of the state of Israel to exist.

The five-year transitional period should have begun with the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area. Subsequent to the Israeli withdrawal, Israel would have continued to be responsible for external security, for internal security and public order of settlements and Israelis. Israeli military forces and civilians would have been allowed to continue using roads freely within the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area.

Permanent status negotiations would begin between Israel and the Palestinians, covering the above mentioned remaining issues.

⁴ *Ibidim*

The withdrawal of the Israeli troops from Gaza meant vital changes in peoples' lives. The night curfew was lifted, no houses were destroyed, the number of killed and wounded people decreased and some of the political prisoners returned home. Schools started to operate regularly and confrontations between the occupation forces and local youngsters ceased.⁵

Anyhow, the Oslo Agreement happened to be a failure. Instead of bringing positive changes to the socio-economic conditions of Palestinians, they resulted in high unemployment rates, decrease in freedom of movement for Palestinians – Israel had stepped up its practice of installing roadblocks and checkpoints manned by Israeli troops around all Palestinian areas, facing previously unknown forms of searches and violent harassment on a daily basis –, lack of civil liberties, failure of the Palestinian authority in respecting law and democracy, 50% increase of Israeli settlements building and land confiscation.

The Paris Protocol, signed in April 1994 as part of Oslo 1, set the framework for the interim-period economic relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The model established in the Protocol, known as a "customs union," pursued the aim of preserving the existing economic relations, i.e., a Palestinian economy integrated in and dependent on the Israeli economy.⁶

Regarding goods from other countries, the Protocol established a joint external border for the interim period. Israel collects the import taxes on the goods and transfers to the Palestinian Authority the taxes on goods that were directed into the Occupied Territories. Furthermore, the Protocol foresees, that Israel may unilaterally establish and change the taxes imposed on imported goods. Regarding V.A.T., Israel transfers to the Palestinian Authority, in accordance with a monthly accounting, revenues collected for goods and services sold in Israel to be consumed in the Occupied Territories.

The Palestinian Authority had no choice but to accept the model set forth in the Protocol, because Israel made acceptance a condition for them to continue to allow Palestinians to work in Israel. Israel imposed that condition at a time when the Palestinian Authority was not able to provide employment within the autonomous areas to the tens of thousands of Palestinians who were working in Israel.

The Paris Protocol transferred to the Palestinian Authority several powers relating to economic policy, like the authority to impose direct and indirect taxes, set industrial policy, establish a

⁵ *Disaster and Mental Health: The Palestinian experience*
By: Eyad El Sarraj, Samir Qouta

⁶ http://www.btselem.org/english/Freedom_of_Movement/Paris_Protocol.asp

monetary authority to regulate financial mediation, and employ persons in the public sector. The Protocol also stipulated the gradual cancellation of export restrictions on agricultural produce exported from the Occupied Territories to Israel that had been in effect until then and protected Israeli farmers from competition.

The relations established in the Paris Protocol emphasized the disparity in power, that had always existed between the two sides from the beginning. The disparity was clearly evident during the first four years of implementation of the Protocol, which took place at the time (unexpected at the time of its signing) of suicide attacks and imposition of prolonged comprehensive closure of the Occupied Territories.

The customs union agreed upon, gave Israel the exclusive control over the external borders and the power to collect import taxes and V.A.T., thus allowing Israel to delay the transfer of taxes that it owed to the Palestinian Authority, or to threaten a delay in transferring the money, used as a means of pressure or punishment.

According to the agreement, Palestinian trade with other countries will still be handled through Israeli seaports and airports, or through border crossings which separate the areas under Palestinian Authority from Jordan and Egypt and which are also controlled by Israel. The necessity of obtaining Israeli approval to conduct trade leads to a substantial economic loss to Palestinians, whenever Israel imposes a comprehensive closure on the Occupied Territories and cancels all relevant permits, as often happened between 1994 and 1997.

Although the customs union framework was intended to ensure free flow of workers, the Paris Protocol did not expressly prevent Israel from prohibiting workers to enter its territory. During the first four years of the Protocol's implementation, Israel imposed prolonged comprehensive closures on the Occupied Territories, causing a significant drop in the income of Palestinians from employment in Israel and a substantial increase in poverty and unemployment.

It was within this context that Ariel Sharon, leader of the conservative Likud party, made a provocative visit to the el-Haram el-Sharif/Temple Mount, the third holiest site in Islam, in September 2000, accompanied by 1,000 Israeli policemen and soldiers. Sharon's visit triggered huge protests by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and inside the Green Line. Israeli troops met these demonstrations with violence. In one instance, Israeli forces used regular ammunitions and snipers against a peaceful protest by Palestinian Israeli citizens in the town of Umm al-Fahm, causing the death of thirteen Palestinian Israeli protestors.

Sharon's visit and the killing of unarmed Palestinian protestors ignited a situation that had already been simmering for a long time. The period that has come to be called the "second Intifada" began in September 2000.

Unlike the first Intifada, however, Palestinian demonstrations and protests were not only aiming at the Israeli occupation, but also at the Palestinian Authority and the Oslo process as a whole. Equally significant was the unprecedented violence, with which the second Intifada was met, from its very inception, by Israeli forces.

From the moment that the Al-Aqsa Intifada erupted, the occupying forces imposed comprehensive closure of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).

In the West Bank, the Israeli government started to build a wall around the West Bank, consisting of a network of fences with vehicle-barrier trenches surrounded by an on average 60 meter wide exclusion area and up to 8 meters high concrete walls. The wall was built partly inside the West Bank, partly along the border between the West Bank and Israel itself. Justifications alleged by Israel are of security nature, especially for increasing the security of Israeli citizens from Palestinian terrorist actions, including suicide bombing.

Many Human Rights Organizations, instead, sustain that the wall is an illegal attempt to annex Palestinian land with the pretext of security and that it violates international law; its intent or effect is to pre-empt final status negotiations; and severely restricts Palestinians, who live next to the wall, especially the possibility to travel freely inside the West Bank and to reach their work in Israel, thus undermining the Palestinian economy.

As a matter of fact, the wall heavily affected the Palestinians in terms of reduced freedom, loss of land and economic property.

As stated by the UN:

"...it is difficult to overstate the humanitarian impact of the Barrier. The route inside the West Bank severs communities, people's access to services, livelihoods and religious and cultural amenities. In addition, plans for the Barrier's exact route and crossing points through it are often not fully revealed until days before construction commences. This has led to considerable anxiety amongst Palestinians about how their future lives will be impacted...The land between the Barrier and the Green Line constitutes some of the most fertile in the West Bank. It is currently the home for 49,400 West Bank Palestinians living in 38 villages and towns." ⁷

⁷ http://www.humanitarian-info.org/opt/docs/UN/OCHA/OCHABarRprt05_Full.pdf

Until May 2004, the construction of the fence had already caused the uprooting of approximately 102,320 Palestinian olive and citrus trees, demolished 0.3 km² of greenhouses and 37 km of

irrigation pipes. At that moment, it covered 15,000 dunums (15 km²) of confiscated land, only few meters away from many small villages or hamlets. In early 2003, in order to move a section of the barrier to the Green Line, a ramshackle mall of 63 shops was demolished by the IDF in the village of Nazlat Issa. In August of the same year, an additional 115 shops/stalls (an important source of income for several communities) and five to seven homes were also demolished there. According to the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), 15 communities were directly affected, of approximately 138,593 Palestinians, including 13,450 refugee families or 67,250 individuals.⁸

The Israeli Human Rights Center B'Tselem notes that "thousands of Palestinians have difficulties in reaching their fields and selling their produce in other areas of the West Bank. Farming is a primary source of income in the Palestinian communities along the Barrier's route, an area that is characterized by the most fertile ground in the West Bank. The harm to the farming sector is liable to have drastic economic effects on the residents – whose economic situation is already very difficult – and drive many families into poverty".⁹

The wall around the Gaza Strip was built in 1994. The border crossing points for people and goods are under strict control of the Israeli Army. The Rafah terminal is the main crossing that Gazans use to enter and exit the Gaza Strip. The Erez crossing is only used to access work in Israel and by businessmen with permits. Palestinians must request a permit and a special coordination approval in order to be able to cross the border, whether it is for personal or for health purposes. Rules imposed by Israel change from time to time, without a precise reason. In 2004 and 2005, male Palestinians, between 16 and 48 years old, were not allowed to cross the border; this new rule came into force during the summer, when many Palestinians residing in other countries, came to the Gaza Strip to visit their relatives. As a consequence of this new measure, many of them were no longer allowed to return to their countries for a prolonged period and many Palestinian students enrolled in universities abroad missed the academic year.

Members of families in which one person had carried out or was alleged to have carried out an armed attack, were not allowed to cross. Due to the Palestinian family structure, which is based on an extended family, it is almost impossible not to be charged with such implications. To reach the West Bank from the Gaza Strip, Israel did not allow Palestinians to cross Israeli land. This means that the Palestinians were forced to cross the border in

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli_West_Bank_barrier

⁹ http://www.btselem.org/English/Separation_Barrier/index.asp

Rafah, enter Egypt and from there fly to Jordan and then reach the Allembly Bridge (Israeli controlled border in the West Bank).

During the last 5 and a half years, that is since the Al-Aqsa Intifada began, the Palestinian Territories have seen a long period of war, violation of human rights, threats to the life of every human being, death, poverty, forced internal displacements, house demolitions, military invasions, physical and psychological violence, perpetrated by the occupying power. The lack of economical resources and the feeling of insecurity that affected all families in the Gaza Strip during the last years, had repercussions on all the spheres of their lives.

The Palestinian Centre Bureau of Statistics highlighted, that there has been an increase in poverty during the current crisis, compared with the situation on the eve of the Al Aqsa Intifada. Poverty rates reached 29.5% in 2005 compared with 20.3% in 1998.¹⁰ The consumption data indicates that the rate of the total diffusion of poverty among Palestinian Households in Gaza Strip was 43.7% in 2005, while 63.1% of households were found to have an income below the national poverty line in 2005. Job opportunities and income earning activities have decreased during the years, due mainly to actions taken by the occupying power, limiting import and export of goods through the Gaza Strip, destroying shops, firms, fields and public structures. The local productive capacity declined considerably since 2000.

As a result of closure more than 120,000 Palestinian labourers were prevented from reaching their workplace inside Israel. Over 31,699 dunums of agricultural land, which represents 20% of agricultural land in the Gaza Strip has been bulldozed and uprooted.¹¹

According to data provided by the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, during the period 29 September, 2000 - 01 August, 2006, the homes of 24,768 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip were totally demolished and 25,211 of them were partially demolished.

¹⁰ *Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006. Poverty in the Palestinian Territory, 2005. Main Findings Report. Ramallah- Palestine.*

¹¹ *Palestinian Center for Human Rights, Poverty in the Gaza Strip. May 2005*

District	N of houses completely demolished	N. of houses partially demolished
Northern Gaza Strip	258	330
Gaza City	178	295
Central Gaza Strip	157	150
Khan Yunis	647	327
Rafah	1467	1087
Total	2707	2189

The South Gaza Strip was the area affected the most by the response of the Israeli army protecting illegal Israeli settlements.¹²

According to the data of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, from September 2000 to the 30th of April 2006, a total number of 29,768 persons were injured in Israeli military actions and 3,870 lost their lives, 33% of these were children aged 0 to 18 years: As described by Iyad Sarraj, head of the Gaza Mental Health Programme:¹³

"Children fill their paintings with blood, ambulances, soldiers, guns and flags, reflecting the daily reality of life for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. They are quick to fight, swiftly resorting to stones or knives to settle street squabbles. They find it hard to concentrate in class and teachers find it hard to control them. Bedwetting among youngsters aged up to 15 is common. [...] Without exaggeration, I can say that every single person in Gaza is traumatised, adult or child, man or woman, to different degrees with different coping mechanisms,[...]. I fear the future of Palestine, even in peace, because the traumatised people and children will show delinquent behaviour and psychological problems, drug addiction and violence. We could enter a state of infighting, or even civil war,".

Sarraj said Gazans, whose freedom of movement has been curtailed since Israel captured the Strip from Egypt in 1967, feel completely caged by curbs imposed when the revolt began.

"Suddenly, while trapped in their cage by Israeli closures, people were exposed to air, land and sea raids. When you're in a cage, this puts you in a state of frenzy, [...]. People become very restless, very anxious and very tense because they have no escape, and so build up such violent energy that they need to express,[...]. That makes everyone suffer from trauma, especially children."

¹² http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/intifada/dest_e.aspx

¹³ *Interview with Iyad Sarraj in Gaza. Fear and fury traumatise Gazans up against Israel. By Wafa Amr.* <http://www.middleeast.org/read.cgi?category=Magazine&num=180&standalone=&month=4&year=2001&function=text>

AFTER THE DISENGAGEMENT

In September 2005, Israeli settlements and military posts inside the Gaza Strip were dismantled, equal to an area of 65,7km². The general feeling among the Palestinian population in Gaza was that a new period of peace and economical rise would follow. This did not happen. Only one month after Israel started a military operation called "first rain" followed by the "operation second rain" during which the Israeli Air Force (IAF) launched

air strikes throughout the Gaza Strip and fired artillery shells (into northern areas). The IAF aircrafts also delivered a series of 'sonic booms' over the Gaza Strip. Sonic booms were usually carried out in the evenings and in the early mornings when the children went to school and the people began their workday. They dramatically affected psychologically the population, caused the death of elderly persons and entailed serious health effects such as heart attacks, tachycardia, ear and sensitive system disorders, etc.

As reported by the Gaza Community Mental Health Program:

"We can categorize these effects on four levels:

Firstly, the cognitive level which includes; loud sounds are associated in the minds of children with danger. It causes poor concentration leading to low academic achievement, preoccupation and magnification of fearful thoughts, fear of losing a close relative, intrusive thoughts about traumatic incidents, violent fantasies, nightmares, depressive thoughts, glorification of violence, increased feeling of vulnerability and alertness due to fact that the loud sounds are associated with danger in the minds of children who are unable to comprehend the distinction between real shelling and mock air raids.

Secondly, the Emotional level which includes; anxiety and panic, fear, nervousness, screaming and crying, anger and frustration, depressed mood, and feeling overwhelmed and the world is dangerous and has no space with security and peace.

Thirdly, the behavioural level which includes; withdrawal, hyper-vigilance (startle response), clinging to parents, night-terror, bed-wetting, avoidance of going to school, poor appetite, stuttering, ticks, regressive behaviour, sleep disturbances, and fear of being left alone.

Fourthly, the Somatic level: headaches, muscle pains, stomach aches, hyperventilation, palpitation, shivering and body shaking, and feeling of suffocation and exhaustion.

A major negative effect of the raids is the impact on daily family life as follows: family excessive fear about children's safety - especially many of the bombings take place while children are in their way to and from school, acting over-protectively, persistent anxiety about losing a family member, nervousness, intolerance, sleep difficulties that lead to feeling overwhelmed

exhausted, broken family daily routine, feeling of helplessness resulting from inability to anticipate the occurrence of the next bombing incident..

In addition to the above mentioned psychosocial symptoms of the air raids, a number of other physical damages were reported by medical sources in the Palestinian Ministry of Health, for example, there is a 30-40 % increase in the number of abor-

tion cases between the period 27-29 October, 2005. Additionally, cardiac patients with pace-maker are also affected. Also, there is marked increase in the patients complaining of ear problems which can affect the auditory nerve leading to deafness¹⁴

Air strikes also caused serious damages to buildings and infrastructures. Windows and doors were destroyed or damaged as a result of shock waves associated with the sonic booms. Many private and public institutions, including schools, were also damaged. Provisional information from health clinics in the Gaza Strip report increased signs of psychological stress and physical damage in the population, particularly amongst children and also in the humanitarian operators (i.e. tachycardia, ear inflammation). Many Kindergartens were closed because of the damages reported.

In December, the IDF began operations in the northern area to create a buffer zone along the former settlements of Nissanit, Eli Sinai and Dugit. Artillery shells were fired to open areas north of Beit Lahia and south of Beit Hanoun in Abu Safia area.

During the month of January 2006, legislative elections took place and the Hamas party was democratically elected to guide the country. Israel considers the Hamas party a terrorist organization and this was the reason why it started a total embargo and isolation of the PA with the full support of the United States of America and the partial support of the European Union.

Israel's immediate reaction was to freeze customs and V.A.T. – a monthly amount which corresponds to almost 50,000,000 US\$ - and shut for long periods all crossing points for the passage of persons and goods under the control of Israeli military forces. Customs and V.A.T. money was usually needed to pay the salaries of PA employees, so the impact of this action was that more than 152,000 employees of the PA have not received any salary since March. Poverty among them has risen noticeably - from 37% in 2005 to 46% in 2006 - affecting the livelihoods of about one million Palestinians, who represent a quarter of the Palestinian population. The loss of salaries had repercussions on the local economy and on the society, which is short of cash money.

The strategies adopted by the families to cope with this difficult situation, are: reducing expenditures, not paying bills, using savings, credit from shops (already interrupted by shopkeepers who no longer trust PA employees' ability to repay) and making hospital visits instead of buying counter medication (this tendency is on going in Gaza Strip). Schools, hospitals and clinics are facing problems recruiting new staff because of salary non-

¹⁴ www.gcmhp.net

payment. Some University have reported a fall in student attendance this term because of growing levels of poverty, leaving the institutions increasingly unable to meet running costs. Furthermore, the escalation of internal violence is at least in part, the result of the non-payment of security staff salaries.¹⁵

As for the closure of border crossings, Erez – crossing point for persons – is closed since March 12, 2006. About 4,000 workers can't reach their job in Israel. OCHA estimates that 30,000 persons have been deprived of income. Meanwhile, as far as the closure of the Karni commercial crossing points for goods is concerned, the losses in the commercial sector, especially in agriculture, have been massive. Paltrade estimates the daily losses in 500/600,000 US\$. Greenhouses formerly belonging to the Israeli settlements and handed over to the Palestinian Authority after the disengagement, have been growing and working in particular cherry tomatoes, peppers and eggplants, which remained unsold; therefore cultivation was abandoned so as to avoid further losses in water and inputs. Due to the closures, only 10,000 litres of gas/day entered the area, instead of the 30,000 litres needed. This caused a transportation crisis and also a power shortage in villages and in public health infrastructures.

Furthermore, the international community stopped the supply of all funds in support of the Palestinian National Authority and as a consequence of the civil population. These measure had severe repercussions especially on the health sector.¹⁶ Funding shortfalls in the Ministry of Health (MoH) have resulted in reported shortages in stocks of medical supplies, essential drugs (23% out of stock in the WB and 10% in GS), including anaesthetics and special drugs for chronic diseases. Shortages have also resulted in the non-maintenance of medical equipment, a reduced number of surgical operations performed and fewer referrals for treatment outside the OPT. The number of in-patients and out-patients attending MoH facilities has dramatically increased, compared with the same period last year, as patients can no longer afford private service provisions.

¹⁵ *The financial problem of the Palestinian Authority that have been impacted on the salaries not paid. According to UN Revised CAP 2006 document.*

¹⁶ *UN – Humanitarian Monitor – May 2006*

Referring to the UN revised CAP 2006 particularly vulnerable groups due to low income and insecure work are: *Households with members who are social hardships cases.* These include households with members engaged in Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) emergency job creation programmes and 45,000 persons who receive relief assistance from MoSA, and

households with members affected by chronic diseases in need of long term treatments, including cancer.

Women. The loss of the (often male) breadwinner's income has meant that women frequently seek out alternative income-generating opportunities. However, they often lack work skills and experience and may be marginalized from access to resources and services. In addition, pregnant women and lactating mothers are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. Pregnant women with complicated pregnancies are also at risk of not receiving the medical care they need.

Children. Children are expected to be at risk of school drop-out due to pressure to earn money. Children psychologically harmed by the violence will be increasingly unlikely to receive the mental health services they need. Children under the age of five years are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.

Children and violence

In 1991, Israel signed the Convention on the Right of the Child of 1989, to be enforced on the entire territory, including the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Nevertheless, the second Intifada that erupted in September 2000 proved to be far more violent and oppressive than before, with obvious consequences on children's life, mental health and possibility to have a full and harmonious personality development, growing up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding as written in the Preamble of the Convention.

As reported by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)¹:
"Despite the formidable body of codified international law about the rights of the child, including the Convention of the Rights of the Child, children are still paying a disproportionately high price in the current Palestinian conflict. Children have been killed, injured, faced with permanent disabilities, or held in Israeli military and civil detentions with no legal representation of parental visits, inadequate food supplies, no access to bathroom and shower facilities and subjected to both physical and psychological abuse."

During October 2002, Israel presented the second periodic report to the Committee on Rights of Child. Mr. Jacob Egbert Doek, Chairperson and Committee Expert, who served as rapporteur on the report of Israel, said that the report gave the impression that the Committee was dealing with a peaceful legally progressive country; unfortunately, the reality was different. The report completely ignored the status of children in the occupied Palestinian territories and the awfully violent armed conflict that had been going on for two years. [...] The pattern of killing children, which had become so entrenched and widespread in the past two years, had developed against a background of impunity for the perpetrators of such crimes over many years prior to the current Intifada. Mr. Doek said. The State party was responsible for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child for all the children within its jurisdiction, including the occupied territories. Palestine was not a State party to the Convention.

² *Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Press Releases, The Situation of Children in Palestine, Beirut, 5 October 2004 (United Nations Information Services)*

In response, the members of the Israeli delegation said, that:

“The responsibility of the implementation of the Convention had been handed over to the Palestinian Authority, which controlled 98 per cent of the occupied territories. However, during the last two years, the rule of armed conflict had been applied in all cases. Israel had been respecting the Geneva conventions on the protection of civilians in times of war. The casualties that occurred during the conflict included children because of their involvement in the conflict. During the latest two-year conflict, children had been recruited, indoctrinated and used as suicide-bombers by Palestinian armed groups against Israeli civilians. The report of Amnesty International² that alleged that cases of deaths of Palestinian children were not examined was wrong. The authorities had carried out investigations on such incidents.”

A further question was raised, regarding the military order no. 132, which considers a 16-year-old Palestinian child already adult: whether an Israeli child of the same age was considered as an adult. At present, a certain number of Palestinian children over 12 years old are detained by Israel. The major offence of these children was stone-throwing, which is considered as a threat to Israeli security. Those children taken to Israel had been mistreated physically and mentally. Parents were not allowed to visit their children.

The members of the Israeli delegation replied that stone-throwing could not be considered a simple action by Palestinian children, as a number of Israeli civilians had been severely hurt by stone-throwing.

According to a report issued on September 13, 2002, “The Impact of Conflict on Children in Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel”, edited by “Watch List”, there are no data available about the number and gender of Palestinian children and adolescents, who have perpetrated or planned violent attacks or who are active in armed groups, and there is no conclusive evidence, that children have been recruited or systematically used by Palestinian armed groups.

It is sure, that throwing stones at the Israeli army was a way to react to oppression, occupation, anger and fear. Palestinian children are known all over the world as the stone-throwers. According to the member of the Israeli delegation answering the questions of the Committee on Rights of Child, one could imagine that most of the children were killed or injured in such occasions, but instead the majority of Palestinian children, who

² *Amnesty International II. Israel and the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian Authority Killing the Future: Children in the Line of Fire*, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/engMDE020052002?OpenDocument&of=COUNTRIES/ISRAEL/OCCUPIED+TERRITORIES>

were killed during the Intifada, died not when confronting Israeli soldiers, but when performing normal daily-life activities such as going to school or to the market or just playing outdoors.

According to the report issued by Amnesty International³ in November 2002: In the two years since the beginning of the Intifada, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip which broke out in September 2000, more than 250 Palestinian and 72 Israeli children have been killed. Palestinian children have been killed by Israeli soldiers using excessive and disproportionate lethal force in response to protests, or as a result of shelling and bombardments of residential areas. Others were killed during Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) assassinations of Palestinian activists, or when their homes were demolished. Some died because they were denied access to medical care by the IDF. At least three were killed by armed Israeli settlers.

³ *Amnesty International II. Israel and the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian Authority Killing the Future: Children in the Line of Fire*, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/eng/MDE020052002?OpenDocument&of=COUNTRIES%5CISRAEL%5COCUPIED%5CTERRITORIES>

⁴ *Amnesty International Israel and the Occupied Territories and the Palestinian Authority Killing the Future: Children in the Line of Fire*, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/eng/MDE020052002?OpenDocument&of=COUNTRIES%5CISRAEL%5COCUPIED%5CTERRITORIES>

During the Al-Aqsa Intifada, 33% of the fatalities were children: 49 children aged 0 to 5 years; 90 between 6 and 10 years; 330 between 11 and 15 years; 422 between 16 and 18 years.

Amnesty International describes the killing of several children through evidence gathered by witnesses:⁴

Khalil Ibrahim al-Mughrabi was playing soccer and flying kites with his friends in a large open space near the border fence at Rafah, on 7 July 2001, when he was killed by a high-velocity bullet in the head. He was just 11 years old. His two friends, Ibrahim Kamel Abu Sussain, age 10, and 13-year-old Suleiman Turki Abu Rijal, were also shot and both sustained serious injuries. The shots came from an Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) post about 800 metres away and according to witnesses there were no disturbances or clashes in the area at that time. The IDF claimed that there had been rioting and throwing of fragmentation grenades in the area, but confidential IDF records showed that this was untrue.

Muhammad Ibrahim Hajaj, Ahmed Suleiman Abu Tayah and Ibrahim Reziq Omar, all 14 years of age, were shot dead and several other children were wounded on 1 November 2000 by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in the Gaza Strip, in a place which over the past

two years has been a regular demonstration site for children who gather to throw stones at IDF tanks and/or at the IDF tower. Muhammad Ibrahim Hajaj was shot in the neck and Ahmed Suleiman Abu Tayah and Ibrahim Reziq Omar were shot in the head and chest. All three died immediately. Several other children were wounded, including two 10-year-olds who were shot in the abdomen and in the right shoulder. According to eyewitnesses and to medical records, the children were fired on with live ammunition from a distance of about 150 metres.

Four-month-old baby Iman Hijju was killed on the morning of 7 May 2001 by heavy IDF shelling in Khan Yunis. Thirteen other civilians, including seven children, were wounded, some of them seriously. At about 11am artillery shells and heavy and medium calibre bullets were fired from IDF bases inside the Gush Katif settlement block into several areas of Khan Younis refugee camp, Hay al-Amal and Nimsawi districts. According to testimonies given to Amnesty International by survivors, residents, and United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) staff members who were present in the area, the IDF shelling was intense and lasted for over half an hour. There was no Palestinian fire at the time in the area, though according to some there had been Palestinian fire earlier that morning but not from the areas shelled by the IDF. At the time of the shelling 20-year-old Suzanne Hijju was visiting her mother and relatives in Hay al-Amal with her four-month-old baby, Iman. The house is very near to one of the IDF bases and, fearing that the house could be shelled, Suzanne Hijju and her mother decided to take the children to safety elsewhere. As they stepped out of the house a shell landed and exploded on the doorstep. Baby Iman was hit by a large piece of shrapnel which entered her stomach and went through her back, disembowelling her. Suzanne Hijju and her 38-year-old mother, Samia, were seriously injured by large pieces of shrapnel throughout the body and Samia's children, 18-month-old Mahmoud and six-year-old Dunia, were also wounded by shrapnel. Mahmud sustained serious abdomen injuries and Dunia was injured in the hand and leg.

Just before midnight on 22 July 2002, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) dropped a one-ton bomb on a densely populated neighbourhood of Gaza city. Nine children, most of them under the age of 10, were amongst the 17 killed. Dina Matar was just two months old and Ayman Matar 18 months. Muhammad Raed Matar was three, Diana Raed Matar 5, Subhi Mahmud al-Hweiti 4, Muhammad Mahmud al-Hweiti 6, Ala Muhammad Matar 10, Iman Salah Shehada 15 years old. Maryam Matar, 17 years old, was seriously injured in the attack and died on 15 August.

More than 70 other people were wounded. Leading Hamas activist Salah Shehada, who

was among those killed, was accused by the Israeli authorities of organizing attacks against Israelis. Given the location of the target, in a densely populated residential area, and the method of attack chosen, the authorities must have known that civilians, including children, would be killed. The following day Israel's Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, called the attack "one of the most successful operations".

During these years of war, displacement, violence, and resistance, children have lived and grown up in a non peaceful environment. The psychological effects on them have been disproportionate.

As Dr. Mohammad Mokhemir, psychologist of the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme GCMHP, during an interview carried out in February 2006, highlighted: "Palestinians not able to escape nor change their circumstances, an experience to large extents determined by the lack of safety and stability for children who are the permanent presence of different kind of traumas including shelling shooting house demolitions incursions and imprisonment and other kind of traumas.

The last five years of the Israeli violence has created a state of uncontrollability and unpredictability among children. They became trapped to anxiety and fear. They are afraid to loose their parents and beloved ones or even they have become afraid about themselves to get injured or to get killed. The schools turned to be scaring places where many children have been killed while they were sitting in the class room or playing in the school yard. According to the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme study about the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorders among Palestinian children we found that 32% of Palestinian children developed acute level of post-traumatic disorders or symptoms including re-experiencing of traumatic events by intrusive recollections of destroying houses killings assassinations violent scenes fragments of bodies pictures of martyrs and they couldn't avoid easily these images of recollection because it happens every day, every day and night, they become nervous, easily provoked and their performances are greatly affected."⁵

The same worries are expressed by Dr. Cairo Arafat within the study carried out on children psychosocial conditions:

"The psychosocial well being of Palestinian children is under significant strain, mainly due to the omnipresence of violence in their surroundings and the resulting pervasive feeling of danger in their lives. The majority of sampled children (93%) reported not feeling safe and exposed to attack. They fear not only for themselves but also for their family and friends."⁶

⁵ *Interview with Dr. Mohammad Mokhemir*

⁶ *Cairo Arafat, A psychosocial assesment of Palestinian children, July 2003*

In the same study, resulted that 48% of the children have personally experienced violence owing to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, witnessing or being directly involved. Ms. Juda, during an interview carried out in April 2006 explained us the changes occurred in children behaviour, since the beginning of the first Intifada:

“In the first Intifada, children were hostile, and this was obvious from their drawings and through their behaviour with one another [while playing] in the patio, where they used to take the toys from each other by force. We tried our best to change this but the general situation was stronger than us because children were subject to violence and shelling.

But after Oslo, we gave children some security through dialogue and explanations about peace and liberty and security, and that there were no soldiers on the road. They no longer heard the sound of shelling and planes. We managed to make the child adapt to the new situation of peace and to unload his inner energy through drawing. They drew birds or flowers or anything from life.”⁷

At the time of the Oslo agreements, the Palestinian population perceived such a process as the beginning of the end of war and occupation. In the streets of Gaza, people celebrating peace, were throwing olive twigs to Israeli soldiers. When they actually realized that the situation had not changed, and the contents of the agreements were actually unfair towards Palestinians, the feelings of disappointment and frustration concerned everyone.

“After the second Intifada (Al-Aqsa Intifada) in the year 2000, things became worse and we were back to square one , [...]. Cannon shells, and assassinations by jets and raids and house demolitions, are all things that were too huge for us to solve through courses and symposiums for psychological enforcement. These events recurred daily and if we were to solve a certain problem, our solution would be terminated with nightfall.

Their educational achievements also deteriorated, and more of them dropped out of schools and kindergartens. The thing that I would like to stress is that we were back to square one in the first Intifada, with all the fear, even if occupation is not here , the sounds of the jets scares the children to an extent that there were children who screamed and urinated at night. [...].

Children, not only fear the army, but also the Qassam rockets, and they know that firing a Qassam rocket will be followed by

⁷ Ms. Fawzya Juda, working in the field of early childhood education since 1978. Director of a kindergarten in the North of Gaza Strip.

⁸ By square one Ms. Juda refers back to the beginning of the recovery process, social and economical, of the Palestinian population

⁹ Ms. Juda refers to the fact that during the Oslo period Israeli Army swept out of certain areas inhabited by the Palestinian population.

enemy jets and cannons destroying everything, and a father might die, and the house might be demolished, and they are scared. If we go to any kindergarten and talked to any child, he will tell you about the suffering in which he lives. These are our experiences, and such are our children, who will grow up to be men, and their lives are the same without change.”

Other teachers of different kindergartens in the Gaza Strip described also the children’s reaction to violence and fear.

“The children, of course, were extremely affected by the Al-Aqsa Intifada. They were living and experiencing fear and cried a lot, and this was reflected on their behavior, such as stubbornness, weeping and imitating things that they saw on TV, such as martyrs and weapons. Of course things changed between the first and second Intifada. The first Intifada was not as brutal as the first and there was no fear and the Jews were not terrorists as now. When they entered homes they respected the elderly and they spoke to children normally. But now they do not spare children, old men or women. No one can stand them now.”¹⁰

“Yes, the children felt the Al-Aqsa Intifada, and this was apparent from the great fear and worry [...]. They greatly feared the occupation army. The first Intifada was different from the Al-Aqsa Intifada, because in this Intifada they felt great fear and concern, and their behavior was abnormal, and when they heard the sound of the planes and the bombings, they were very scared, and this affected their personality. The children used to talk in the kindergarten about anything that they had seen on TV.”¹¹

“Surely they felt the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Their behaviors before the withdrawal were always of introversion and apprehension, and they always played the game of Jews and Arabs.”¹²

“[...]children] drew tanks and soldiers and flags, from their imagination, not necessarily resembling tanks that they had seen, [...]. As for games, they made two puppets, a bride and a groom, and they put them over cubes, and made the groom into a martyr and that the Jews were shooting at them, and they began throwing the cubes at themselves, [...]”¹³

¹⁰ *Al Olama Seghar Kindergarten*

¹¹ *Deir Yassin Kindergarten*

¹² *Al Zahra Kindergarten*

¹³ *Al Wessam Kindergarten*

The ways children express their feelings and represent the reality they live in is through games, stories and drawings. All teachers reported that while playing children often represented events related to the ongoing conflict: Palestinian resistance against Israeli Army, martyrs funerals, massacres, shootings and so on.

Mr. Sharhan, a photographer presently following a research project about street children in Gaza City, described us their usual way of playing in the streets:

"[...], there is imitation of reality, such as the game of Israelis and Arabs, which is a well known game, where a Palestinian is represented as a martyr and Israelis are stoned. The children always quarrel on who will be the martyr and who will be the hero in this scenario. They also try to imitate the Israeli army, and they know that they deal with children violently, so they imitate what they see on TV in general. This game is the most common among the children.

Sometimes, they play other games such as football, hide-and-seek, and girls play hopscotch and jump-rope. These are popular games that they play by their own way, even though they do not have areas or time for play. While they are playing, nevertheless, they do not feel free and safe due to the fear of sudden Israeli air strike or, also due to the tension in the streets. For example, if we talk about Gaza children, at present are spending their school vacation. They play under great tension and with great caution. [...] yesterday the children playing on the beach in Gaza, freely, were carried back on stretchers for the dead, after that their picnic turned into a death trip instead of a trip of joy and playing and life.

Children are very much scared, that they would fall victim to the same fate, so they play today and move from place to place in great tension and wariness and play where they live because an Israeli shell may hit in any moment.

Also the political situation inside the Palestinian territories and security-related anarchy and daily shooting, and rallies that they see has greatly affected the lives of our children directly and clearly.

It also affects the concept of what is right and what is wrong, where children cannot distinguish who is right and who is wrong.

Today they watch the TV seeing Palestinian against Palestinian problems, and they started a new game which is Palestinian against Palestinian. [...]" ¹⁴

We asked the kindergarten teachers interviewed how parents acted in order to protect their children.

"[During the first Intifada] Parents used to be afraid to send their children to the kindergarten unless they were accompanied by one of them, [...]. At first, they used to prohibit them from going out in fear for them from the Jews, and they prohibited them from playing even at their doorsteps, [...]. During the Al-Aqsa Intifada, parents' behaviour used to be the same, such as not letting their children go out, even though Israeli bombing was on

¹⁴ *Shareef Sharhan*

the border and on the Brazil neighbourhood and not inside the village, but whenever they heard any sound, the children had to go into the house, and the parents also prohibited their children from touching anything on the ground in fear for them, which made them fearful through their parents.”¹⁵

“[...] in the first Intifada, parents use to be very fearful for their children and prevented them from leaving home, which was of course because of the Jews being around, and the occupation imposed aggressive measures against us, such as curfews and no freedom of movement.”¹⁶

“For parents, the first Intifada was different from the second. They did not feel extreme fear in the first Intifada because the child used to go out of the house and soldiers would only aim their rifles without shooting and killing him. But in the second Intifada, if a child would merely go up to the roof, he would be wounded, and a mother is now more protective of her children and would tempt them to remain inside the home and would tell stories and induce them to spend their time with toys. In this way a mother would prevent her children from leaving the home. Also, she would prevent them from watching TV and would isolate them inside their rooms with the toys. Moreover, in the first Intifada there was work and income, but now there is no work and no income, which is reflected on the child’s psychology. In the current Intifada there is more awareness than in the first Intifada because there are lectures and courses for the family training them how to deal with children during the shelling and raids.”¹⁷

“In the first Intifada, people were fearful for their children and they prohibited them from going outside the home, and not even to play outside, where they feared that unknown objects would blow up any second. In the Al-Aqsa Intifada, there were persons who were targeted by the Jews.”¹⁸

Dr. Cairo Arafat highlights that:

“Children’s cognitive and affective processes can be affected by conflict, imprinting emotional, psychological and physiological scars. This may lead to behaviour characterized by distrust and hostility and can prevent the child from developing into a productive and social adult and citizen. However, under the right circumstances, a child’s cognitive and affective processes can also serve as a source of strength, building “resilience” and increasing their ability to “bounce back” from unusual stress or trauma. This is especially the case when a child can count on continuous support from parents, family, friends and/or other community members and social institutions.”¹⁹

¹⁵ *Al Wessam Kindergarten*

¹⁶ *Al Zahra*

¹⁷ *Al Olama Seghar*

¹⁸ *Shady Seam Kindergarten*

¹⁹ *Cairo Arafat, A psychosocial assessment of Palestinian children, July 2003*

Parents and teachers of today were children during the first Intifada. They experienced war and fear as children, through the support of their parents and other care givers, without the necessity to be primarily responsible for someone else. But today, as adults it is their responsibility to protect the young, within a context completely different from the one in which they first experienced war.

It has been suggested frequently that severe disturbances of the 'normal' development during childhood will result in psychopathology in adulthood or at least that the quality of life in adulthood is treated.²⁰

According to studies carried out in Gaza by the Community Mental Health Programme indicates that many adults are today suffering from mental health problems such as depression or psychosomatic disturbances.

Dr. Mohammad Mokhemir, of the GCMHP, stated that:

"Palestinian parents themselves are traumatized, their normal function of protecting their children is paralysed, they become helpless, they couldn't afford the day and night chilling, for example. And also the parents' lives have become extremely stressful where the lack of economical resources and the level of unemployment have tremendously increased due to the Israeli closures. According also to the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme study we found out also that there is a strong proportional relationship between the mental health of mothers and their children, an increase of the mother's psychological problems indicates an increase in their children's problems where 20% of mothers is suffering from somatic symptoms and 40% of them suffer from depression and anxiety."²¹

Adults, especially in the Gaza Strip, are not only scared to become themselves or their family members victims of a military attack. What happened during the last years affected them in terms of loss of hope for a better future. The joy and hope raised by the Oslo agreements and the subsequent understanding that nothing had changed caused feelings of mistrust towards any kind of reaction or resistance towards the occupying power. The different social involvement in resistance strategies between the first Intifada and the second is evident. If during the first Intifada everybody was actively taking part in non-violent resistance movements, during the second Intifada people left the resistance to be carried out by the armed wings of the political groups in Palestine. Furthermore, the increase of poverty, the lack of security and the feeling of impotence to defend one's own family and properties, caused increasing depression, passivity, anger and anxiety among adults.

²⁰ *Disaster and Mental Health: The Palestinian experience*
By: Eyad El Sarraj, Samir Qouta

²¹ *Interview with Dr. Mohammad ---*

“With the bombardments, daily life of Palestinians is an impossible mission, a kind of constant zigzag during the night and during the day, due to the continuous invasions in the South and in the North. Anywhere you go you find destruction: homes demolished, funerals, lands, trees and green houses destroyed.

People are waiting the sun to rise, the nights often do not allow peaceful sleep due to all occurring around. It is an impossible life, all the rights are neglected: to move, to laugh, to cry, everything is the same, everything is grey.

But where will take all this without leaving regrets, neither will of revenge and hate against the other? And now how can we live in all this? The majority of people suffer from double personality, they live joyful and sadness without being able to distinguish the two. Everything has become the same, you can not feel any longer the taste.”²²

Renato Scifo, child psychiatrist of *Medicins Sans Frontiers* has been interviewed, and he expressed his concerns about children’s need to find a referral model with whom identify themselves:

“[...] children, [...] found themselves living in this dimension of lack of future and the normal necessity to find referral models, with whom to identify themselves, which absolutely can not be found in their parents, as deeply depressed from years and years of Intifada.

[...] in the group of younger children, from six years to the pre-adolescence, there is the great problem of not having referral points to whom identify oneself. Of course, if the society, for example the militant groups thanks to their activity, are showing an opportunity to go from an absolutely passive functioning, where you endure violence and the lack of a strong model, children can and must, otherwise will feel a sensation of non existence, follow and identify themselves in such model that is aggressive therefore from this the perpetuation of violence.”

Symbols of this new Intifada are not any more the popular committees, Yasser Arafat or the PLO/Fatah party. The new youth emblem are armed fighters and martyrs. The new generation is living a relationship based on conflict, especially with their fathers, accusing them of being weak and not able to defend them from the Israeli enemy.

The home of a little 4-year-old boy in Jabaliya was shelled one night by an Israeli tank, while he was inside with his parents. The family was hiding in one room for more than four hours, while the army continued to shoot at the building. A few months later, during a small discussion between the boy and his father, the boy asked him why in that occasion he didn’t take a rifle and go out to shoot and kill all the Israeli soldiers.

²² *A poem by Sami Abu Omar*

To become a martyr is nowadays a matter of social recognition and prestige among the youngest. Martyrs are not only suicide bombers but anyone who dies because of the Intifada or during confrontations with the Israeli army. Martyrs are usually celebrated also by spreading posters with their portrait. A new game among the children is to go to a photographer's shop and have a picture as martyr taken.

Mr. Mohammad Kilani, social worker for MSF, told us:

"There is an example that impacted me: one day, while I was in a summer camp in Rafah, Khan Younis, [...], with the children who had seen violence on a daily basis, I asked [to one of] the children:

Why do you have photos of the martyrs of Fatah and Hamas and others?

This indicates that children now have a culture of going to a photographer and paying him 5 shekels in order to photograph him with weapons, and he feels that it is a project of martyrdom."²³

CHILDREN OF TODAY ARE THE ADULTS OF TOMORROW

After the disengagement of the Israeli settlements from Gaza Strip, the shared hope of a new period of freedom, peace and economical growth was again brutally disrupted. The events that followed, as described in Chapter 1, led to an increase of violence, poverty, confusion, and lack of hope.

Israel started a new wave of violent attacks against the Palestinian population, launching missiles on targeted people or buildings, shelling open or inhabited lands along the Israeli border, provoking sound booms.

It is hard to describe a sound boom, you believe that a bomb has been thrown into your apartment, you feel your body shaking and your heart beating, it is as if your inside is cracking. In October 2005, when it first happened, Israel started this terror campaign by provoking sonic booms every day for weeks, unexpectedly, at any time of the day and the night. The blast shatters windows and cracks walls. Most of them were occurring in the early morning, when people went to work or children to school. The number of children who attended kindergartens, decreased noticeably in that period. The children were scared of leaving their homes or suddenly finding themselves without their parents.

The interviewed teachers told us how the children felt at that time:

"The sound bombs were terrible and left a terror in the hearts of children, which will remain for the rest of their lives. Sound bombs were very dangerous, to an extent that the building used

²³ *Al Soundus kindergarten*

to shake from sound, and we the educators tried to make the children forget this sound but they had their eyes on the teacher but their ears were anticipating the sound.”²⁴

“[children] experienced immense fear and some children are suffering involuntary urination and depression, aggression and violence in some instances, and some children became afraid to attend kindergarten especially because they were away from their mothers.”²⁵

At first they used to be scared, but we trained them to put their fingers in their ears whenever they heard the sound, and to yell at each other “HEYYYY.”²⁶

From November 2005, the northern area of Beit Lahia and Beit Hanoun, two villages next to the border with Israel, have constantly been shelled by Israeli tanks. The Israeli air force launched leaflets in which they informed the population of the area that it was declared a no-go area from then on. A curfew was imposed on the population that refused to leave their homes, from 5 pm to 7 am. A new game was then popular with children: to go around the yard with a water bottle and collect the incandescent fragments of the Israeli shells. The Palestinian Authority immediately informed the population that the shells might be depleted uranium and thus lethal to everybody.

At the end of June 2006, after the capture of an Israeli soldier, attacks became even more violent, affecting and targeting all the population of Gaza Strip. Continuous sound booms, air missiles, invasions, home demolitions, killings of militants and civilians.

In order to understand better how children dealt with the situation we held a meeting with mothers of children attending 10 kindergartens in the south and north of Gaza Strip. We first asked them what was the reaction of children during the sound bombs and other blasts, then we asked what were their behavioural changes. Some of the answers from the mothers follow:

The first thing that he do it is to cover his head with the blanket and shout “the Israeli come and hide me my mother” My child stops any activity he is carrying out, such as playing or eating or watching the TV. When he hear the sound of bombing he start shouting and he put his hands around his head and he start crying and he go to sleep quickly and cover his head. Sometimes he wake up suddenly and start shouting.

²³ *Mohammad Kilani*

My child wants to see what is happening so, for example, he says: I want to see the tanks and weapons! During the day he isn’t so worry but in the night he wake up suddenly and runs desperately to me to asking for a strong and long hug.

²⁴ *Shady Seam Kindergarten*

²⁶ *Al Wessam Kindergarten*

I can say that my child's behaviour has been changed positively since he started attending the kindergarten but because of the continuous bombing this changes wasn't completed. For example my child became more sociable and caring of the others, he started to depend on himself in doing many things and I feel that he learns a lot of positive behaviours. Also his time is full of activities that he does in the kg and repeats them at home. But as a result of the last bombing he became more nervous and as a reaction he started making wooden guns and playing with them in groups with his friends. In addition to this his paintings are now all about damaged and burnt cars.

Three weeks after the beginning of the Israeli military offensive, the interviewed mothers reported to us that 2 children (a girl and a boy) were killed in an Israeli Air strike to the house. The other members of the family were injured (the mother is seriously injured). 7 of the children lost the father. 4 children lost one brother. The homes of 22 children were damaged by tanks and 4 houses completely destroyed by Israeli missiles.

A teacher of a kindergarten in Beit Lahia, North Gaza Strip, told us:

In the homes, especially during the last months, the situation has deteriorated. Children don't want to stay alone, some don't want to go out from the home, they sleep with the parents, they never go to the toilet alone and many have problems of uncontrolled urination. One kindergarten tried to organize summer camps, but it has been very difficult as the fragments of the shells were reaching the playground, therefore they had to carry out all activities inside. One little girl drew a face with the hair sticking up, I asked her why and she told me it was a very scared girl." ²⁷

Cana'an Institute of New Pedagogy is a local organization, working in the field of child education. During an interview we asked them what they feel about the future of Palestinian children.

"If things remain as they are today, including bad conditions and general Palestinian polarization and a state of tension, paired by a lack of educational activities that would enable children to express themselves, most of our children will grow up becoming largely violent, and thereby we will not have achieved anything significant for the Palestinian community and, therefore, all these occurrences reflect on society, in that they will remain in a state of violence.

If there becomes a state of relief, institutions and activists in the field of providing educational activities to children will thrive, and the state of imposed siege will be lifted, thereby enabling

²⁷ Al Ekklass kindergarten

the people to organize activities with their children and this will in turn lead us into a bright, promising and optimistic future, in which our children may practice any activity and unload their energies and repression they have inside, and they will thereby become free and outgoing young men and women, able to build a democratic civil society in which we would respect freedoms and denounce violence in all its forms, or at least enough to provide them with relief within this society and through which it is possible to rely on these children in building the future state.

But it seems to me that the general state today indicates that we are approaching the first possibility, as a result of the discontinuation of international aid and the complete embargo and inability to organize activities. In this year, we are speaking of educational activities, the most important of which are summer camps that were not held as in the past years, so this will have a great impact, but optimism and hope still prevail. Therefore, we all must put an effort in working with children and organizing educational activities in order to allow them to excel, create, innovate and participate.”²⁸

The same question was addressed to Ms. Juda.

“There are children whose families were killed, how would they feel? They will grow up with hatred and a desire to take revenge from those who killed their family. And there are children whose homes were demolished and who had to sleep in tents instead of their houses. They will become vengeful towards those who demolished their homes. There are also wealthy people whose farms and pastures were destroyed, and they turned penniless over night, so how will those react?

Things are very clear. As long as there is occupation and raids and assassinations and starvation and killing, there will be a shattered and aggressive mentality. If you imagine that someone took your mother away from you, how would u feel as an adult? So what about a little child? Like what happened on the seashore, where a family went out to rest from the shelling in Bet Lahiya, only to find death on the shore. A child who experiences such events will suffer mental disorders, such as fear and lack of self-confidence, and will not be able to express himself. Therefore, and like we accepted peace, we truly hope that peace prevails and that world conscience awakens to know that there are children and a people under occupation. [...]. We hope [...] that the children of Palestine would live in peace, and to wake up from their sleep without hearing the sounds of shelling and the jets and assassinations, and to live in peace.”²⁹

²⁸ *Cana'an Institute or new Pedagogy Trainers*

²⁹ *Fawzya Juda*

Out of 1.5 million people living in the Gaza Strip, only those who are over 58 years old know what it means to live in a peaceful country.³⁰

Today's children were born during the Intifada. They can tell the sound of a real bomb from that of a sonic boom and they know what an F16 or an Apache is, not because they saw them in a cartoon or in an action movie on TV or because they have new generation toys, but simply because they are a part of their life.

³⁰ According to the United Nation Population Division, and a statistic study carried out during 2002, the average of people living in the OPT above 59 years is equal to 4,9% of the total population.

Early-childhood education in palestine

Two months ago

I was at the Allembry bridge, entering Palestine.

A young Israeli soldier stopped me and asked me the routine question:

“What is the purpose of your visit?”

I answered I was going to Jerusalem to meet ECHO and discuss a project on early-childhood education.

Then she asked me: “Why education?”

Palestinian children have no education and Israelis have enough! ”

She absolutely startled me.

HISTORY

Until 1967, the Gaza Strip used to be an Egyptian protectorate. From then on and especially from the end of the 6-Day-War, the Gaza Strip is under Israeli occupation. All matters related to social services fell under the responsibility of the so-called Department of Civil Affairs Management which was also responsible for releasing licenses to kindergartens. During that time not many kindergartens existed in the region. The first ones established were linked to UNRWA, the United Nations Relief Work Agency providing services to the Palestinian refugee population. In the same period, only a few kindergartens were available for the non-refugee population. Therefore, parties linked to the Palestinian Liberation Organization, PLO, started to establish new kindergartens, supported mainly by women's associations and used as welcoming structures for mothers and children. Most of them were not registered with the Civil Administration Management office and did not have a licence. This was an expres-

sion of the general opposition against Israel occupation and a clear demonstration that their authority was not acknowledged.

As reported by Ms. Fawzeyya Juda, who works in the field of early childhood education since 1978:

“[Before the first Intifada] When the kindergartens first started, they used to belong to the UNRWA, [...]. Of course these kindergartens did not cover or absorb a large number of children in the territories, and at the time of the occupation each faction within the Palestinian Liberation Organization created places under the title of kindergarten, which they owned, as well as women's development centres. So they became nationwide kindergartens, which tended for children as well as women, for whom they provided instructions on how to deal with the child and take care of him, as well as nursing and training enabling a woman to know how to protect and take care of her children and home, and how to bring up her child properly, afar from all the negatives of our society.”

The women's movement, active in Palestinian politics since the beginning of the twentieth century (the first Arab Women's Congress was held in Jerusalem in 1929), covered an important role in protests against the British rule and in the General Strike of 1936. The General Union of Palestinian Women was formed in 1965, but it was in the 1970s that popular Women's Committees began to take a more active role. These popular committees worked in the understanding that strengthening the role of women in the struggle against the occupation would change both the nature of women's roles and of the anti-occupation struggle itself. The goals and activities of the local Women's Committees varied, but all of them stressed the women's need for productive work, education, and vocational training, and to involve house-holding women in wage-earning activities.

Within the frame of such a strategy, kindergartens became the place where women met and thought together about how to resist to the occupying power and participate in the national struggle. The support of women's associations became particularly precious during the first Intifada, when families were not able to afford the registration fee to the kindergarten, teachers worked as volunteers and the municipality exempted KGs from paying electricity and water.

In 1994, with the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, the newborn Palestinian Ministry of Education MoE became responsible of the supervision of kindergartens. “The Ministry of Education assumed responsibility for children in 1996 by a resolution of Mr. President. From the first moment, the Ministry of Education drew up an

ambitious plan to improve work at the kindergarten stage, because of its importance. Since it took charge of supervising kindergartens, it took into consideration the material aspects and acted to develop kindergartens by providing a minimal level of health-related matters, as well as educational and technical aspects. It also specified criteria and specifications for the building that should provide minimal airing and lighting and meet health requirements. This was at the beginning of the Ministry's work, and we followed a field plan to visit and scan several kindergartens that were in the governorates of our country, whether in the Gaza Strip or in the West Bank. We visited all kindergartens and tried our best to prepare them structurally, and also health-wise in cooperation with the Ministry of Health.”¹

At that time there were 80 licensed and 100 unlicensed kindergartens. From then on, more and more kindergartens were established - especially by private owners - as an income-generating activity for private families. All of them applied for a licence in the hope to obtain support from the Ministry. Instead, the new-issued document with the criteria for the release of a licence, established conditions that were absolutely unaffordable and unattainable for the majority of the existing kindergartens. Furthermore, the benefits given to the kindergartens, like the exemption from the payment of electricity and water, were cancelled. In 1996, a working group was established with the aim of elaborating a national curriculum but, unfortunately, it never managed to finish the job because of the second Intifada. As a matter of fact, the MoE became responsible only from a technical viewpoint.

“[After the withdrawal of Israeli occupation forces from Gaza, during the Oslo Agreement time], We tried in various ways to let the child unload what was inside him, because there really was a peace process and we had to convey to the child that there is peace. [...], children used to draw barbed wire and Jews, and expressed the violence which they had experienced, and after the peace agreement we explained to them that there is peace and security and freedom, and the establishment of the state of Palestine, so they began to draw flowers and birds. Of course this took long, until we reached a point where the child truly unloaded all his fears, [...]. Work became available for workers, and the situation improved and kindergartens started to cover themselves, and we were able to obtain license from the Ministry of Education, [...].

Of course, the MoE requests certain conditions, in order to give the license, that the kindergarten must respect in order to be taken into consideration and receive the license such as the area, the toilets ventilation etc....

¹ Mr. Sabry

[...]the ministry only handed instructions. Once, the ministry visited the kindergarten and said that we must raise the paint to a higher level, so that the children would not be able to reach it even if they stretched out their arms, so we answered him that how could the ministry impose demands upon us instead of supporting the kindergarten? Because if it wasn't for the institutions [International organizations] who look after kindergartens from the perspective of childhood and bringing happiness to children, kindergartens wouldn't have lasted. We wouldn't have been able to renovate or paint or pay the utility bills from the revenues alone. The ministry representative replied that they do not offer these things, but whichever kindergarten does not meet the requirements, then the ministry would not release the license.”²

During the period after the first Intifada, many organizations continued the work started by the women's associations, but focused more on the psychological recovery of children and mothers. Furthermore, kindergartens that had so far been mainly considered as entertainment structures for children rather than early-childhood education structures, began to fix their aims in a more educational perspective. Organizations, like the Early Childhood Education Center, Tufula Mubakkera, and Ghassan Kanafani, assisted many kindergartens by providing professional skills to teachers and a new educative methodology.

This positive period lasted for only five years, that is until the outbreak of the second Intifada.

“This situation lasted until the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, when the deterioration started. There were closures, unemployment, shelling and assassinations, so we were back to square one. [...] during this period, because of closures and rising unemployment, there were two choices: either the child would go to the streets, or enrol to the kindergarten and pay according to his financial situations, even if only 10 shekels, because this was the only kindergarten in the area. Therefore, the educators did not receive their salaries in order for the educational journey to resume in kindergartens. The number of children diminished: from 170, it dropped to 140 then 120 and then 100. This was because of the economic situation, where unemployment reached 60% and the situation became hard on all. Kindergartens did not have a source of income anymore because children did not pay the fee. Some paid only 10 shekel every two months and others 5 shekel - that is, one dollar a year. Anira institution came allocated a carton of milk and a box of cookies for every child, which was a great incentive because they

² Ms.Fawzya Juda

came without a sandwich, or with a pepper sandwich, not even thyme (as Ismael Haniye said: we want to feed the people thyme).”³

“The events in recent years, during the Al-Aqsa intifada, had negative impact on performance in the educational process in general, and on kindergartens in particular. There were difficulties, and it was hard for us to arrive in order to follow up and supervise these kindergartens.”⁴

With the beginning of the second Intifada, the overall conditions in the kindergartens deteriorated. The number of new kindergartens continued to grow, but only very few applied to the MoE for the license, as were not meeting the criteria requested at all. Once more, the families had to face economic problems and, as a consequence, the expected rise in the number of children signing up in early-childhood education structures did not take place. To make sure that the children would continue to attend the kindergartens, these could not increase the fees and for that reason the incoming money was insufficient for paying construction works, teachers trainings and didactical material for educational activities. The role that the MoE held was pure technical supervision, as it provided no material or financial support to the kindergartens. The only step taken in favour of the kindergartens was the release of licenses to the majority of the existing kindergartens, even the criteria were not met, so as to encourage owners to improve the premises and services provided. In spite of this measure, there was still the problem that every year the kindergartens had to apply for license renewal and, if no improvements had been achieved during the year, the MoE would not grant it.

As for the support given by above-mentioned local organizations, professionals in the field of early-childhood education, they have stopped their programmes for four years now, because they are lacking financial resources and suffering from the restrictions imposed by Israel to their movements from Jerusalem to the Gaza Strip or the West Bank. Yet, early-childhood education is still an important issue, as the primary schools demand that children, who want to enter the first class, be already able to read and write. During the last months, since February 2006, the financial crisis, that hit the Palestinian Territories and its entire population, had obvious repercussions also on early-childhood education. CRIC carried out an assessment in 26 kindergartens, located in Beit Lahia, Beit Hanoun, Jabalia, Shejahiya and Zaitoun (two quarters in Gaza City East), Khan Younis and Rafah. The results provided tell us that, due to this crisis, the children went to the kindergarten without snacks, drinks or pocket

³ Ms. Fawzeya Joudeh

⁴ Mr. Sabry

money (2 or 3 NIS that the children usually get to buy crisps or other kinds of snacks). Furthermore, most of the children that used transportation facilities offered by the kindergartens, began to go on foot or stopped attending the kindergarten at all.

From March 2006, almost half of the total number of children couldn't pay the monthly fees any more; some of them paid only part of it. The directors kept the children nonetheless, because the families promised to pay off their debts as soon as the salaries were paid. As a consequence, from March 2006 many teachers don't receive a whole salary and some of them only get a very small part of it. Nevertheless, almost all teachers of the assessed kindergartens are still employed and go to work; only three teachers in the South Gaza Strip resigned their job, as they could no longer afford to pay the transport to their working place.

When the Israeli military attack began on the 28th of June 2006, seven kindergartens in the North Gaza Strip, where a prolonged invasion took place, suffered heavy structural damages due to military occupation of the premises or the launch of rockets or missiles, that hit the buildings themselves or the adjacent houses or other structures in the neighbourhood.

KINDERGARTENS IN THE GAZA STRIP

In the Gaza Strip there are 230 licensed kindergartens, distributed as follows: 18% in the north, 36% in Gaza City, 27% in the centre including the municipality of Khan Younis, 19% in the south.⁵ In 2005, CRIC produced an assessment of the kindergartens in the following intervention areas⁶: North Gaza Strip (Beit Hanoun, Beit Lahia, Jabalia), two districts in Gaza City (Shejahiya, Zaitoun), and South Gaza Strip (Khan Younis, Rafah)⁷.

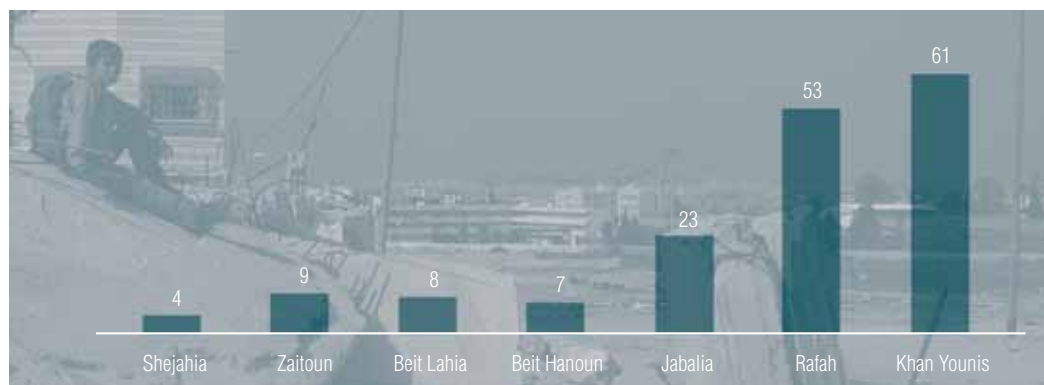
In the above-mentioned assessed areas, we visited 165 kindergartens (KGs): 51 in the northern area, and 114 in the southern area, of which are 146 with license and 19 without license. KGs are organized either as private structures run by private owners, for whom KGs represent profit activities, or they are linked to secular or religious associations generally run as non-profit structures, which are mainly involved in social and educational issues. Among all KGs assessed, 98 are private and 67 are linked

⁵ *Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2005. data regarding non licensed kindergartens are not available.*

⁶ *The early childhood educational sector, in North Gaza Strip (Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun e Jabaliya), Gaza City (Shejahiya and Zaitoun) and South Gaza Strip (Rafah e Khan Younis). Assessment report. by CRIC, Dominique Louise Sbardella, May, 2005*

⁷ *From now on we will refer to the North of Gaza Strip (Beit Hanoun, Beit Lahia, Jabalia) and the two districts of Gaza city (Shejahiya, Zaitoun) as North area, meanwhile, as for the South of Gaza Strip (Khan Younis, Rafah) as South area.*

Chart 1 - Location of KGs (number of KGs)



to a secular or religious association. 40% of the KGs have been founded before 1995, 42% between 1996 and 2000, and 18% between 2001 and 2005. The trend of attendance has decreased in the last three years: the average number of children attending was 133 in 2002-2003, 131 in 2003-2004, and 117 in 2004-2005. Considering

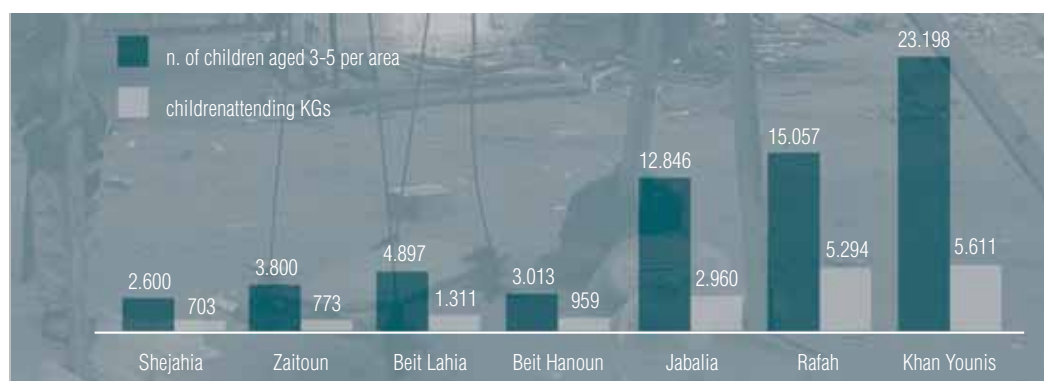
that the birth rate increased since 1998⁸, we can assume that the falling trend is due to the deterioration of the families' economic conditions and the fact that they aren't able to pay the fees and to grant early-childhood education to their children.

The number of KGs working in the targeted areas is very low and does not cover the real need. In the assessed areas 65,411 children aged 3 to 5 live.⁹

⁸ PCBS, *Population in the Palestinian Territory, 1997-2015*

⁹ PNA, *Home Ministry, Computer section.*

Chart 3a - KG attendance by children age and location



According to our estimates, only 27% of the 3 to 5 years-old children attend KGs. There are certainly several reasons for such a low attendance of children to early-childhood schools, but according to our knowledge, the main reasons can be found in the severe economic conditions, that the families in the Gaza Strip have to face every day. Yet, most Palestinian families consider education a decisive and important factor in their children's future, as it is believed the only possible means to grant the possibility to find a respectable job, which guarantees better economic conditions and, even more important, a higher social status in the community.

Thanks to the importance given to education by Palestinian families, we believe that the families find mechanisms to cope with the economic difficulties they have to face, in order to grant education to their children.

The high number of children in each family, pushes them to make strategic decisions like not to enrol all children at kindergarten, but only those who are considered more successful or those parents have placed more expectations on. Furthermore, parents often decide to register their children only to the pre-school class, avoiding the first years foreseen for 3 and 4 year-old children. Parents consider early-childhood education an important step to prepare their children for primary school. This fact also represents the reality of the primary-education sector in Palestine, where children are usually already able to read and write when they start primary school, and where the teaching program takes it for granted that the children are already alphabetized.

According to our estimates, KGs have an average of 2.5 pre-school classes for children aged 5, attended by 62.5% of registered children, and 1.5 classes for children aged from 3 to 4 and attended by the 37.5% of the registered children. The number of children born in the year 1999 is 19,290. The 62.5% of the children attending the KGs is 10,085 that represents 52% of the total population born in 1999. Meanwhile, the number of children born in the years 2000-2001 is 40,453, the 37.5% of children attending KGs is 6,051, therefore, only 15% of the children aged 3 to 4 attend early-childhood education.

KGs, linked to associations and private owners and aware of such problematic, have taken measures in support of those families who face economic difficulties. Generally, registration fees are calculated according to the capacities of the population involved, that is the families who live near the KGs. Almost all KGs accept

¹⁰ Such data do not include children from the districts of Shejahiya and Zaitoun, not available because they are in the statistics regarding Gaza City.

also few children who cannot pay the fee; and the majority of the KGs support families with more than one child in pre-school age by asking the payment of the monthly fee for only two of the brothers or sisters.

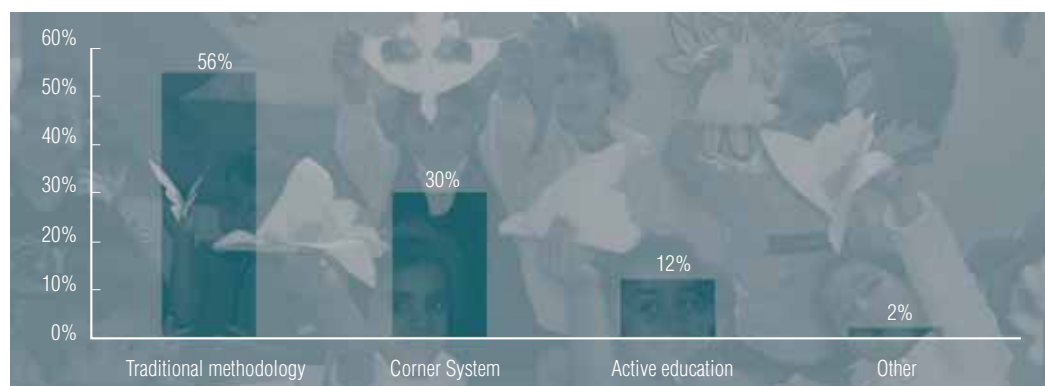
A problematic common to all kindergartens is the lack of professionally skilled teachers. The majority of KG teachers are young girls freshly graduated from secondary school, who have no specific background on educational or pedagogical subjects. The professional role of the teachers is not considered adequately, neither by the society nor by the authorities. Here in Palestine, the kindergarten teachers are called “murabbiya”, that means ‘care giver’; a term used for anyone who takes care of a child, without referring to any responsibility in the education and development of the child. In fact, teachers are usually young girls that do this job while awaiting the opportunity of a better job. It often happens that they abandon their job when they get married or when their families ask them to spend more time at home to look after the household. Also the society, not being aware of the important role played by KG teachers in the child’s development, doesn’t consider this job as a prestigious one. Furthermore, the labour legislation does not recognize the professional role, because, even if there is a clear legislation that protects primary-school teachers by a collective agreement, the same does not apply to KG teachers.

The lack of professionally skilled kindergarten personnel is a known problem by the MoE: “As for the Ministry’s development plans in kindergartens: we aim to develop the performance of kindergarten educators by providing them with intensive training courses and workshops in order to enable them to better work and perform within the kindergarten, and how to deal with the child. [...]”

New workshops have been conducted for child educators on how to deal with child psychology, and how to choose food and on how to create puppets, as well as providing the child with a joyful atmosphere. Also on the child’s health conduct, such as how he should protect himself from disease and how to cross the street and protect himself from accidents inside the home (fire, electricity, drugs...etc), and personal hygiene.”

Several reasons, like the lack of a national curriculum, not professionally skilled personnel, and the lack of professional trainers on early-childhood education, had important repercussions on the teaching methodology used in the kindergartens. Three teaching approaches are the most widespread in the Gaza Strip: the traditional methodology, the corner system and the active education.

Chart 9 - Educative methodology applied by KGs (percentage of KGs)



More than half of the assessed KGs assessed apply a “traditional educative” methodology, that is a didactic approach exclusively focused on schooling: reading, writing, basic notions of mathematics and shared social behaviour. The objectives are pursued by front lessons without the support of educational tools. Children are forced to listen to the teacher, to focus their attention on the blackboard and to repeat what the teacher says.

30% of the KGs use the “corner system” methodology, which is an educative approach that gives particular importance to the arrangement of the space according to specific educative purposes.

12% of the KGs apply the “active education” methodology. In the local context, active education stands for a method that is basically identified by three elements: educational tools used to integrate the lessons; the importance of playing; the importance of child’s capacity to express himself and to be creative.

But if we consider factors like active participation, the importance of playing and drawing, the teacher’s attention towards the child’s personal characteristics, we find that these are generally neglected in most kindergartens, no matter the method used. The classrooms are usually small, overcrowded, poorly furnished and not decorated. Children sit in lines behind tables without space to move; to reach the door or the blackboard, they must climb over tables and other children. In these conditions it appears difficult to carry out activities which involve the children; there is no evidence of manual activities done by children, only 3% of the assessed kindergartens exhibit

children drawings on the walls, or any other tool used to integrate front lessons. We have investigated how long the kindergartens dedicate to free playing – non-organized or self-organized games, during which teachers do not play a role of guidance – and to educative playing – games organized by the teachers with an educative purpose. When integrated into an educative framework, such activities become an effective means of “active education”.

Time dedicated to playing activities	KGs carrying out FREE PLAYING activities	KGs carrying out EDUCATIVE PLAYING activities
Daily between 15 to 45 minutes	48%	16%
Daily between 45 to 90 minutes	14%	4%
A few days per week from 15 to 45 minutes	22%	30%
A few days per week from 45 to 90 minutes	12%	10%
Occasionally from 15 to 45 minutes	0%	12%
Occasionally from 45 to 90 minutes	0%	2%
Never	4%	27%

Playing is essential in the psychosocial development of the child, yet, less than 50% of the KGs dedicated only 21% of the time spent in the KG to free playing every day. Such data mainly refer to the break between lessons when children leave their classroom to play in the garden, often considered as a spare time during which teachers can take a break from their role of educators. Furthermore, only 30% of the KGs foresees such activity few times a week and for a period of time that lasts from 15 to 45 minutes, which represents 7% of the total time spent in the KG per week.

Another activity that supports and stimulates the children’s cognitive development is drawing. The majority of the KGs foresee such activity once a week or several times a week.

Time dedicated to drawing	All KGs
Once a month	4%
Once a week	39%
A few times a week	39%
Every day	14%
Never	4%

Several reasons account for the high percentage of KGs that don't dedicate enough time to educative/creative activities; lack of didactic equipment, like paper, pencils, colours, adhesive tape, scissors, etc., toys among them. It is a common characteristic in all kindergartens.

As for the conditions of the premises, all assessed KGs need rehabilitation/repair works, as none of them have premises meeting all the criteria requested by the MoE.

The criteria requested for indoor areas are the following:

- The kindergarten must be built on the ground floor and include one floor only;
- Internal walls must be 2.80 meter high;
- Classrooms dimensions must be between 20 and 40 m²;
- Floors must be paved with tiles;
- Walls must be painted with light colours;
- KGs must be aired and illuminated inside;
- Windows must be at least 1/6 of the wall;
- One sanitary unit must be available every 30 children.

As for the ceilings, the MoE requests 2.80 m high walls. A common characteristic in KGs is the presence of laminated ceilings which do not protect the room from heat and humidity. Generally in such cases it is suggested to build a double roof in order to isolate the room from the laminate and avoid the problems above.

Classrooms must be properly aired and illuminated through windows spanning 1/6 of the wall. Generally illumination and aeration are granted in each classroom. Nevertheless, in most cases windows do not have glass panes but only plastic shutters. In such cases windows are generally closed in order to protect the room from the cold or to prevent strangers from looking into the class room, therefore preventing both illumination and aeration.

The MoE requests one sanitary unit every 30 children attending the kindergarten. Usually it also recommends indoor and outdoor bathrooms, so as to keep the indoor space free from sand. Only 53% of the assessed KGs have internal bathrooms, which usually are not aired at all. Airing the bathrooms is a very important issue. KGs are attended by an average of 134 children, that use the sanitary premises more than one time a day. Most KGs do not have a cleaning person, and it is usually the teachers' duty to clean at the end of the working day. The results of the collected data say that 17% of the indoor bathrooms do not guarantee enough airing. Furthermore, in 13% of the KGs with internal bathrooms, the sanitary fittings do not work properly.

The criteria for outdoor areas are the following:

- The garden must be aired and sunny with space for outdoor games and sand;
- Each garden must have a sunshade roof, covering at least 25% of the external space;
- The outdoor garden must not present obstacles dangerous for children, and it must be encircled in the kindergarten structure.

These criteria are generally met by most of the kindergartens.

Cric in palestine

Emergency interventions in the early-childhood education sector

Let us take this opportunity to recapture our instinct to nourish and protect children.

Let us transform our outrage into concrete action.

Our children have a right to peace.

Peace is every child's right.

Graca Machel

The impact of Armed Conflict on Children (2000)

CRIC began to work with kindergartens in the Gaza Strip in 1995, right when the first Intifada ended and at the beginning of what all Palestinians believed to be the end of the conflict and the occupation. Like every country after a war, Palestine was engaged in rebuilding its public and social services. Also the kindergartens, in those years, underwent a big change, both conceptual and structural. Once considered simple baby-parking places, they began to be thought of as early-childhood education structures. Many Palestinian organizations, professionals in the field of child education, began to work with kindergartens so as to improve the teachers' professional skills, help the children overcome traumas due to the experienced violence, and strengthen the relationships between the family members.

To avoid overlapping, CRIC decided to intervene by responding to those needs, which had not yet been faced, or by supporting the already existing organizations engaged in child education.

From 1995 to 2001, CRIC worked with 96 kindergartens in the South Gaza Strip (Rafah, Khan Younis and Mawasy) and 1 kindergarten in the Bedouin village of Umm Al Nasser in the North Gaza Strip (Beit Lahia). The 97 kindergartens received the following support:

Cric in palestine Emergency interventions in the early-childhood education sector

Description	Number of Beneficiaries
Training on educational methodologies	36 kindergartens
Educational tools	97 kindergartens
Equipment	57 kindergartens
Rehabilitation works	41 kindergartens
Health screening	74 kindergartens
Food parcels	64 kindergartens
Sanitation and disinfection campaigns	1 kindergartens (incl. surrounding area)
Workshops for families on Health and Hygiene	34 kindergartens - 550 families
Workshops for teachers on Health and Hygiene	20 kindergartens
Theatre Performance	1 kindergarten

When the second Intifada erupted, the situation of villages in specific areas and refugee camps changed drastically. All areas near the Israeli settlements were completely sealed off and the Palestinian residents were not allowed to exit these areas without a special permit, thus living completely isolated from the rest of the Gaza Strip for over five years.

As mentioned before, Israel started a violent and oppressive attack especially in areas around the settlements, by installing new pass roads and military posts. At a certain point, a newly installed checkpoint at the entrance of Khan Younis cut the Gaza Strip into two parts and Salahadin Road, which connects the North Gaza Strip to the south – from Erez crossing to Rafah terminal –, was closed and declared off limits. These restrictions to movement caused serious financial losses and increased poverty. Furthermore, Beit Lahia, Beit Hanoun, Shejahiya, Zaitoun, Nusseirat, Deir Al Balah, Khan Younis and Rafah became theatres of continuous invasions, destructions and killings of innocent people.

Once again, the Khan Younis and Rafah refugee camps were the most affected areas. Israel adopted the strategy of levelling and shelling the territory around the settlements even if there were houses or other buildings. From September 2000 to August 2006, 2.114 homes were totally demolished and 1.414 homes were partially destroyed. In addition, several watchtowers were erected and checkpoints established, snipers shot at people and buildings thus making these areas very dangerous.

The investigation into the economic conditions of 1.114 families whose children attend kindergartens in Rafah and Khan Younis resulted in the following: the families are composed on an average of 7 members, with slight differences from area to area;

in 79% of the families only one member works, generally the father, and in only 1% of the assessed families more than one member is employed; 44% of the working population has a permanent job, mainly in the PNA; the highest percentage is registered in rural areas, the lowest is in urban areas; 27% of the working population has only occasional jobs, mainly as daily workers, and 8% has a seasonal job; 58% of the children in the assessed families were aged from 0 to 5. 96% of the children from 6 to 16 attend school; 10% of 1.114 families live under the poverty line, and 78% under the subsistence poverty line; only 13% of the assessed families live over the poverty line. According to UNRWA, 32.135 families live in this area. From the beginning of the second Intifada, 841 persons have died as a consequence of the conflict, of which 183 were children under 18 years.

From May to September 2001, an in-depth assessment of the children's psychological conditions was carried out. The direct contact with the children and their families during the implementation of the preceding projects made it possible for the CRIC staff to evaluate the necessity of an intervention that would bring not only a material relief to these children and their families, but also psychological support, as these people were living in a dramatically precarious situation in which bombing, shelling, violence, and displacement occurred continuously and poverty was a steady condition: these represent the causes of evident trauma and discomfort especially among children. The assessment was also based on surveys carried out during the last year by two association partners: the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP) and the Al-Hanan Association for Mother and Child. Contacts with local institutions like the Ministry of Social Affairs Department of Khan Younis, complete the picture from a statistic and medical viewpoint.

¹ According to the data of the World Bank, families living with 2,1 \$ per day per each family member fall under the poverty line, and families living with 1,6 \$ fall under the subsistence poverty line. The numbers of dependant family members and the monthly earning for each family were collected and such base line percentages were calculated.

The assessment report gives the following situation:

"The worsening of the political crisis in Gaza Strip in the past months brought the Israeli-Palestinian tension to increase the intensity of the conflict in the area. Every day open fire fighting, house demolitions or air strikes are reported to be taking place at different locations in the Gaza Strip and especially in the area of Rafah and Khan Younis. Violence has reached a level unprecedented in the past for many years. Distrust, the fear of others and the fear for one's own life and future, in addition to the resentment that normally appear in conflicts are leading on the one hand to a huge sense of discomfort, resignation, desperation of

all the population and on the other hand even to a radical polarisation of political parties and movements. In addition to this, the siege adopted by Israel on the Territories under control of the Palestinian National Authority is strangling the weak economy of the Palestinian families, aggravating the sense of precariousness and social crisis.”

In this situation of threatening, fear and impoverishment, children were the most vulnerable part of the society. In areas like Rafah and Khan Younis, among the most targeted by military actions, the continuous feeling of fear that the children suffered, generated various psychological and social problems: i.e. several cases of psychological disorder like incontinency, dyslexia, drowsiness, absent-mindedness, aggressiveness, and serious social discomfort.

During this crisis, kindergartens in the southern Gaza districts recorded a 5% dropout rate, mainly due to the economic crisis that affected people all over Palestine. To face this dropout, the kindergartens reduced their attendance fees from 25-30 NIS to 15 NIS (about ? 3,86) a month per capita. Many hardship case families could not even afford to pay such a low amount of money, moreover the fee was insufficient to cover the kindergarten's running costs and the maintenance of the structure, the staff and the didactic equipment became increasingly urgent and difficult.

From a survey conducted by the Benevolent Association for Mother and Child “Al –Hanan”, in which 74 kindergartens in Rafah and Khan Younis were analysed, it became evident that a high percentage of children (70%) showed signs of behaviour disorder:

- 40% fear
- 35% over excitement and aggressiveness
- 12% difficulties in learning and personality-related problems
- 8% incontinence
- 5% sleepiness

Furthermore, the Gaza Community Mental Health Program carried out a survey on the psychological effects that Israeli bombardments had on the civilian population in the Gaza Strip during the past one and a half years. The study aimed to assess the trauma magnitude especially among those women and children whose houses had been bombed.²

The most important results of this study are:

- Increase in exposure to trauma that led to an increase in the rate of Post Traumatic Syndrome Disease (PTSD)³:
 - 54.6% of the children started to develop acute PTSD symptoms

² Abstract of studies conducted by Gaza Community Mental Health Programme Research Centre.

³ The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is the most pathologic response to trauma characterised by a failure of the person in recovering from mental trauma. The treatment of this disorder consists in actions for the recollection of the trauma, monitoring the hyperarousal symptoms.

- 34.5% of the children started to develop medium PTSD symptoms
- 9.2% of the children started to develop light PTSD symptoms

In addition to the increase in PTSD symptoms, it was discovered that a 13.3% of the children suffered from a sharp increase in mental and behavioural problems like sleep disorders, hyperactivity, speech disorders, lack of concentration, aggressive behaviour etc.

- Increase of psychological problems among the mothers:
 - 19.7% suffered from somatic symptoms
 - 24.6% suffered from depression
 - 16.6% suffered from anxiety
 - 11.8% suffered from phobia
 - 11.2% suffered from psychotic symptoms and psychosis

The study found a strong proportional relationship between the mental health of mothers and their children in crisis situations, in which an increase in a mother's psychological problems often indicated an increase in her children's problems.

During these years of conflict, not only infrastructures and premises had been destroyed but also, and even worse, the worldwide recognised fundamental role of the family, that is to take care of the beloved one's and in particular of the children.

In 2002, CRIC implemented a project to support the most vulnerable Palestinian families with children who suffered from the psychological consequences of the conflict in the affected areas of Rafah and Khan Younis. The project's aim was to improve the parents' and educators' capabilities of coping with the dynamics of stress and trauma in their children and pupils. The intervention focused both on the psychological and the educational sphere so as to provide a comprehensive service. 20 kindergartens were selected in which 2.624 children (aged from 4 to 6) and 103 teachers benefited from the project.

The Gaza Community Mental Health Program implemented a teachers' training cycle on "How to Recognize, Identify and Deal with Children Suffering of Fear Due to the Escalation of the Conflict". The training aimed at equipping inadequately prepared or inexperienced teachers with the necessary theoretical instruments for recognizing and identifying the atypical behaviours of children who suffer from fear due to the escalating conflict. The training was to improve the comprehension of children's mental health in their immediate social environment.

By the Al Hanan Association for Mother and Child, the kindergartens were introduced to a new teaching methodology, i.e. the corner system, which foresees the child's direct involvement in the learning process and trains the child to avoid an episodic perception of the reality by considering various viewpoints and the overall meaning of a specific situation.

Both local partner organisations held meetings with the parents in which they focused on psychological issues in order to help parents to deal with their children during a crisis.

The Tuffah Educational Development Centre implemented a teachers' training cycle on "The Puppets and the Sewing Machine", based on the assumption that the children assisting to a theatre performance in the kindergarten participate actively in a representation of the reality and imaginary situations having a therapeutic purpose and educating in peace and inter-culture. The teachers learnt new ways to narrate and illustrate the story by choosing the best fitting subject according to the aims (for example how to stimulate the children's linguistic skills and likeable behaviour manners, how to help the children to relive psychological and social problems which they are exposed to).

The EducAid Onlus, an Italian CRIC partner in the implementation of this project, held two training cycles on "Psychomotor Activities" and on "Cooperative Games and the Parachute". The purpose of the first course was to present and experiment the trolley for psychomotor activities. The teachers learnt how to use the wooden trolley, equipped with balls, ropes, circles, scarves, sticks, drums, and a triangle, for the development of the children's knowledge skills like concentration, observation, memory, calculation, listening, coordination and control of body movements, equilibrium and rhythm.

As far as the training on cooperative games is concerned, the assumption of the course was that there is no winner at the end and that the final goal is achieved by cooperation. Within the project, great importance was given to playing so as to help the children overcome stress and trauma. In cooperation with the partner Al Amal Rehabilitation Society, a mobile unit, called Sindibad play-bus, was established for experimenting new activities in kindergartens.

The play-bus spent a whole day in each kindergarten. The operators' team worked in two groups, "Bessan" and "Alah Ed Din", involving the children in two different main activities: playing and creating. Cooperative games and sport competitions belonged to the first group, while drawing, collage making, chalk modelling and other creative activities were part of the second group.

At the end of the project, the GCMHP established a new program for the psychological support of preschool-aged children, so as to continue the work of the concluded project.

In the meantime, CRIC focused its strategy on trauma prevention or trauma intensification by developing resilience in the early-childhood education sector. By intervening on and directly involving parents, educators, groups of couples and local communities, which are the main mediators in the children's development process, it was possible to reach preschool-aged children and achieve changes in the whole context and implement a preventive approach to trauma.

Three projects were implemented in 2003, 2004, and 2005, involving 6.728 children, 299 teachers, and 3.037 parents. To reach the most vulnerable, needy, indigent preschool-aged children, 66 kindergartens were identified in the most depressed Gaza Strip areas, in which the inhabitants suffered very bad socio-economic conditions and insecurity due to ongoing Israeli military operations. The interventions took place in the North Gaza Strip (Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun, Jabaliya), in Gaza City (Shejahiya and Zaitoun) and in the South Gaza Strip (Rafah and Khan Younis).

The kindergartens' environments were reorganized so as to transform them into friendly, protective, and safe places.

The premises were rehabilitated and the classrooms were refurnished and equipped adequately. The educative methodology applied was modified and playing became a primary tool for teaching and learning. The educators were trained in the "active learning" methodology, and ad hoc workshops were held on what resilience is and how activities can be carried out with children in order to strengthen their capability to think about life and adversities in a positive way.

Thanks to the play-bus activities, the parents were furthermore involved in playing and recreational activities together with their children.

Through the projects implemented, kindergartens became a place where children could feel free to practice and satisfy their curiosity and live and experience positive relationships.

Socio educational support to palestinian children Emergency intervention in the Gaza strip

BACKGROUND: THE FAMILY AND THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SECTOR

In Palestine, life has an exceptional significance, because it is considered a gift from God. Therefore, a baby's birth is always a big event as it is the reason for joy and happiness. The traditional words addressed to a mother or father are: "I wish you that your life will be long enough to bring up your child". This kind of saying takes up an even stronger significance, if we consider the reality in Palestine, where the population lives under occupation since 1948 and where life is constantly threatened and impossible to protect. From this perspective, the newborns are perceived as a means for granting the continuity of the Palestinian people, keeping alive the ethnic group and the Palestinian cause.

In Palestine, the most important social institution is the family. It is considered the fundamental basis for the identity and status of an individual. All members are part of a big unit, which is the extended family called "El Hamula". The families follow the paternal line; membership boundaries are drawn along the male descendants' lines. The continuity of the Hamula is essential and the family's power and importance are directly related to the number of males in it. Therefore, the birth of each child, and in particular boys, assumes great importance for the family, both in terms of continuity and power. The marriage of a Palestinian woman and a subsequent pregnancy give her female status social recognition, because they mark the passage from adolescence to adulthood and also prove that she can give birth to a child, which is considered the core aim in the life of each adult. For the father, too, the birth of every child increases social recognition, which not only marks his adulthood but also affirms his contribution to the continuity of the Hamula and of the Palestinian cause.

To better understand the relationship between a child and his parents, eight families were interviewed, that is two from the Jabaliya village in the North Gaza Strip, four from Gaza City, and two from Khan Younis in the South Gaza Strip. The interviewed people gave distinct answers to the questions. The differences did neither depend from

the place in which the people live – north, centre, or south – nor from their economic situation, but from their personal education. During the interviews, the fathers preferred their wives to answer saying that generally it is these who spend most of the time with their children, even if the social and cultural customs hold the fathers responsible for the education and social behaviour of their children. This is because the children automatically become members of the father's and not of the mother's family.

The members of a Hamula usually live all together in the same building, quarter, or area. When the daughters get married, they go to live in their husband's home, whereas the sons and their families live all together in their grandfather's home. The members in an extended family share all daily activities. The women take care of the house and the children and the men go to work. On leisure time, holidays and special events, the members of the extended family usually meet and spend their time together. Usually only men have relationships or friendships with people who are not relatives. The women have few occasions to meet other women outside the family and build friendships with them. They leave their home only for the time necessary to carry out their tasks, or if they have a valid reason, like an appointment at the doctor's, a visit at the kindergarten, lessons at the university or work. In any other occasion, women are always accompanied by husbands or, if unmarried, by other family members.

The mothers were asked what "educating their child" meant to them and the majority of them answered to correct their children's behaviour instead of supporting and guiding them through a process of development, understanding, acknowledgement and discovery. Correction is foreseen as a preventive measure so as to avoid that a child behaves in a socially unacceptable manner. As mentioned above, a child represents always the Hamula in the society and all actions will fall back on the extended family; each member is responsible for the extended family's social recognition and reputation and conversely the reputation of the Hamula identifies the individual in the community. Therefore, bringing up of the children is a very important matter that involves directly the extended family altogether. As a rule, the family net helps the parents in taking care of the youngest. Usually, the children spend most time of the day playing and interacting with their brothers and sisters or with their cousins. None of the interviewed families allowed their children to spend some time outside the home. This is mainly because the families do not approve of their children spending time with other children in the neighbourhood. If they do not know their families they could give a bad example, teach them bad behaviour like cursing, lying, not respecting others, or even worse, involving them in child gangs who play dangerous games like throwing

stones at the Israeli soldiers. Preventing children from going outdoor is also a protective measure against unpredictable perils, like military attacks and shootings.

Traditionally, the parents are in charge of the child's education; nonetheless, generally the father is held responsible and accountable for his children's actions and conduct, even if already grown up. This is the reason why the father intervenes as soon as the mother mentions the problem, even if they share the responsibility of education. In many families, the husband is the only person who is allowed to reprimand and punish the children. The mothers said that their main role is to comfort the children after a quarrel with their father or their friends, and that the most important ability of a parent is to be able to solve a conflict.

Another important task of a parent is to reassure the children when traumatic events occur like bombings, incursions, internal fights and when children are scared and feel threatened. Reprimands and physical punishments are generally used and considered necessary. When parents want to correct their children's behaviour, they use their authority to gain more attention. By frightening them they prevent that the children repeat the wrong behaviour. Only one mother said they never hit their children, and only two families confirmed that they prefer talking with their children instead of using force. There is the opinion that children are not able to understand dialogues or conversations until they reach the age of 11 or 12. In particular small children, from 3 to 6, are not questioned and the words or sentences they pronounce are usually perceived as being funny or simple imitations of someone else and not the expression of the children's thoughts. In this way, the child's self-intention and determination is not recognized. When the mothers were asked, how a good child should be, all of them answered that it should be quiet.

The interactions among children have been investigated, too, mainly through direct observation.

As the mothers explained in the interviews, the children spend most of their time at home and they are not allowed to leave the house, unless there are accompanied by a family member. At home they play with the other children of the family. Boys often play wargames pretending to be Palestinian fighters and the girls like to pretend to be brides and housewives. Very little boys and girls play together and feel no difference in gender. The cultural or religious customs do not divide them, but their specific interests and the games they play. Girls are taught to behave in a composed manner, while boys can express all their instincts and often show themselves aggressive to others.

The youngest children are usually left out of the games, so they start to play alone using their imagination and random things they find around. When they are involved

in the games, the oldest children give them a precise and well-described role, which usually is not linked to an initiative or active role of the child in the game. Fights among children are normal. Especially the younger children do not want to share their toys with the elder ones or they get very upset when they are not allowed to participate in a game. When this happens, they usually go to the mother and tell her what is going on and ask for comfort. In other cases, they go to the oldest brothers asking to start a baby-gang fight with the other groups.

The first time that a child shares the company of children who do not belong to the family, is when he or she starts to attend kindergarten, which is generally considered a place where the child is supported in developing social and pro-social skills, creativity, manual and motor skills. Yet, especially in the Gaza Strip people believe that the main concern and duty of early-childhood education is to guarantee that the children acquire basic school skills. The highest priority in a kindergarten is given to didactic learning, especially of the Arab language and mathematics, by almost all parents and teachers. Therefore, the daily program rotates around the teaching of contents without taking into account the different stages in the child's development and without involving the child in the learning process. Children are like passive recipients who have only to memorize. The educational environment is usually short of educative tools, toys, and surfaces. Grey walls, inadequate furniture, and overcrowded small rooms are typical. Most of the teachers are young girls without a specific preparation in pedagogical issues. Lack of a professional background, unawareness of the children's needs and missing knowledge on how to deal with children result in stress, missing motivation, loss of control, punishment and screaming. The children do not enjoy the kindergarten because they get bored and often they try to run out into the garden or go back home.

In 2005, the American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) evaluated the quality of pre-school education in the Gaza Strip¹. They investigated into the teachers' and parents' opinion on pre-school objectives by focusing on social, cognitive, emotional-psychological, and motor skills. It turned out that the teachers ranked cognitive objectives first (30.5%), social objectives second (29%), emotional objectives third (28.2%) and motor-skill objectives the fourth (12.3%). On the other hand, the parents believed that social objectives come before cognitive objectives (40.8% and

¹ *Anera American near east refugee aid final report An Evaluation of the Quality of Preschool Education in the Gaza Strip Part of the Project for Improvement of the Quality of Preschool Education in the Gaza Strip Prepared by The Consultative Team of the Community Service and Continuing Education Deanship of the Islamic University of Gaza Submitted to AMERICAN NEAR EAST REFUGEE AID August 2005*

31.7%). The emotional objectives took the third place of importance (only 15.7%) and the motor-skills objectives came last (11.9%). The parents and teachers intend the cognitive objectives as the importance of teaching the basics of reading, writing, and maths, intellectual abilities, different skills and talents, and linguistic skills. Teachers perceive social objectives as good child upbringing, teaching moral values and good manners like respect, responsibility, discipline, tidiness, patriotism, cooperation, and social integration with others. Parents perceive social objectives as a preparation for primary school, teaching good manners (respect, discipline, tidiness, love of others, etc.), religious conduct, sharing, integration with peers, and communicative skills. On the contrary, emotional or psychological objectives for teachers are activities aiming to prepare a child for school and for the separation from the parents and to mitigate some of the childhood problems, like introversion, shyness, aggressiveness, etc. For parents it means to prepare the child psychologically for school and strengthen his or her personality.

From a research carried out by CRIC and EducAid in 2005, in which Mr. Giacomo Anastasi analysed the early-childhood educational context, a distressful lack of attention emerged in teachers and parents for certain fundamental features of the social-cognitive and social-affective development in pre-school children.

Almost all children showed poor interaction capacity and weak social skills. Having few possibilities of playing and expressive activities, children are not stimulated to be creative and to express themselves freely. There are only few opportunities to acquire and exercise communicative and linguistic skills. Consequently, nearly all children had great difficulties in communicating and speaking, especially when asked to intervene individually. Their socialisation and co-operation skills were also weak, as the children rarely have the opportunity to play, actively interact or carry out tasks that require participation and co-operative skills. Attitudes like passivity, inhibition, and isolation were also widespread. Hyperactive or aggressive behaviours were revealed, too, but not on those levels perceived by the teachers or parents. Furthermore, the child sees the teachers not as an extension of the maternal figure, to refer to and to attach oneself for reassurance, but as an adult who gives orders and “represses” desires.

As far as the parents are concerned, most of them did not possess sufficient awareness of the child’s needs for his or her affective-cognitive development. Hiding behind the “justification” of stress due to the social-political and economical difficulties, very often little attention was paid to the child’s natural rhythms and develop-

ment processes and scarce interest was given to the importance of a friendly and warm atmosphere expressly created for the child.

Parents believe that their role as educators and caregivers means to provide their children with the appropriate skills to become well-educated, sociable and good-mannered adults and that protecting them just means avoiding any risk for their physical health, not caring about their emotional well-being. They underestimate or pay little attention to their children's psychological and emotional health. But by doing so, they oversee the effects that the conflict and the occupation have on their children and the fact that children who go through traumatic experiences in a war or a conflict usually develop special needs – for understanding, emotional resolution, security, a sense of belonging and self-worth². This kind of attitude must not be confused with a lack of care or love from the parents to their children, but may be linked to the fact that the adults lived their infancy and childhood during conflict and occupation and they also suffered from fear and sorrow. When talking about the situation of the Palestinian population, everybody always says, "what can we do, this is our life". The priority in Palestine is to stay alive and find the best way to have a good, quiet and "normal" life, by means of a good job, a respected and healthy family and house of their own. Therefore, the emotional fears, that everybody has, are unconsciously hidden to be able to continue life. Problems like hyperactivity, isolation, aggressiveness, lack of attention, withdrawal from school, bedwetting, are interpreted as caprices, lack of discipline or childish requests of attention due to jealousy towards the other brothers and sisters instead of symptoms of stress and trauma. Only few families refer to specialized care centres, as the community severely stigmatises as "crazy" those who resort to professionals like psychologists or psychiatrists. Mental health problems are a matter of shame for the person directly involved and for the whole family, and most people do not know the difference between a consultation and a medical treatment.

Yet, as highlighted by Dr. Cairo Arafat, "children's cognitive and affective processes can be affected by conflict, imprinting emotional, psychological and physiological scars. This may lead to behaviour characterized by distrust and hostility and can prevent the child from developing into a productive and social adult and citizen." Dr. Arafat is convinced that most children are able to cope with low-level risk, although the development and ability to reach their full potential can be jeopardized if risks are accumulated. Unfortunately, Gaza represents an environment in which risks accumulate. Palestinian children

² *Ressler, E., J. Tortorici, and A. Marcelino. (1993). Children in War: A Study for Unicef, UNICEF, New York.*

have witnessed violence, imprisonment and killings of their beloved, the destruction of homes, infrastructures and lands, closures and curfews. They can hardly imagine a different world or a different way of living. Their life experiences have strongly affected the cognitive and affective emotional processes. All researchers denounced the alarming conditions in which the Palestinian children live, by describing all the various traumas they suffered and to which the behavioural and psychological problems have to be connected, like PTSD, anxiety disorder, general mental health problems, conduct disorder, hyperactivity, emotional problems, peers, and pro-social problems.

RESILIENCE AS A STRATEGY TO REDUCE EFFECTS OF STRESS AND TRAUMA

*Historically, those concerned with the situation of children during armed conflicts have focused primarily on their physical vulnerability. But the loss, grief and fear a child experienced must also be taken into account. All phases of emergency and reconstruction assistance programmes should take psychosocial considerations into account.*³

Since 2003, CRIC interventions have focused on supporting pre-school aged children, strengthening or developing resilient capacities in order to prevent or reduce the effects of trauma. Resilience and the reason why CRIC directs its activities towards it, are explained by Mr. Alessandro Latini, EducAid Desk officer for Palestine:

"[...] Resilience can be defined as the process that makes the resumption of a development possible after a traumatic injury and in spite of the presence of adverse circumstances. We must pay attention to the fact that we are speaking about a new development, not the restoration of a previous situation. What is made possible by resilience is the search for a new welfare and not the rebuilding of a lost welfare. Resilience is then a capacity, a personal resource of individuals and of groups.

What social sciences, pedagogy, psychology realized is the possibility of promoting, developing, reinforcing and favouring such resource in the life of people who met traumatic event and situation.

If this is the personal resource, the capacity individuals can appeal to, then education to resilience means facilitate positive processes and relations that help people cross the psychological obstacles produced by traumatizing situations and events.

The choice of such approach is the consequence of "reading", detecting an urgent need in the situation of early childhood in

³ *United Nation study on the impact of armed conflict on children, By Ms. Graca Machel, 1996.*

Gaza Strip. Many areas of Gaza Strip were suffering, and they are in a similar situation today, a heavy military pressure, through checkpoints, bombing, invasions, movement restrictions, and permanent threatens to people's life.

In every traumatic situation is useful to distinguish between two kinds of aspects: those acute, usually detected at the beginning of the traumatic event or at his further sudden worsening, and those chronic, when the situation stabilizes at a defined level of suffering for long periods, during which who has been hit try to organize some form of coping. This distinction is important, because while during the acute phase a timely psychological intervention (post-traumatic psychosis and neurosis therapy), in the chronic phase, in order to develop and support the resilience of traumatized individuals and groups, intervening on the educative dimension and on the dimension of social relations is essential.

Unfortunately, the situation in which the Palestinian population lives has the features of a chronic phase. In order to intervene in the dimension of social and educative relations kindergartens are a good choice: they are places of education, where different relations are experienced and the support of competent authorities is lacking.”

Resiliency is the process through which a person, who experienced a traumatic event, regains confidence in himself/herself and thinks positively about life, finding the strength and hope to overcome difficulties and start again to imagine and elaborate a rewarding and personal track.

According to the Palestinian culture, the first place where children meet with other groups of peers, is when they attend kindergarten. The kindergarten represents also the meeting place between educators and parents, especially mothers, and where they can talk about the children's present and future. It happens often that the people from the neighbourhood come together in the kindergarten to discuss about issues that involve everybody. Also workshops on prevention, child and family protection are held in the kindergarten. For this reason, kindergartens are the most appropriate places for interventions that aim at positive changes regarding resilience in children and at the same time involve caregivers and the surrounding community.

The research carried out by CRIC and EducAid in 2005, investigated the early childhood educational context needs by focusing on the educative environment, the available toys, the materials and teaching aids, the playing activities, the activity program schedule, the play, social and pro-social skills, the linguistic skills, the emotional and affective connections. The results showed that the large majority of the kindergartens analysed are characterized by an acute lack of space in relation to the high number

of children. Generally, the children were seated at desks standing in neat, school-like rows. The spaces were organized so as to satisfy the need to direct the children's attention towards the blackboard and the teacher. This kind of arrangement corresponds to a rigid school planning, that almost always aims at transmitting scholastic skills, thus making it very difficult for the child to develop the fundamental elements of the growth stages, like cooperation, socialization, creativity, manual-motor expression and all the social and pro-social skills contributing to enrich the child's affective-relational environment, the fundamental resources for a more mature elaboration of the trauma that, directly or indirectly, almost all these children had to face.

Toys, materials and teaching aids were under the exclusive responsibility of the teachers, who decided when and how to use them. Usually they were better suited for adults than for children, thus depriving the children of the opportunity to interact with them. In this way, the utility of these instruments as educational "mediators" was lost. The use of materials that stimulate the child's development in combination with movement was not known, and the use of construction toys, dramatization and art was also extremely limited.

The time-tables were also very strict. From 8.00 to 8.30: the day began with prayers. From 8.30 to 10.00: didactic activities: Arabic, mathematics, English. From 10.00 to 10.30: the break was often the only moment when the children could go outside and play in the open air. From 10.30 to 11.00: the last half hour was usually used for drawing, singing, or story telling.

The importance of playing in childhood generally found little interest in the analysed kindergartens and also the teachers were extremely unaware of these topics. The kindergartens dedicated very little space and time to playing, as it was considered a totally unimportant activity. Moreover, the only opportunity to play was often during the break, so as to avoid subtracting time from other activities that were considered more important. In the classroom, the children were sitting at a desk most of the time and no time was used for playing. Activities were generally led by the teachers. These just prompted the children to use the teaching aids, but only showed how to use them now and then. In none of the analysed kindergartens were there any activities aiming at stimulating the child to explore and experiment his or her environment by playing. As far as the "pretended" aspect of playing is concerned which acknowledges the need to facilitate the child in de-contextualising and cognitive decentralization by exploiting the symbolic dimension, again no indications or signs were found in the teachers' activities. The teachers consider outdoor games involving movement only

as actions that enable children to let off steam. During dramatization activities that are part of the playing activities and seldom enough take place, the child was always forced into the role of a spectator who could only watch the teacher and listen to him.

Unfortunately, the social skill expressed in the interaction with peers was completely missing in the kindergartens' educational context. The organization of the premises did not encourage the establishment of relationships among the children. Condemned to immobility behind their desks, the children had always to pay attention to the teachers, who guided them through the lesson and rarely invited them to participate in cooperative activities. It was not surprising to learn that verbal and non-verbal manifestations of aggressiveness were common among the children and that these showed behaviours like taking away objects from each other, refusing to participate, being destructive to other children's activities. And the level of isolation at school of the majority of these children was even higher, as they did not take actively part in the lessons and showed alarming levels of indifference, abulia and passiveness in front of what happened around them. The manifestations of aggressiveness and intolerance, like fear, inhibition, and isolation, indicated a weak capacity of applying cooperative behavioural strategies to negotiate and manage conflicts. Among the children there were almost no forms of self-help and the teachers totally lacked any strategy to encourage those forms of help. Pro-social skills can be an indispensable resource for resilience, especially in an emotionally difficult context like the one existing in the Gaza Strip

One of the most important development phenomena in the pre-school period is the acquisition of efficient linguistic and communicative skills. In the analysed kindergartens we found a low level of communicative interaction among peers. The communication level between children and teachers was also very low, because the teachers tended to give orders, mainly addressing the children as a group. The teachers rarely established individual communicative relations with a child. The teachers did not favour conditions that may encourage the children to develop a whole series of communicative interactions, but on the contrary they often used methods that do not allow communicative interaction. The teachers addressed the child only to ask questions or give orders. Generally, the teachers talked to the class as a whole and the children often answered in a chorus. On rare occasions, when a teacher talked to a single child, it was only to ask a question and not to "converse" with the child.

The study revealed that the emotional-affective relations were underestimated. On the one hand, the teachers made only poor use of adequate feedback to support the chil-

dren in acquiring the emotional-relational skills that are necessary during the development phase; on the other hand, the children's perception of the teachers as a reference person of emotional and affective importance was very weak. The teachers did not possess the capacity to understand the children's needs and to react efficiently to the children's natural need for feeling welcome, comforted and at ease in an emotionally positive environment. Very little attention was paid, for example, to recognizing and respecting the children's natural rhythms. The importance given to the learning goals meant that the emotional and relational needs occupied the second place only and, in most cases, were subordinated to the implementation of strict didactic programs.

Activities were implemented that would bridge the gaps and respond to the needs of the early-childhood educative sector, and, in the families, the communities and the different educative contexts, all necessary conditions were set up for developing the capacity to assist the children in finding a resilient approach to life.

A new educative methodology was proposed to the kindergartens, that implied the active involvement of the children in the learning process; the teachers were trained adequately and a new curriculum was designed. The new program of the daily activities left enough time for all kinds of playing, as this was considered the most important and best way to stimulate the children's development. Playing has a great influence on the later development of the child, as it promotes the integration of the strategies necessary to interact with the reality. In addition, it is perceived as a particular context in which children can develop and exercise behavioural skills to be integrated afterwards in more complex sequences. Particular attention was also given to the children's playing behaviours. When the playing act becomes more sophisticated and complex, this reflects the development of certain cognitive aspects, like speech and the capacity to solve problems.

At the same time, the parents were involved in the children's activities so as to obtain their approval and support, and also, in particular, to increase their participation in the activities. The kindergartens received new furniture in order to create a safe, protective, friendly environment for the children, teachers and parents. A safe, welcoming, friendly environment makes the children feel comfortable and free to express their emotions and make new experiences. This is a fundamental step for developing positive relationships, being ready to learn and enjoying the time in the kindergarten. Finally, a regularly held monthly "playing day" was introduced during which the involvement and active participation of parents, teachers, children and members of the surrounding community was required. These events were organized, implemented, and facilitated by a group of animators that moved from kindergarten to kindergarten

with a bus full of toys and tools for their playing workshops in open-air spaces. As mentioned before, three projects have already been implemented since 2003. During the whole period, all activities were constantly monitored by the CRIC managerial staff and, most importantly, by its educative advisors, who were in charge of instructing the kindergartens' educators while implementing the new activities and educative methodology. Furthermore, regular coordination meetings with all partners were held in order to have a constant flow of feedback information that may enable to lead, modify, and improve the activities by a logic of learning organisation matching the project's overall methodological approach in terms of action learning. For every single project one interim and one final internal evaluation were planned, to be carried out each by the CRIC staff according to the SWAT methodology and, parallelly, by professionals in early-childhood education.

TRAINING TEACHERS IN ACTIVE LEARNING METHODOLOGY

The narration the educator is the subject of, leads those who are being educated to learn the narrated contents mechanically by heart. Even worse, narration makes the pupils "vessels" that the educator has to "fill". The more the vessels get filled by such "deposits", the better the educator. The more compliant to being "filled", the better the pupils. [...] in such a distorted view of education there is no creativity, no transformation, no knowledge. Knowledge exists only in inventing, in re-inventing, in performing a restless, keen, unceasing search in the world, with the world and with fellow men.

Paulo Freire, La pedagogia degli oppressi

The kindergarten teachers and directors were involved in a training on "active learning methodology", implemented by our local partner, the Cana'an Institute of New Pedagogy.⁴ The training saw the participation of personnel of those kindergartens involved in the project. It lasted 9 months, for a total of 150 hours, and was developed in 8 sessions. The training held by Cana'an was described to us by the very trainers as follows: "[...], there are 3 main tracks that we rely upon in our training of kindergarten educators. The first track is the track of social environment and society, in which we focus on the environment in which educators and children live, and how it should be dealt with, as well as with the society surrounding kindergartens. The second track, here, we focus on ed-

⁴ www.canaan.org.ps

educational activities and human relations, and we discuss topics related to education and educational theories and methods, as well as anything related to children's educational behaviour through kindergartens. The third track, this is a major track, relying on activity technologies, in which we discuss games, creative expression, theatre and activities related to enforcing reading and writing in children.

In our operation, we rely upon 4 major principles which are: participation; non-violence; freedom of choice; permissible choice. These are mainly the processes and methods that we rely on in the training. Also, we talk about the issue of administration and organization and the use of areas within kindergartens and within the classroom, which is a very important issue on which we focus with the educators in order for them to ensure that the kindergartens in which they work, however small in size or area, are safe and appropriate for children. We provide them with a service through which they discover society and life using active methods and tools of educating children.

Our philosophy in training relies upon practical implementation of activities that we learn and adopt, where kindergarten educators implement them during training in the training hall, meaning that the kindergarten becomes a mirror of what is happening in training, i.e. that every track and topic in the training are practiced in actuality in order to adjust them for execution inside the kindergarten, whether in terms of place or activities or dealing with the children, because we deal with educators using educational methods and they deal with children likewise.

In the work which we do, we mainly rely on the concept of active learning. Active learning relies on the educator's participation in the activity and the child's participation in choosing the activity that he wishes to engage in.

Active learning concentrates mainly on utilizing the human's five senses, unlike the conventional system which relies on hearing and listening or speech. This system relies on all senses (sight/hearing/speech/practice). By utilizing the five senses, the greater part of active learning is achieved. We also focus on making the educator independently implement the things that she can do with the child in front of the training staff and other educators. These sessions are also used to discuss, amend and develop in order to allow the child to adjust to the most possible degree. Our objective through this program is to operate according to 3 principles, which are: allowing the trainers to obtain knowledge with respect to methods of working with children and how to deal and interconnect with them in this field; presenting to the educators guidelines and values, i.e. how could we change their convictions towards working with children, and the activities that they could work with, such that they would change the conventional method into a creative method that mainly relies upon greater participation of the children in their

creations and production; Meaning how to enable educators to obtain tools for working with the children, how can they work and benefit from active learning as a method of work with children, providing them with a wider area of participation and a wider area of choosing their libraries and acquaintances in this field.

Educators in kindergartens became able to deal with and interconnect with children and became more able to organize activities and to find the activities that best suit the children, and their knowledge of children's needs increased, and they now know how to deal with them with accordance to their pace and not by our own desires. Also, they have experienced a change in their convictions towards children's rights, meaning that we now talk to children about their rights and also implement them together with them by organizing activities that suit them, their convictions and skills, which allows us to discover their skills and creations. Implementation of the children's rights is also represented through a greater respect of a child's freedom of expression, as well as better listening to him and respecting his freedom of choice, such as that the child chooses the activity in which he would like to participate. These are our objectives through the program."

The teachers enjoyed themselves a lot. They learned a new way of participating in a training that required them to become children themselves. In this way, the teachers could imagine how the children would react to a new game, a certain remark, or a gratification, as they had to kneel down and act just as child; crying, playing, understanding, thinking, arguing, laughing like a child. By doing so, the teachers had to overcome their sense of shame and throw themselves into a new adventure. It was obvious that they would also build strong ties between each other and form alliances, experiment complicity, cooperation, and sharing.

But most importantly, the Cana'an training increased the teachers' awareness of the importance of their educative role, of an organized and well thought-out educative methodology, of creativity and imagination for the children's development. At the end, the teachers' self-esteem and their level of consciousness had grown.

"We benefited a lot from the Cana'an Institute course such as new skills and classroom decorations and methods of dealing and we were introduced to a second team from whom we learned many things. Also teaching children with stories and theatre. We saw that children absorb the stories and there are many instances with the children that we treat intentionally, and we found that this method is extremely successful.

Before the course, we were barely aware of these stories and games, but afterwards we learned how to deal with them and teach them properly, and we also learned how

to tell a story to children and to convey it to them for the purpose of correcting bad behaviours, for example. Knowing how to deal with the children and parents, and creating methods. These methods were unknown to us, and we learned them through the institution and learning by play and obtaining experiences, bearing in mind that our kindergarten used to be primitive and did not have things such as workshops and art and how to deal with children. We benefited a lot from this course. [...] We also learned how to draft a study plan and to deal with the parents, where they were previously highly uncooperative. By inviting the parents to the kindergarten and presenting before them the works inside the kindergarten and the new method for teaching and the activities conducted by the kindergarten, this led to a parent's faith in the kindergarten.”⁵

“This training was very beneficial for the educators, and it broke the barrier of fear in children, and the barrier of shyness in educators, and it strengthened relationships between kindergartens, and helped us a lot in dealing with children and solving their problems. We came to know the problems facing the children and familiarized with the child's personality.”⁶

EDUCATION TO RESILIENCE

EducAid⁷ organized and held workshops for teachers in which they explained the concept of resilience by setting up laboratories in the kindergartens so that both educators and children could learn by practice, understand by attempting and discovering, enjoy while learning. The first workshop was held during the first two implemented projects in 2003 and 2004 and it included the creation of pet and plant laboratories. At the end of the projects, the CRIC staff together with the educators made an evaluation of the activities. It emerged that the educators understood well the importance of love towards

animals, by taking care of and looking after them, and the potentiality of these activities for developing the children's cognitive and affective skills. Nevertheless, it was also registered that teachers had difficulties in finding the time to look after the animals and to take care of the space in which they were kept, due to the limited time available during kindergarten hours. Furthermore, they were mainly concerned about hygiene, especially as far as the chickens, pigeons, and turkeys were concerned, as they were afraid that the animals could transmit diseases to the children.

⁵ *Al Olama Seghar Kindergarten*

⁶ *Deir Yassin kindergarten*

⁷ www.educaid.it

After a discussion, the CRIC staff decided to change strategy, in order to find a new way to introduce the concept of resilience to children and educators. A corner point was that the new laboratories should meet the specific needs and characteristics of the kindergartens, like the limited working time available for the teachers in the kindergartens, that is only four hours a day. CRIC's educative advisors, that had been accompanying the kindergartens since 2002 during the implementation of all projects, emphasized the fact that the kindergartens were hardly capable of efficiently organizing space and time. Therefore, it was decided to dedicate the new workshops to these two specific issues: the re-qualification of existing spaces and the setting up of an adequate time management.

Pet and plant laboratories.

The first workshop held dealt with the children's involvement in a loving, protective and caring relation with pets and animals. Cyrulnik affirms that if a child, who wants to recover, meets someone willing to help, the child will make a positive evolution, thus becoming a resilient child. Yet, how we can explain to a children that to feel better, it is also necessary to accept care, protection and love? Maybe with the help of a personal experience of a loving relationship, giving them the role of the caregiver.

By means of an organized game, the children themselves chose the animals and plants to host in their kindergarten. When the new guests arrived, a big party was organized in each kindergarten and a vet and a florist, recognisable as doctors in white coats, with stethoscope and thermometer, explained the needs of the pets and plants. Plastic tools were distributed and, together with the teachers, a plan for the daily care was set up in which all children took turns in carrying out the daily tasks like feeding, cleaning the animals, and watering the plants.

In this way, the laboratories became an instrument for learning by challenge, discovery and interaction.

"[the pet and plant laboratories helped...] Providing the opportunity to children to familiarize with plants and animals, and that we must preserve them and learn how to deal with them, and that we must show sympathy towards animals, and providing the child with the opportunity to draw animals and plants and providing him with the opportunity to familiarize with the animal or bird organs, and to get to know its life, and to know whether certain animal gives birth or lays eggs, and there became a desire by children to attend kindergarten in order to watch the animals and birds,

⁸ Boris Cyrulnik, *Il dolore meraviglioso*, 2000, Edizioni Feltrinelli.

⁹ *Al Soundus kindergarten*

and the child was provided with the opportunity to know these animals and birds, and there became a relationship between the children and the animals.”⁹

“This laboratory connected the child to reality and we began to use it for teaching children letters, for example “C” for Chicken, and children learned the rabbit song. The laboratory is considered as a landscape in the kindergarten. It was fun for the children.”¹⁰

“When we brought the pigeons to the kindergarten, the children gathered joyfully around the cage, and opened the door, and the pigeons flew out, and the children went out to the street running and screaming at the pigeons, and the teachers went out after them to bring them back to the kindergarten. On the next day the owner brought new pigeons instead those that flew away. It was a difficult, touching and sensitive position.”¹¹

Quality of space and time management

The feeling of being loved helps to increase the level of self-confidence. A self-confident child is ready for new adventures that will teach him or her about the world. In an educative context, it is important, therefore, that the child may move inside a familiar, welcoming, protective, amusing, thus resilient environment. The second workshop held by EducAid dealt with “quality space and time management in the kindergartens”.

The organization of time and space in any human environment does not only depend on an objective arrangement, but also on the ability to fit intentional purposes to places and activities. When we think about the organization of a space, we necessarily think of the people in it. When a person steps into a room that was specially prepared for him or her, this person feels that somebody was longing and waiting for him or her, and therefore his or her self-confidence grows.

A learning environment made-up especially for children must include a series of activities, routines and rituals to give them the sensation of comfort, protection and attention. Everybody loves the pleasant sensation of being welcome. Rituals that clearly mark the change from one activity to the next can help children find their way through an organized day.

Rituals absorb the children’s attention and are a means to keep them quiet. Rituals beat the rhythm of the day. Children do not sense the repetition of rituals as boring, but at is a pleasant reassurance of well-being (something they already know, they can do, and assures them that everything is all right). Good adult-child and child-child relationships are a fundamental aspect in the quality of school life. These relationships influ-

¹⁰ *Deir Yassin kindergarten*

¹¹ *Hejjar CRIC’s Educative Adviser*

ence the quality of space and time organization as it is just them that give a meaning to space and time.

In the training, the importance of space or distance between people was pointed out: getting close to or touching someone are both aspects of space organization directly connected to the quality of a relationship. The possible physical proximity or contact with people is usually proportional to the quality and the level of confidence in the relationship. Touching each other or looking into each other's eyes does not depend on the physical arrangement of a room, but on the arrangement of the people inside a room and between them.

To feel familiar and comfortable within a defined area it is important to know exactly one's own spaces and one's own personality within this space. A well thought-out learning environment for children is an environment that can be conquered by them. There are various strategies that can be used to help children, and adults, to 'conquer space': by defining precise areas inside the room (even mobile or temporary elements may also be used); by applying symbols on things and spaces to render them recognizable; by personalizing the spaces; by disposing of a room for personal belongings, and many more. To 'conquer space' means to be able to move independently, recognizing places and knowing their specific use. It also means to be able to recognize the signs of one's own presence in the environment, that is, the very personal tracks left by each individual and the group itself. Of course, this step is very important for each child, as it improves self-reliance and self-confidence

Promotion of childrens's creativity

Creativity is the capacity to imagine a different future, the ability to set oneself an easy-to-achieve goal in order to anticipate that future by creating order and beauty and by sharing objectives from a state of chaos and confusion.

The mere sight of a tree makes room for imagination, anything around us can be transformed by imagination: a tree, if sketched on a sheet of paper, can become a tree of words, a tree of fear, a tree of ideas, a tree in the night.

A number of activities were carried out with the use of simple everyday tools, like paper, colours, and theatre. The goal of the workshop was not to deliver ideas for new activities, but to make the teachers understand how every well thought-out activity meeting the children's needs and abilities can improve the development of their cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and motor skills. Simple activities are the first step to achieving the capability to cope with more complex activities.

At the beginning, step-by-step activities with paper were proposed: from simple actions to complex activities.

Tearing a sheet of paper is the most common and the easiest gesture a child can do, and by simply doing so, they develop psychomotor skills and understand the meaning of space: tearing it towards oneself or away from oneself. Yet, a more complex activity does not depend on a more complex movement only, but also on a decision to make: that is how to hold the paper and how to tear it.

Starting from an A4-shaped paper sheet, the trainees tried to obtain the longest possible strip by tearing it so as to experiment the sense of size: Why did we obtain different strips from the same sheet of paper? Because the strips have different sizes. Another useful game is to measure the strips: *mine is 3 times longer than yours, this one is two times larger than that one, and so on.*

The teachers were invited to play the *"This is not a strip of paper"* game. All trainees sitting in a circle tore some paper into strips and by using their imagination they had to describe what the paper strip was like: a tongue, a brush, a magic stick or anything else their fantasy suggested. There was only one rule in this game: it was forbidden to repeat a definition given by another person.

Sketches made by children enable us to trade places with children and understand their way of perceiving the world. In a sketch, children illustrate a scene, in which the need to fix a spot in space is contained, in which the feelings about the characters are reflected and the things they know in the world: they fix easily identifiable elements on the paper.

Various graphic devices may be found in children's sketches: settings; transparency; the mixing of elements seen from the front and in profile in the same figure; zoomed objects or persons according to the subjective importance given to them by the child author; the distortion of parts of the objects or persons which attract our attention on them or on the action produced by them.

Another game, called *"If we were Picasso"*, was proposed to the trainees. The materials used were a child's portrait, a A3-sized paper sheet, a pair of scissors and some glue. The single steps of the game were the following: cut the shape of the portrait off a paper sheet; fix the remaining outer contour onto the left side of the A3-sized paper sheet; draw the missing parts with a pencil according to one's own taste and to what one *"wishes"* to see in this shape; from the cut-out shape cut out other details like eyes, nose, mouth, etc.; fix the details onto the right side of the paper; finish the work by colouring it and by adding hair, too. It is not important to make a beautiful

picture: in this case, the main purpose is to express oneself, in other words, to show the children who is inside of oneself.

One more game was organized for the trainees. Once divided into three groups, each group received one A1 and one A4-sized paper sheet. Each group had to imagine a stage with a background behind cut-out shapes. The trainees painted the background and drew the shapes of their imaginary actors (animals, persons, plants).

The next step was to colour the figures drawn. This part of the game stressed the importance of the children's capacity to wait. The final product itself gave the opportunity to introduce another key theme of this training, that is the theatre. By simply covering the stage with a white sheet of paper, an instrument for telling stories was created. Then, the prepared paper shapes were handed over to another group, different from the one who made them, and the trainer gave the input for the narration of a story.

Trainer: "Once upon a time, there was a tree..."

Trainee 1: "Big and green...". Each time a trainee added a new part to the story, the trainer repeated the whole story from the beginning, in order to help to follow the flow of the story.

Trainer: "Once upon a time, there was a big green tree..."

Trainee 2: "...and there was the shadow of the tree and under it there were several persons who ran after a butterfly and smelled the flowers..."

Trainee 3: "...And the butterfly flew around and sat down onto a flower...and it was so marvellous !...", and so on.

Each participant invented a part of the story; from time to time the trainer added some disturbing, magical, tragic, or funny element.

By means of dramatic role-playing, children break the restrictive walls of reality, they deepen their knowledge of the world and develop skills they will need all along their life. Researches show that children who engage themselves in dramatic play are able to feel more empathy towards other people because they experimented being somebody else for a moment. They have the skills for cooperating with their peers, controlling their impulses, and they are less aggressive than children who do not engage in this kind of play.

Art

Art is fun and provides a delightful way to learn about the world and it's physical properties. Most children love to put their hands into paint and other gooey materials that "tickle their senses". Art allows children to discover the emotional pleasures

of sensory and tactile playing while learning important lessons of cause and effect and the material properties of matter. What's more, art develops important cognitive, social-emotional and multi-sensory skills. Self-directed learning with fluid, sensory and tactile art materials is particularly important in early childhood and brings benefits to elder children as well.

In the projects, creative art was used as a means of non-verbal communication, stimulating the children to express what they know and what they feel. A well-known Palestinian painter, Mr. Hazem Harb, member of the artist group "Windows from Gaza"¹² got involved in workshops for educators and children in the kindergartens.

He chose three themes: "I tell you who I am"; "I dream"; "My nice classroom".

The children attending were involved in drawing themselves, their hopes, and their wishes.

The learning environment

In a resilient environment children feel safe, comfortable and at home. This helps them become independent and confident learners. Unfortunately, all kindergartens in the Gaza Strip without exception lack financial resources and this general problem is the reason for the unsafe conditions of the premises and the lack of didactic materials, stationery, tools, and so on.

The kindergartens had to be completely renovated. It was urgently necessary to rehabilitate premises, supply equipment and redesign spaces. Mrs. Donatella Bidini, was invited to guide a training for kindergarten educators on planning and putting into practice the reorganization of the educative environment. The educators were involved in a workshop in which they drew the map of their classroom; and by arranging toy furniture onto the map, they tried to organize this specific learning environment in the best way, considering the existing space, the number of children attending, the activity table and the messages to transmit to the children in class. Logistic problems emerged immediately; difficulties like keeping the children's attention awake during the lessons, being always aware of every single child's feelings, in using the available time efficiently, in shifting from one activity to the next. Another critical point was the lack of appropriate educative tools for integrating the lessons, like toys, stationery, and other didactic materials, that could even become an obstacle to a stimulating, well-equipped, adequate classroom. The teachers understood perfectly that, before organizing an environment, it was necessary to organize first their daily schedule with all activities to be carried out and only then they could begin to or-

¹² www.artwfg.ps

ganize the space in a way to facilitate the implementation of these activities. For that reason, they began to work on the schedule including their daily, weekly and monthly activities, considering the different kinds of activities, the time to dedicate to each activity, and the educative tools and equipments required for each activity. At this stage, after the theoretical training there followed a second part, in which the teachers had to put into practice their previously acquired knowledge by refurbishing the classrooms in all kindergartens.

The trainees made a list of the required materials: furniture, toys, educative tools, shelves, libraries, drawers, and so on.

The kindergartens, therefore, received the whole equipment requested by the educators. Existing pieces of furniture in the kindergarten were renovated by the educators with the help of other actors involved in the project, like the group of animators of the play-bus, the artist Hazem Harb, and the parents of the children attending the kindergarten.

The training turned into a carpenter's workshop, in which pieces of furniture were renovated, painted and decorated. The educators were also involved in the construction of toys like wood building-bricks, sawn-out letters and numbers, puzzles, puppet theatres, puppets, cardboard washing machines and kitchen sinks, and many others more.

The works needed for the rehabilitation of the buildings and premises were carried out according to the criteria set out by the Ministry of Education. Outdoor spaces were equipped with sand and playground equipments.

"Renovations made us all happy because it was the first year in which we did not feel the winter. In previous years the children were afraid to go out of the class, to avoid the rain and the winds. But this year, after renovations and setting up the tent, they go out to the yard and play without being affected by the winter. And the classrooms changed greatly, for the better of course, and children now have their own play room. Regarding the stationary, it helped us greatly. We used it to create many things such as wall tools and colouring, and we learned how to utilize the stationary for the longest period possible. [as for the distributed toys] There was a feeling of joy, and they came to know toys that they were deprived of, and learned to organize toys and return them to their places after playing, and learned to take care of their toys, and to participate and deal with one another."

"[after the distribution of stationery] Wide areas have emerged within children's thinking, such as manufacturing of planes and rockets, i.e. shapes that express whatever was inside of them,

¹³ *Al Olama Seghar Kindergarten*

and as I have mentioned earlier, drawing and colouring help them unload whatever was inside of them.

[as for] The games were really great and provided the children with the opportunity of creating shapes and things that express whatever they had inside. As for outdoor games, playing with them made the children very happy and all this helps the child to unload what's inside. The theatre also helps children unload through the use of puppets. [as for the rehabilitation works] The place became larger and healthier, and there is variation in games that provides a better sections system, and more freedom became available."¹⁴

"At the beginning the kindergarten used to be simple without tents or swings, and there were problems between the children over the swings. When CRIC supplied the toys, this reduced problems between the children, and we also benefited a lot from the tent. With respect to the educational program, we came to know about the mental needs of the children, and learned how to develop their mental capabilities through books. The toys functioned as a means for unloading energy in children, and all toys became available and functioned to develop children mental abilities.

As for renovation, they constructed a tent and an external wall for the kindergarten, as well as outdoor games in the street."¹⁵

After a few months of training and after receiving stationery materials, the kindergartens flourished. Each classroom was a lush of colours: decorations made of paintings, drawings, panels, and a variety of coloured, moving shapes hanging from the ceiling. But most important of all: each single object was made by the children, not necessarily beautiful or perfect, but hand-made by them.

The playbus

In the old days, at the beginning of the 20th century, the children in the villages throughout Palestine used to await impatiently the arrival of a very strong man wearing oriental dresses and carrying on his back a big hand-made wooden box, painted with bright colours, and adorned with bells, candles and flags.

The man entered the village, walked the main streets, past the market, near the school and in the most populated quarters, ringing a little bell and shouting "*The sandug el furje*"¹⁶ is here, come all, come to see...".

¹⁴ *Al Soundus kindergarten*

¹⁵ *Deir Yassin kindergarten*

¹⁶ *Magic box*

All the children followed him to an open space where he put the box to the ground and started to play a tale inside the box. The children would stand in a wild queue waiting for their turn

to peep into the box, in change of half a piaster, an egg, or a piece of bred. The children peeping into the box through a small hole, discovered fantastic pictures of unknown, mysterious places, wild animals, mythological characters of popular stories, that were part of the tale the man played. Amazed by the tale and the pictures, the children began to play together, imitating the various characters discovered just a few moments before, and continued to do so for the rest of the day, imagining that they were heroes, wild animals in the forests, and so on.

With the same intention, that is entertain a group of children, an equipped mobile unit, or play-bus, visited numerous areas in which many children live, offering games and organizing playing events in which to involve all children in the neighbourhood and the same community. The implemented projects saw the participation of two play-busses; one in the South Gaza Strip was related to the partner association Al Amal Rehabilitation Society, and the other in the North Gaza Strip to the Remedial Educational Centre; there were 10 animators with a professional background in education and animation techniques.

The play-busses visited each day one kindergarten involving teachers, parents and children in organized cooperative games.

“Our objective in the play-bus is to contribute in providing mental and social support for children in the Gaza Strip in general, through providing entertainment and amusement to children amidst the deteriorating conditions which our people face in all its factions; children, women, men and elderly. The general objective of the bus is to spread the culture of play, because playing is a basic and important element in the process of entertainment. In the beginning the play-bus was a good idea in the Gaza Strip, but today it affects society as a whole at the levels of children, parents, kindergartens and schools. The play bus provides the parents with the opportunity to allocate certain time to play with the children and to discover their children's abilities and skills. When a child's mother plays with him at the kindergarten, she will have allocated part of her time for her child to engage with him in a certain activity, and it is known that the time of children's mothers is lost between fulfilling husbands' needs and house chores, and the children does not enjoy some time with his mother or father. Today, the play-bus has become a demand by a large number of kindergartens. There is an impact on educators within the kindergartens by exchanging experience between us and the educators, there has become an atmosphere of dialogue and discussion between us, which helps them understand several basic educational concepts such as the integration of children with special needs and active teaching,

and they now have a wider understanding of the idea of non-curricular activities and its importance in the psychological support for the child.

The play bus constitutes an opportunity for the child to express himself and his identity, and to discover his talents. As I said before, there is a growing demand for the play bus because there is now awareness and conviction that playing is one of the methods that should be used in the process of teaching.

Every time, the play bus has a greater impact on the development of activities in kindergartens and at other levels as well. Today, the experience of the activators and me is increased. It is important to observe foreign experiences in non-curricular activities, such as that of the Italians, and to implement them in Gaza as suitable to our society, children and abilities. There was a merge between two cultures and two types of activities lead to the emergence of unique activities for the children, which the children appreciate, as do educators and parents, and this is important.”¹⁷

Playing is essential in the child's psychosocial development. But, playing activities do not always take place in kindergartens, because too often they are considered a spare time activity. Dedicating an entire open day to this kind of activities means to interrupt the normal kindergarten routine and underline the very importance of playing for children. Furthermore, being involved actively in the playing and creative activities of the play-bus, the parents learn to understand their children's non-verbal communication and the importance the playing has for their children's development. They share and experience new games with their children and use a non-verbal language to communicate with them.

“The purpose behind our work with the play bus has been the following: entertaining children and cheering them up; helping children unload by the various activities and playing; learning by play; reinforcing the relationships between children, parents and kindergarten; breaking the daily routine in the kindergarten; contributing in solving some behavioural problems, such as: shyness – introversion – hygiene – violence; reinforcing the child's self-confidence; developing children's personal skills; exchange of expertise between educators and activators; teaching kindergartens to use natural material in creating simple toys.

Our work has strongly affected children, parents and teachers. This has been possible through: building close relations because the bus acts as a connector between parents' children and kindergarten; providing consultation and instructions to correct some behaviours in children; educator's desire to learn and gain ex-

¹⁷ Remedial Education Center playbus team

pertise and new methods of playing and dealing with children; interaction between educators and cooperation and participation in the various activities in the bus; kindergartens' request to resume bus visits in the coming years, which indicates their joy, interaction and benefit from the activities provided; to convey the idea of the bus to parents in order to apply it with their other children; utilizing the simple elements of the environment and developing work in the kindergarten. Especially as regards children, the play-bus helped solve several behavioural and mental problems in children such as: shyness – introversion – hygiene – violence; cheering up children and bringing them joy; developing children's skills and strengthening their muscles through using the scissors and gluing and colouring (art labs)."¹⁸

Like in former times, when the children became excited when the strong man with his magic box arrived in the village and were impatient to hear and see his new stories, today too, children feel just the same when waiting for the play-bus to arrive.

"When the Sindibad Bus arrived at the kindergarten, the occupation was still existent, and children's psychology was bad, but the Sindibad Bus helped them unload and have fun away from these effects and children awaited the day on which the bus arrived, when all the children would take part in the same game."¹⁹

"The children very much liked the Sindibad bus, and they became more sociable, and more accepting of new faces that attend the kindergarten, and more willing to come to the kindergarten, and playing spaces became wider as well as their horizons."²⁰

The Teacher network

The exchange of experiences is always a rich source of useful information and a way to learn, especially when people working in the same sector discuss together. Discussion groups about working experiences and other working conditions are a powerful tool to strengthen the single persons.

The Palestinian national labour legislation does not recognize a professional role to kindergarten teachers Even if there is a clear legislation protecting primary school teachers through a collective agreement, the same is not applied to kindergarten teachers. Furthermore, the society is not aware of the important role of the kindergarten teachers in the children's development, and does not consider this job as a prestigious one.

Teachers are the main actors in the educative development of pre-school aged children, but as mentioned above, they must

¹⁸ *Al Amal Rehabilitation Society, playbus team.*

¹⁹ *Deir Yassin kindergarten*

²⁰ *Al Soundus kindergarten*

be recognized in their important role. Self-awareness must be a basic condition to build and promote one's own professionalism.

"There are sub-objectives which have been reached through the implemented projects, for example to create a network of educators and kindergartens that could connect with each other in order to develop the educational work reality in this field, and this was embodied by the educational saloon in which educators met with each other and discussed their issues and educational problems.

[...] how could we interconnect with each other as educators, and how to organize activities specific for them? Well organized educational meetings are starting to take place. [...] will depend upon their ability to interconnect thereafter." ²¹

An important goal of the network, in fact, is the identification of common problems, opportunities and possible solutions, subjects of interest to be discussed, resources to be shared.

"Creating a network of teachers for children and meetings was a great idea. Each meeting took place in the kindergarten and everybody gets to know this kindergarten and the subjects that will be discussed, [...]. Teacher network is for us to come to know each other and to exchange experiences and create workshops and to identify the problems facing children, and also to visit kindergarten. This project had a great impact on kindergartens as a result of the teachers' experiences, as they taught us how to benefit from teaching methods and provided us with vast knowledge. We hope we remain in contact, and that CRIC project does not terminate. We also hope that some union or supervisors over kindergartens to raise the level of kindergartens in Palestine, and we wish for continuity of institutions such as CRIC and others to support kindergartens because, frankly, we are wronged, and this is why we demand for the establishment of a union or a supervising party. [...] As you know, we are 27 kindergartens in the project and we have come to know each other and we all gained experiences and achievements and we would like to document our new knowledge within a journal [...]. In such a journal, we would present activities and photos of the programs and the corners system, and all achievements and special activities, [...]." ²²

²¹ *Trainers of Canaan Institute of new Pedagogy*

²² *The teachers network*

Resilience and access to symbolism

In May 2005, an evaluation of the project implemented during 2004-2005 was carried out by the child psychologist Dr. Daniele Chitti. The title of his evaluation report is "Resilience and access to symbolism".

Symbolism is not something apart and parallel to real daily life, it is not an oneiric feature but an increase of emphasis put on a meaning hidden in daily life events. Pursuing the assumption that this new relationship, if sensed positively, is the driving force behind the development of resilience, the evaluation investigated symbolic, metaphoric or ritualised events to which the children and their families attributed resilient significance and built upon positive relationships.

For example, children are happier if they feel continuity between their school and their family. If children perceive that the adults who are important to them take care of them in a like-minded way (that is creating a sort of “collective mind” or “educating community”), they feel more worthy of love and interest, their self-esteem grows and they overcome the sense of insecurity that children generally tend to feel in any case. This is even truer when their insecurity is well-founded on real facts. Symbolism emerges when this continuity is promoted by objects or “mediating” situations (parties, meetings, trips, exchanges of gifts, the passing of things or thoughts from one place to another, educative or fun workshops...).

If adults, who usually have the function of teaching or educating, play with the children on their same level and not as leaders, this situation becomes a symbolic experience that allows children to minimize the duty/pleasure dichotomy and dispose of far more flexible instruments for judging and using occurring events.

The main purpose of the evaluation was not only to check the structural and pedagogical quality of the kindergartens involved in the project, but rather to establish if a different quality can promote a higher resilient capacity in the children and their families in the face of a chronically difficult and traumatic reality.

The evaluation focused on the simple hypothesis that a person's resilient qualities are favoured by an increase in positively perceived relationships, as this contributes to higher self-esteem and more creativity and helps to reduce typically “resistant” symptoms like aggressiveness, resorting to force, lack of reflection, and isolation.

This basic assumption was investigated by proving whether there is a connection between the increase in positive relationships among the kindergartens promoted by the project, and a similar increase in the children's life outside the kindergarten (family and society) and in the kindergarten itself – seen as a social subject with its potential community network of reference.

First of all, certain behavioural indicators were observed and discussed with the protagonists; secondly, an evaluation of the level of awareness achieved by the involved people regarding re-activation was carried out, and the results put in relation to the project.

Behavioural indicators

These are the behavioural indicators examined of the different actors involved in the children's social and educative life:

In the children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • level of quarrelsomeness, aggressiveness, violence, crying (both at home and in the kindergarten) • existence of isolated or overly shy children • children able to laugh
In the teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • capacity to play with children "as peers" • sense of authority and dignity, also in relation to the headmistress
In the headmistresses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • level of enthusiasm expressed • point of reference for the children • professional relationship with teachers
In the parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • affective involvement in the discussion • correct perception of their children's needs

When observing the children in the kindergartens, a low level of aggressiveness, quarrelsomeness and crying emerged despite the general overcrowding. The children behaved in a spontaneous and expressive way, without particular fears and obvious disciplinary restrictions. All interviewed persons, including the parents, stressed the great improvement of this aspect as one of the project's most important results. The headmistresses estimated that the level of aggressiveness dropped by 70 to 90%. Parents and educators attributed this to the presence of games and to the fact that children felt their teachers closer to them, both during play and from an affective point of view. According to Dr. Chitti's opinion, the personality of the headmistress played an important role; as this was highlighted during the interviews. A low level of aggressiveness was always connected to the headmistress exercising a role of emotive and educative leadership.

A similar reason was found in children isolating themselves. In most of the kindergartens, isolated children were difficult to identify and in the majority of cases it was possible to find mechanisms to integrate these children again into a relational circuit. Also here, the evaluator attributes a key role to the perceived figure of the kindergarten's director and "it seems that the project in some way, on various levels, has created a greater relational and emotive complexity. The headmistress is like everyone's mother, the children who are having the most difficulty often turn to her, while the teachers tend to play a more collective role (rather like older sisters)".

According to the interviewed actors, children laughed far more than before. Great promoters of laughter were identified in the play-bus team and in all the structured symbol-

ic activities (puppet theatre, telling stories in the playroom). Mothers and play-bus animators claimed that what made the children laugh was the fact that the grown-ups in the Sindibad games, the theatre plays and the stories seemed foolish in the children's eyes. As a matter of fact, by observation made during the activities it appeared clearly that when the teachers really involved themselves in playing with the children, these reacted with considerable positive emotions. Once again the role of the headmistress, "authorizing" teachers to act as children while playing with them, provided these symbolic events with an emotional significance: "There is something paradoxical about the fact that an adult with a teaching and formal role can play at the same level with the children she has to teach: this sort of short circuit has a hugely beneficial symbolic effect on the child's confidence, as long as someone efficiently maintains a totally adult role (the headmistress). Through her protective and somewhat detached presence, she allows the teachers to maintain their authoritativeness."

The kindergarten directors appeared to be characterized by enthusiasm within a role of strong emotive leadership, to which children with difficulties could refer to; they also succeeded in instilling confidence into the teachers, thus having a positive influence on the relational quality perceived.

As for parents, they showed great affective and emotive involvement with their children, over and above school and behavioural problems; the description of their needs was not at all banal and the examples or practical problems reported bear witness to pertinent and well-thought out caring.

The awareness of resilient processes

The evaluation tried to find out how the involved parents perceived their children's needs. The caregivers were invited to make a list of their children's needs. Only few needs were listed regarding education in the strictest sense of the word. Yet, as described by Dr. Chitti, "what transpires is the wish of a world of adults (mothers, teachers, fathers) allied in the protection, care and education of the children, and also the need of an unthreatening world, with spaces to play, and sufficient resources to guarantee their rights." The parents expressed the hope that their children would become courageous, not for fighting or war reasons, but for being able to stand up for their convictions in front of adults. The parents worry about what could happen when their children come together with other children, who are often much older, without being guided by an adult. Apart of that, the families were unanimously convinced that playing and, in particular, other creative and symbolic activities like drawing, singing, puppet theatre, and

story telling, were most important for their children. Some parents were also very aware of the highly symbolic character of drawing and story telling and gave examples of how, thanks to symbolism, their children coped with their problems or enriched their lives.

Yet, even if adults strongly believe in the power of playing and learning through enjoying, the same Palestinian family (particularly the mothers) and educational system seem to stick in a conflict apparently without solution: pleasure against duty. As highlighted by the evaluator "Mothers and teachers would like to be able to say that the fun activities contribute more to education, or rather, that if you have fun, you learn more and more easily. Yet this shared opinion can usually only be read between the lines or after establishing a relationship of trust with the people you are interviewing, or, you can get it directly from people who are highly enthusiastic and aware (in a certain sense "revolutionary"): in these cases, this idea (which is also a desire) emerges in all its importance. This secret aesthetic desire is strongly defended by the totally ethical and public necessity to give education and its practice a serious, solemn and formal connotation."

For the teachers to accept playing without fear as an educative instrument, it was necessary to have a justification by international experts and a serious institute, like the Can'an Institute, to propose it. For the parents, countless examples were found to prove that their main desire was to participate together with their children in play and fun activities (trips, parties, play-bus) organised by the kindergarten. Officially, nearly all the headmistresses and many of the parents claimed they needed workshops for educative problems and handicraft for puppets and other toys.

The strongest desire expressed by the mothers was to meet each other, to do things and talk about them together, to have persons outside the incumbent and rigidly controlling family to refer to. Whether directly or indirectly, the project allowed them to leave their shell, participating in the kindergarten activities and meeting each other. They could use the fact that, at home, now the children talked a lot about what they did during the morning, thus giving the mothers an excuse to stay at the kindergarten (after accompanying their children) or to go there during the day to talk to the teachers and headmistress. This opportunity allowed the mothers and teachers to give a proper value to school-family integration. Teachers and headmistresses, as well as the Can'an Institute, strongly affirmed the importance of a unity and continuity of educative aims between kindergarten and family, while mothers showed to be more aware of the fact that the greatest value of this collaboration is that, psychologically, the children seem to benefit enormously from seeing adults who are important to them and

take care of them, collaborate together; making them feel important, increasing their confidence and self-esteem and their feeling of being loved. This is why secretly the mothers wished to have play and recreational activities to be involved with their children. What emerges, therefore, is that the project seemed to have promoted the role of children as social mediators quite easily, exploiting their natural inclination to integrate their positive experiences and have them act as unconscious promoters of new social relationships

Conclusion remarks of the evaluator, dr. Chitti

Nobody knows what goes on in the minds of children, but we can easily imagine how the changes brought about by the project have set off an enormous quantity of individual mental elaboration, maintained and articulated by the possibility of creating chains of personal and collective meanings, using (like toy building bricks) the elements which the project and its protagonists (local and international operators, partners, teachers, headmistresses and parents) have made available. I have tried to explore some of these meanings and I'm fairly sure I've highlighted a small number of them; symbolism is a powerful instrument because not being limited by an exclusively causal logic, it allows us to find a large number of possible combinations from only a few elements.

Children are "machines for growing" as well as "social machines", (which is basically the same thing: you can't grow without sociability), they are the creators of the game of construction which is their life. When making a self-evaluation, no adult today likes to see him/herself as the product of parent or teacher intervention in childhood. So why should it be any different for children today?

The adults' task is to provide the building bricks: new relationships, new ties, new objects, new people... The children's task is to decide which new construction to concentrate on.

The real educative damage adults can inflict on children is to limit the number of available bricks or to provide them with faulty or spoiled bricks.

Qualitative indicators of a resilient environment

The specific objective of the interventions is *"to give psychosocial support to Palestinian pre-school aged children, by improving their resilient capacities and intervening in the socio educative context"*.

The implemented projects foresee to intervene in the socio-educative context, so as to

develop the children's ability to face life adversities, reducing or preventing effects of stress and trauma, through a resilient approach to life, intervening on human and material mediators with whom the child interacts daily. Human mediators are the ones who, by interacting with the children, enrich their emotional and affective development spheres, like the peer group, parents and educators. Material mediators are all those tools that facilitate the learning and discovery process: the class room, playing, art... If well used and addressed, the mediators, allow to stimulate the development of specific personal characteristics essential to face life in a creative, trusting and positive manner.

To verify if the project's goal were achieved, the identified indicators of the "mediators to resilience" were monitored throughout the implementation period.

The kindergarten environment

- the daily program foresees structured and organized welcoming rituals and activities.
- the arrangement of furniture and other equipments encourages interrelations between children.
- the overall environment foresees the presence of personalized areas and tools such as panels, coat hangers, pictures, drawers, files, etc.
- the kindergarten spaces are safe and clean

The educators approach

- the daily program foresees structured and organized welcoming rituals and activities.
- the arrangement of furniture and other equipments encourages interrelations between children.
- the overall environment foresees the presence of personalized areas and tools such as panels, coat hangers, pictures, drawers, files, etc.
- the kindergarten spaces are safe and clean

Playing, imagination and creativity

- playing is foreseen in the educative program
- arts activities are foreseen in the program
- theatre and stories are foreseen in the program

Relations between children, teachers and parents

- interactions between children are cooperative and they share materials, toys and support each other during tasks
 - teachers have an encouraging, attentive and non threatening attitude and approach towards children
 - parents meet with teachers to discuss about their children development or participate to programmed activities
-

The educative environment

The first mediator to resilience appointed is the kindergarten environment. Only a welcoming and protective environment allows children to feel free and confident to express themselves, practice their curiosity and live positive relationships.

Welcoming routines in the morning when the children arrive to the kindergarten are very important for the emotional feelings of children. Through organized and well thought-out welcoming activities, the children feel that they belong to the environment and the group of peers. Furthermore, the attentive approach of the teacher makes feel the child protected, accepted and cared for. 19% of the involved kindergartens were not used to carry out activities dedicated especially to the purpose of welcoming the children in the morning. 31% welcomed the children with specific activities, but only in special occasions, like on the first school day of or after the holidays. 50% of the kindergarten teachers said that, after arriving in the morning, the children usually played in the garden until all children were present before starting the scheduled program. This is not considered an organized welcoming activity, even if children are happy to start the day playing. All trainings carried out by Cana'an Institute, EducAid, and Mrs. Bidini emphasized the importance of dedicated activities for children arriving in the kindergarten. All classrooms were equipped with an area, including a carpet and several games, where the children sat down and spent the first half hour in the morning singing, playing and telling each other what they had done the day before. This was a way to establish emotional and physical contacts between each other and them and the teacher. As soon as the classrooms had been reorganized, all kindergartens included activities for welcoming the children in the morning in their daily program.

Physical or relational contacts among the children were neither common nor easy due to the classrooms organization. The tables were usually arranged in rows and in almost 50% of the kindergartens the children did not have space to move. The children's backpacks and jackets were further obstacles that the children usually kept with them as there were no coat hangers, wardrobes, or shelves in the classrooms. Furthermore, the teachers were constantly drawing the children's attention on themselves, preventing them from talking or playing together. In the projects, the classrooms were arranged so as to create areas of specific interest, and leave more space to move inside the room and to create special corners in which the children divided in groups would carry out different tasks. Personalized areas were prepared, too, in which the children could deposit their jackets, bags and works, and at the same time recognize the classroom they belonged to. This new methodology was applied in all kindergartens.

Protection does not only mean to be cared for and loved by adults, but also that the

environment is carefully prepared, clean and safe, free from obstacles and threats. Generally, this was not a common characteristic of kindergartens. It was assessed that educators did not check the kindergarten areas before the arrival of children, toilets were often dirty and the children were used to throwing the garbage on the floor. One of the subjects in the Cana'an training for educators dealt right with this kind of matters. In the training, the teachers and directors were asked to make a schedule of their tasks, including the activities to be carried out before the arrival of the children and after the end of the working day. The staff of each kindergarten organized to keep the common areas clean and safe and, by doing so, changed the atmosphere of the kindergartens completely.

The educators approach

Caring and attentive teachers pay great importance to the children's emotions, results, and actions. When the educative tools and toys are positioned at a reachable height for children, teachers make the most out of children's handworks and the children participate actively (both individually and in groups) in activities and decision-making processes and by expressing their opinion they develop the sensation that they belong in the kindergarten, their self-confidence grows and also their courage and capacity to express their thoughts and opinions.

At the beginning of the school year, only a few kindergartens were equipped with toys, stationery to carry out activities, and educative tools to integrate lessons. 85% of the kindergartens had a few toys and 12% had none at all. Only 4% of the kindergartens had stationery at their disposal and the curriculum of 46% of them did not foresee the use of stationery in their activities. Educative panels existing in the classrooms where made by teachers or acquired, only 12% were prepared by the children and teachers themselves. During the implementation of the project, teachers reorganized the classrooms' environment. As already mentioned above, the space was divided into interest areas: the welcoming carpet and playing corner equipped with a library of tale books and shelves with different toys (bricks, puzzles, etc.), children-sized domestic equipment like washing machines, sinks and so on, and theatres with puppets; the art corner was equipped with colours, sheets of paper, brushes, and any other required tools and materials; the concentration corner in which to learn letters and numbers with the help of educative and supporting tools. The now adequately sized furniture in the classrooms was arranged in a way to allow the children to interact constantly and made it possible for the teachers to follow all children in the different interest ar-

as on their level. This new classroom arrangement and curriculum enabled the children to move from one interest area to another according to a defined schedule.

Only 12% of the involved kindergartens exhibited the children's drawings in the classroom. 28% did not keep the children's handworks but threw them away after the end of the activity, 31% usually give the drawings to the children to bring them home, 29% usually collected the drawings to file them in individual folders. The teachers were not used to paying attention to the children's works by congratulating, greetings and providing advice. The data reveal that 58% of the teachers never paid any attention to the children's works and 42% every now and then and only when comparing the children who had carried out the assigned works to the ones who had not fulfilled their duties. At the end of the project, the teachers began to give importance to the results of the carried out tasks through positive remarks shared by the whole children group, and to keep individual folders for each child containing all his or her works (drawings, paper works, filled notebooks). The children were involved in expressing their opinion, for example, when being asked to explain a drawing to the class or to participate with personal comments when a story was told. By doing so, they were also involved in the decision-making process, "do you want to play with bricks or do a puzzle? Do you prefer that I read you a story or we play with the theatre? Do you want me to tell you a story or to listen to yours?"

At the beginning of the school year, 65% of the teachers did not involve the children in sharing their opinions and 35% did it only occasionally; 77% did not involve the children in the decision-making process. None of the involved teachers had the routine of this kind of approach towards children, instead of at the end of the year, 89% regularly involved the children in expressing themselves and taking decisions.

Playing, imagination and creativity

Playing is an important activity for children. Manipulative games, puzzles, collectible and matching games offer children a quiet activity that they can do alone, with friends, with a teacher or a parent, or in a small group. Through playing, children learn to cooperate with each other by sharing and taking turns as they play a game or build an intricate design. They develop confidence when they complete a task successfully using self-correcting toys like puzzles, shorting boards and stacking rings. They practice eye-hand coordination and they refine small muscles skills. When they build something with wood bricks or other shaped objects, they experiment with construction and invention and use creative problem-solving skills. They also expand their emerging math skills such as counting, serialising, matching, patterning and classification. When

using words to describe how they are putting together a puzzle or sorting a collection of objects, children develop language skills and learn to express themselves.

Through creativity children create and represent their ideas in a visual form. Children draw, paint, knead, cut, glue, and make things of their own choice. Sometimes, they simply explore the materials and enjoy the process of making. At other times, they create designs or make something that represents a real object, place, or living thing. Creative art is another language children use to express their originality and personality. Dramatic plays are central to children's health development and learning during the pre-school year. With the help of dramatic plays, children break through the restrictions of reality and pretend to be someone or something different, they make up situations and actions that suit the role they have chosen. When engaging in dramatic play, children deepen their understanding and develop skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

The involved kindergartens did not give much importance to playing, creative and imagination activities. 35% of the kindergartens did not foresee playing activities in their weekly program, 19% only once a week, 23% twice a week, 15% three times a week and 8% every day. As for creative activities, 42% of the kindergartens did not foresee such kind of activities, 16% only once a week and 35% twice a week. Only 4% of the involved kindergartens carried out creative activities regularly every day. Dramatic play was foreseen in 19% of the kindergarten once a week and 27% twice a week.

After that, kindergartens modified the curriculum and weekly activities program by introducing playing, creative and imagination activities on a daily basis.

Relations among children, teachers and parents

Another resilience mediator monitored throughout the entire school year were relationships between children, teachers and parents. The observation and counselling carried out by CRIC's educative advisors aimed at evaluating the existing relationships so as to verify whether the actors involved perceived these relationships as positive, that is: if the children were cooperative with each other, if they shared materials and enjoyed working in groups; if teachers encouraged children while interacting, if they were aware of individual needs and did not use physical punishment; if parents met teachers to discuss their children's development or participate in programmed activities. Many were the data gathered that showed a positive flow of mutual exchanges involving all children, teachers and parents.

The teachers' physical and emotional approach to children changed considerably in terms of quality and professionalism. At the beginning of the school year, the teachers

used to carry out activities statically from behind their desks; only 70% of the teachers happened to play or sit together with the children in rare occasions. Physical contact was almost completely inexistent and 88% of the teachers referred to the children by calling them by name only to reprimand or to attract their attention. 77% of the teachers admitted that they listened to the children only sometimes, 19% never did, and only 4% said that they listened to children carefully and with great interest in order to understand the children' personality and individual needs. The teachers' approach and attitudes to the children have completely changed by the end of the project, 97% of the teachers now interact with children on their level according to the activity carried out and the specific occasion. That means that they sit on the carpet with them during the welcoming routine and while playing, or on small chairs in the concentration corner, in the sand when they play in the garden; all teachers have understood the importance of listening to the children's words and always refer to them by name. At the same time also the children's feelings and attitudes have positively changed. Generally, the parents used to go to the kindergarten to talk with the teachers about their children's progress and achievements, and to pay the fee. The teachers usually perceived a lack of support from the parents' side and never requested their support for extracurricular activities like the participation in improvement works for the kindergarten. In the activities carried out during the project, particular attention was paid to finding out new ways to involve an always greater number of parents in the life of the kindergartens, by organizing parents' meetings or workshops, inviting them during the open-door days for visiting the play-bus or for renewal and decorating the furniture of the kindergartens. The parents responded positively to these initiatives and affirmed to be impressed and happy about the new organization of the kindergartens.

The children did not have cooperative attitudes towards the other children either, and did not want to share toys or other materials existing in the kindergarten. Their new way of playing and having fun with other children was the first positive change highlighted especially by parents.

What teachers and mothers think

In order to achieve a deeper understanding of the results obtained, we directly asked the educators and mothers what were the changes that had occurred in everyone of them. To teachers we asked what changes they went through as professionals in the field of education, what should be the role of a kindergarten teacher and why children should attend a kindergarten.

Atfal Al Talia Kindergarten is located in the Khan Younis refugee camp. The families there are poor and safety is a luxury. The children in the neighbourhood are organized in baby gangs and it is very hard even for grown-ups to be respected by them. The kindergarten has been many times vandalized by other children living in the neighbourhood, who usually climb over the protecting wall, jump into the yard and spend hours playing, breaking into the classrooms and destroying the toilets. The owner of the premises has installed barbed wire all around the fence wall, in order to prevent the children from entering the kindergarten. Many times, instead of seeking dialogue, the grown-ups often reacted impulsively and aggressively, convinced that this was the only way to achieve some discipline. This was the attitude of the teachers in the kindergarten.

“The biggest change that we went through has been related to the way of approaching children. We had the habit to treat children with violence and we changed our way to interact with them, with more affection but only after the training. Even when the child was violent with us. The role of the teacher must be to be affectionate with the child as if we are substituting the mother, be patient and support the child, tender in approaching him or her.

The child must go to the kindergarten as the child is part of the family first of all and he learns only from it. When he attends the kindergarten he meets with an other society and other children and he knows that he has an obligation and appointments that every morning he has to respect. When he goes to the kindergarten he learns many things such as to be organized, wake up in the morning, to be sociable with the others and also social relations. As well as audacity, to express his own opinions, to learn the environment through new personalities of different families and other children.”

In this interview it is clear that teachers understood the importance of positive relationships, and especially that aggressive behaviours are not the right way to establish cooperative relationships with children. The teachers understood the need for protection that the children expressed by certain actions, manners, and behaviour and found new ways of responding to their needs: patience, loving care and tenderness. At the same time, they understood the children’s need to explore and acknowledge, and to bring order in their daily life.

All teachers emphasized the fact that during the project they improved their knowledge on how to deal with the children’s behaviour, their understanding of creative activities to integrate lessons, thus stimulating the children’s active participation in the learning process. Furthermore, and in our opinion, the most important statement shared by all is that children should attend kindergartens not in order to learn how to

read and write but to learn by direct experience how to become a valid member of a heterogeneous society. All of them highlight the importance of socialization, of meeting children not belonging to one's own family, children who usually do not play with them. They perceive the kindergarten as a place where children are challenged to built their personality in relation with their peers. This point is extremely important, especially if we consider that the Palestinian society is based on the enlarged family with a strong hierarchic and patriarchal structure.

Another conviction common to all teachers is that children should attend kindergartens in order to increase their self-esteem and have the courage to defend their own opinion without letting themselves be overwhelmed by the group. Courage is a very important topic. A main worry of adults is what may happen when their children meet other children, who are often much older, without the guiding hand of an adult, a situation which is all too common in the Gaza Strip, especially in the refugee camps and in the more depressed areas.

"Yes, I became more experienced, and I now possess activation tools and more experience in dealing with children, and a better ability to solve problems facing children in a novel scientific method, and I now possess knowledge of the sections system that serves many fields in education, activity, education and art." ²³

"Surely, there was a great and significant change, and we came to know many things which we had not known before the Cana'an Institute course which benefited us with many things such as educational matters and games.

[The teachers role] Educating children, because this is her duty. Also, to be an instructor and a mentor for them and to properly correct their negative behaviours.

[Why children should attend kindergarten] First, when the children come to the kindergarten, they unload the great repression which is inside of them, and familiarize with educators in the kindergarten, as well as new faces on the road. They also come to learn. And while travelling on the bus they get to know new places. They also obtain religious education and things that they did not previously know from home, where there is no one but father, mother and brothers, unless they were visited by guests.²⁴

"[The teachers role] To embrace and love the children and to be patient because they need patience, and to encourage them to express themselves and to develop their capabilities.

[Why children should attend kindergarten] In order to know the society surrounding them and to learn its customs and traditions and to learn to play and to base him towards the primary stage."²⁵

²³ *Al Soundus kindergarten*

²⁴ *Al Wessam kindergarten*

²⁵ *Al Olama Seghar Kindergarten*

Mothers were also invited to participate in an interview in order to understand better and from the viewpoint of parents and children what kind of results have been achieved by the project.

Here follows an integral interview which in our opinion needs no further comment:

Do you think that your child is happy to go to his kindergarten?

- At the beginning of the year, it was difficult for my child to go to the kindergarten, especially because he clings very much to me and to his home; so when I sent him to the kindergarten he first refused to go, but then when he saw that also his friends went, he started to accept the idea.
- My child refused to go alone, without me, to the kindergarten; therefore, at the beginning I had to take him there and bring him back home every day. After one month he started to go and come back alone together with his friends. I am so happy now that he is independent.
- At the beginning of the school year, he refused to go to the kindergarten and he never wanted to wake up in the morning and I had to struggle to take him to kindergarten. But, after some time, he began to wake up by himself and said that he wanted to go to the kindergarten to play the new games.

Which are the things that he or she enjoys the most about the kindergarten?

- First, her friends played a key role in helping her to love the kindergarten. Second, the various activities carried out every day, she's never getting bored, she always tells me about it. Third, the play bus-and the parties they organize during each visit.
- I felt that my child enjoyed more and more going to the kindergarten and I believe it is due to the new methodology applied, which is bringing happiness and encouragement. And he always speaks about the play-bus! He remembers all the names of the team members and when he comes home after a day spent with the play-bus he is very happy, more that usually.
- For sure the toys are the things he most enjoys; he always tells me " Mama, I want to go to play, we have a lot of games". He also enjoys to play with other children of his age; once he told me "I have a friend, his name is Ahmad, today he gave me a cookie". Certainly, the relationship with the teachers is also very important; they play a key role and encourage my child to love his kindergarten; the teacher is very tender in responding to the children's needs. Another thing my child loves are the trips organized by the kindergarten and the parties held during which the kindergarten owner distributes sweets and juices among the kids.

Does your child speak about what he or she does in the kindergarten?

- Yes, of course, he describes and talks about everything that happens during the day; all the activities carried out, especially the songs that he learns. When he comes back home, he starts to sing every song and he teaches them to his brother.

Does your child do or repeat the same activities when he or she comes back home?

- Yes, every day and immediately when she arrives home she says for example, today we coloured the letter "S" and she asks me to bring some paper and colours and she does the same activity to show it to the family.
- What he likes more is the collage, he enjoys cutting papers and then paste them together in order to create a picture.
- I feel that he likes role-playing, especially the play-bus team, he dresses as them and repeats what they did during the day. Sometimes he gathers his brothers and some friends and he says "I am the teacher and you are my pupils and now we will play a game."

Does your child ask you to visit his or her kindergarten?

- Yes, especially when there is a party or the play-bus. Also when she saw one of her friends' mother coming to visit the kindergarten, she insisted that I would go, too.
- He asked me to visit the kindergarten when the new furniture arrived and when the kindergarten applied the new system of corners, he told me "now we sit on the ground and we play with new games, come to see me, Mama".

Why do you think that your child wants you to visit the kindergarten?

- I think she wants me to see her new world in which she spends the morning.
- I feel that he becomes happy when he sees me participating in his world.

When you visit the kindergarten, what does he or she wants to show you?

- First of all his friends, the ones he plays and learns with and especially the ones he loves the most.
- She wants me to see her teacher, she shows me all the things she did and the objects she made.
- He shows me the games that he usually plays with and he always asks me to attend during the visits of the play-bus.

How does he or she play at home?

- Before attending the kindergarten my child used to play alone, refusing to share his toys with anybody or to join him while playing. But after attending the kindergarten he became more social and more cooperative and he began to play with his brothers and friends. He applies most of the activities he learned also at home.
- At the beginning my child played with his brothers aggressively, he did not want to share his toys and he wanted to have all other children's toys. But after attending the kindergarten, he learnt to share toys and play with other children; now, he doesn't fight with the brothers for the toys and he looks for new friends to play with.
- There are some games that she plays together with her brothers, roles for example "I am the teacher and you are the pupils".

During the last months did you notice any change in your child's behaviour?

- My child's behaviour changed positively when she started attending the kindergarten, but when the bombings started all the positive achievements were almost cancelled.
- My child became more sociable, he started loving the other children and he also became more independent; my feeling was the he learnt positive things.
- He was not bored any more, because during the time spent in the kindergarten he learnt many new games and activities that he repeated at home without getting bored. But as a result of the last bombing he became again nervous and as a reaction he started to make wood guns and play with them in groups together with his friends. In addition to this, his drawings are now all about destruction and burning cars.

How do you think that the kindergarten contributed in changing the behaviour of your child?

- Yes, the kindergarten played a key role in changing my child's behaviour positively: this was possible because the educators organized a good social environment where she met new friends and she learned how to cooperate with them.
- The kindergarten gave my child the chance to play and learn many new, nice activities. Finally, the educators taught him new concepts, a new language and some good behaviour as cleanness, respecting time.
- One of the best activities they carried out in the kindergarten was certainly the welcoming moment in the morning, which gave the children the chance to talk openly and express themselves.

Conclusive remarks and recommendations

The present research aimed at providing an overall description of how CRIC responded to the needs of pre-school aged children for preventing and reducing symptomatic traumatic behaviour. First of all a description of the early-childhood education sector in Palestine was provided, in order to give a comprehensive picture of the context. The second part of the research focused on describing the strategy adopted by CRIC to prevent effects of trauma on children, intervening in the socio-educational contexts, strengthening perceived positive relationships and naturally developing resilient capacities in children.

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SECTOR

The majority of kindergartens in the Gaza Strip do not have appropriate characteristics. Premises are usually old and full of dangerous obstacles for children. The lack of tools and equipment to carry out activities, such as toys, books, stationery and other didactic materials, invalidates the kindergarten' function as stimulator of children's development through imagination, discovery and joy. The entire environment does not represent a welcoming, familiar and protective place. The activities and rigid discipline do allot time to establishing emotional relationships, or for joking, playing and having fun together. Only a few kindergartens foresee the active participation of children in the learning process, all the others apply what we call a "traditional methodology", where children are asked to memorize letters and numbers only.

Most teachers do not have a professional and educational background; therefore, they find themselves in difficulties when attempting to carry out their tasks. Parents are "trapped" in the common belief that the duty of the early-childhood education sector is to prepare the children for primary school, providing them with reading and writing abilities solely, and the children themselves are not interested in attending sterile and boring lecturers where their natural desire to play, disturb and laugh is repressed. This leads to a series of effects: the parents are not satisfied with the performance of kindergartens, an attitude stressed also by the fact that the professional role of kindergarten teachers is not recognized, not even on a legal level; the children are not happy attending kindergarten; the teachers' self-esteem and enthusiasm are annihilated.

Conclusive remarks and recommendations

Kindergarten owners or directors are not able to invest on the structures or on the personnel because of the lack of financial resources. The children's attendance fees represent the only income. To encourage more families to send their children to the kindergarten, fees have even been reduced to a minimum and seldom cover monthly running costs. As a consequence, kindergartens cannot afford to buy didactic material for their activities and teachers are earning salaries under the minimum standards.

The Ministry of Education (MoE), aware of the needs and gaps, has intervened through granting almost all existing kindergartens with a temporary licence to carry out their work even when criteria were not met and furthermore offered teachers a course on "How to use the teachers guide" recommended by the MoE. Nevertheless, this cannot be considered a solution but rather a temporary remedy.

The following stringent efforts need to be made in the early-childhood sector by national authorities and donors:

- To establish and pursue a plan for drawing a national curriculum for the early-childhood education sector, aiming at providing all kindergartens with a shared and professional educative methodology.
- The National Authority must officially recognise the role of the early-childhood educator as a professional qualification, and legally provide a specific working contract and legislation.
- To establish a nation-wide agreed training/education programme for educators that incorporates knowledge of pedagogy and teaching techniques for early-age education. Furthermore, the literature endorsed by the Ministry of Education (like The Teachers' Guide) is out-dated and needs to be revised. It is important to underline that, in Palestine, many local resources are available that should be more involved and supported. As already highlighted, several local professional organizations in the field of early-childhood education have been providing vocational training to educators on alternative educational methodologies. A great number of them have also edited context-specific, high-quality text books on pedagogy, child education, teaching techniques, parenting, animation techniques for children and more.
- To direct efforts assisting kindergartens to ameliorate their structures and provide them with the necessary equipment and especially non-durable materials such as stationary and didactic material. This is considered a priority, especially in this peculiar moment in which families do not have the financial capacities to pay attendance fees, and kindergartens have not paid salaries to the employees since March

2006. It appears extremely important to avoid the risk that kindergartens raise attendance fees, so as to be able to cover running costs and salaries, thus creating a service affordable only for privileged children.

CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS

The evaluation of the implemented operations yields that the CRIC strategy was effective and well addressed.

Kindergartens proved to be an appropriate area of intervention in order to reach not only children but also parents, educators and indirectly the neighbouring community. Involving teachers and directors in a vocational training reinforced their professional skills on educational issues and their awareness of the children's needs and development spheres. This brought considerable changes to the overall environment: kindergartens became welcoming, protective and stimulating environments; the activities proposed helped children to develop cognitive, emotional, social and physical abilities; and most importantly, the teachers' self-esteem rose, their personal confidence and awareness of the important role they play noticeably increased, and this led to a positive change in the relationship with children and parents. Children started feeling accepted, cared and loved by their teachers and this led to a significant improvement of their social, emotional and cognitive behaviours, while mothers found new persons to share their worries and hopes for the future of their children.

According to the evaluation carried out by Dr. Chitti, the motive of such changes was simply that everybody was happier because the others were happy, too. Yet, such happiness was brought through the reciprocal understanding and capacity to answer to needs in a more assertive, confident and aware manner.

Once more, we involved teachers and parents asking them to give us advice to better address new interventions.

First of all, we involved the teachers, members of the network, who stressed their conviction of the importance of a body that would represent the professional category of early-childhood educators and advocate for their rights. This body should also cover the role of coordinating all educators in the whole country. Furthermore, they asked to be supported in facilitating the establishment of links with educators abroad, who work in this field. They expressed the need to acknowledge new and different realities

Conclusive remarks and recommendations

other than to bring their experience out. They proposed documenting their work with pictures, stories and interviews to be published in a journal to address themselves to families and teachers in Palestine and in other parts of the world. This international network would benefit not only the teachers individually, but hopefully also other workers in this sector, as well as the parents and, most important, the children.

The interviewed kindergarten teachers and directors also expressed their fears for the oncoming school year that starts in September 2006. They mainly worry about the difficulties they have to face if the present situation does not improve. In particular the psychological state of the children and their mothers. The military incursions during the last months yielded a great number of traumatized children due to the noise produced by the shootings and bombings, many of them had to hide or flee from their homes, many of them lost their beloved, many others were injured. Many women lost their husbands in the last months, or their husbands were injured or captured. All of a sudden, they had to take over the whole responsibility for the family and become the main breadwinner in it. Although the teachers said that they feel comfortable enough to deal with the children in moments of fear and anxiety thanks to the new activities they learned, like theatre and dramatic play, they feel that they are not able to help those with more severe problems. Therefore, they recommended a psychological support for children and mothers, also through the kindergarten.

Another worry is that the number of attending children will drastically decrease due to several reasons, first of all the families' can no longer afford to pay attendance fees, second they fear that something might happen when the kids are on their way to and from the kindergarten or in the kindergarten itself.

"What will happen if they tell me that the Israeli want to shell the house neighbouring the kindergarten? None of the families will continue sending their children to my kindergarten. And children that need transport to reach the kindergarten will they come? Families are scared, and you can no longer trust anyone, and for sure they will not trust the bus driver unless they know him very well and are sure that he is not affiliated to any resistance groups. Otherwise they are scared that one day a missile will hit the bus when the children are inside, as already happened."

The interviewed mothers also expressed their worries and need to understand better how to deal with their children during difficult circumstances like those are going through now. The mothers said that they feel unable to make their children feel safe, protected and strong. When the children were afraid to stay alone in a room and con-

tinuously cling to their mothers, these considered themselves unable to do or say anything meaningful for their children. We are convinced that in reality the mothers are more aware and capable than they believe to be, and the same is also held by Dr. Chitti who carried out the evaluation of CRIC interventions and available literature such as the assessment report on Palestinian children by Dr. Cario Arafat. Therefore, we believe that mothers should be involved in workshops aiming at increasing esteem and confidence in their parenting abilities, which is a crucial part of improving the outcomes for the children.

Other needs expressed by mothers are: a workshop to learn how to construct toys with low cost materials; playing areas near to the homes, peace.

As long as war continues, children will never be able to live serenely, and there will be an ongoing need to provide them with support and help in developing coping mechanisms to deal with the impact of trauma, fear and depression.

As long as war and occupation persist, the Palestinian population will continue to live under appalling conditions, in which their dignity is continuously trampled, their rights totally ignored and their freedom neglected, with the result that it will be almost impossible to have a generation of adults who believe in values such as peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.

The hope for a better future for children and adults can only grow if the conflict ends definitively.

The international community and humanitarian organizations must direct all their efforts to advocate for people's rights, to apply pressure on governments to help to bring the conflict to an end, or at least to end the collective punishment that is currently taking place, and to ensure that the world is informed about the Palestinian plight. All organizations working in the field of child protection, both domestic and international, must continue to advocate for children's rights and make public the daily experiences of the children living in Palestine.















