




MAY 2017

A black and white photograph of an elderly woman wearing a black headscarf and a black long-sleeved garment. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. Her hands are clasped together, holding a thin, light-colored cane that extends downwards. The background is dark and out of focus.

TEN READINGS OF A BLOCKED DECADE

#OPENGAZA

A PRIVILEGED INSIGHT INTO THE LIVES OF FEMALE BREADWINNERS IN GAZA. INTIMATE STORIES ILLUSTRATING THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF BLOCKADE AND WAR.

THESE WOMEN ARE REPRESENTATIVE OF MANY MORE WOMEN.

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50 YEARS OF OCCUPATION. 10 YEARS OF BLOCKADE.

The year 2017 marks 50 years of Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian territory and 10 years of land, air and sea blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip. Three major escalations of hostilities in six years have further eroded basic infrastructure, service delivery, livelihoods and coping mechanisms.

An eight-year-old child in Gaza today has already lived through three wars. Children under 10 have only known life under blockade. 42 per cent of Gaza is unemployed, with a sad world record of youth unemployment peaking at 60 per cent and over 65 per cent among women. 80 per cent of Gaza's two million population depends on external aid.

Prevalent violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) are the main drivers of humanitarian needs of Palestinians and undermine already vulnerable living conditions.

The situation in the oPt has become a protracted humanitarian protection crisis with peaks of acute emergency due to war and the effects of the prolonged Israeli military occupation.





ACTION AGAINST HUNGER IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY (OPT)

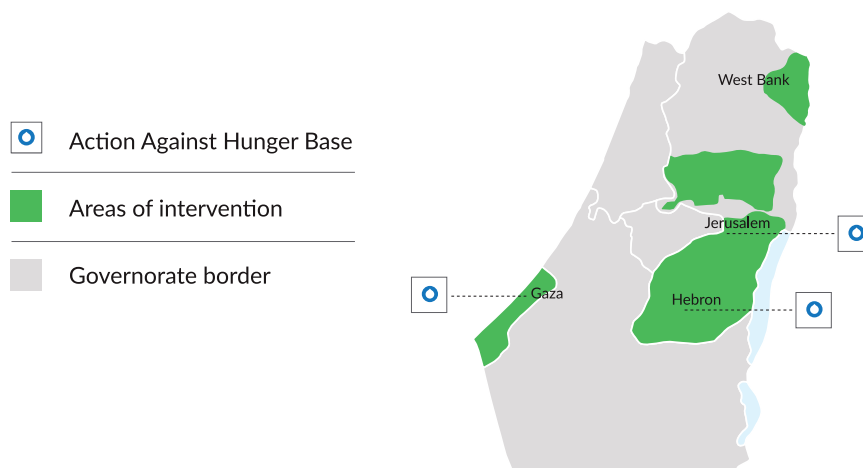
Action Against Hunger has been working in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) since 2002, aiming to reduce vulnerabilities and respond to humanitarian needs; in addition to protecting and strengthening the resilience of Palestinian communities.

The situation for the population in the **Gaza Strip** has increasingly deteriorated after the most recent war in August 2014 and ten years of blockade which has resulted in a lack of access to natural resources, basic services and income opportunities.

In the **West Bank**, severe restrictions and limited access of the Palestinian population to water, adequate housing, land and livelihoods severely hampers the socioeconomic growth of Palestinian communities. There are also alarming protection concerns that need to be addressed.

As part of our global approach on nutrition security, we intervene in a number of thematic sectors. We believe it is essential to integrate protection into all our interventions to ensure provision of basic services to vulnerable populations, aiming also to achieve gender equality. Among other sectors, we implement WASH (Water Sanitation and Hygiene) projects in cooperation with local partners and communities. We focus on improving water access and water quality, and responding to water scarcity in times of drought and conflict. In the FSL (Food Security and Livelihoods) sector, our projects aim to provide viable and sustainable sources of income and livelihoods opportunities.

Action Against Hunger is also actively advocating for the respect of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL).





OUR WORK IN THE GAZA STRIP



FOOD SECURITY AND LIVELIHOODS

Our FSL programming in Gaza aims at improving the socio-economic status of vulnerable Gazans through increasing access to sustainable livelihood opportunities.



Support to the agricultural sector: rehabilitation of greenhouses and irrigation systems, distribution of agricultural inputs, provision of training and cash for work.



Women economic empowerment: enhance access to income opportunities and greater involvement in decision making processes at community level through women cooperatives and the establishment of small businesses. Particular focus on female single-headed households.

Photos: © Lys Arango for Action Against Hunger



ADVOCACY

Advocate for the respect of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL), including universal access to water, land and livelihood opportunities.



WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

Our WASH programming in Gaza aims at increasing access to safe, sufficient and affordable water, reducing environmental pollution, assessing and mitigating storm water, constructing and rehabilitating waste water networks and reducing diarrhea and waterborne diseases.

- Improved water and waste water management:

- Construction and rehabilitation of waste water networks (*Photo 1*)
- Creation of innovative rain water harvesting ponds and municipal storm water drainage systems with infiltration to the aquifer (*Photo 2*)
- Capacity building of key local stakeholders (CMWU, PWA)
- Public awareness on water quality, safe water management and promotion of hygiene practices at community and school levels

- Improved access to essential services:

- Mapping of water trucking and roof tank distribution (domestic and drinking water)
- Provision of adequate WASH and shelter infrastructure at Designated Emergency Shelters (*Photo 3*)
- Improving sanitation conditions through construction of latrines and septic tanks for war-affected (*Photo 4*) and marginalized households
- Piloting grey water and black water treatment for reuse at the household level



THE BLOCKADE UNPACKED

Through a decade-long blockade enforced by Israel, Palestinians are restricted from travel by land, air and sea. The impact of ten years of blockade further exacerbates the remaining humanitarian needs 2.5 years after the end of 2014's 51-day hostilities

ACCESS TO CLEAN WATER AND ELECTRICITY IS SPORADIC FOR MOST INHABITANTS

The chronic electricity and fuel deficit affecting Gaza has disrupted the delivery of basic water and sanitation services

40%

OF THE GAZA POPULATION RECEIVES WATER ONLY TWICE A WEEK OR LESS, resulting in a high requirement for domestic water storage

60%

OF GAZA'S POPULATION RESORT TO PRIVATE, UNREGULATED WATER SUPPLIERS, with lower and largely unmonitored hygiene standards

UP TO ONE MILLION PEOPLE COULD BE EXPOSED TO SEVERE PUBLIC HEALTH RISKS, INCLUDING WATER-BORNE DISEASES



Source: 2017 oPt Humanitarian Response Plan (OCHA)

Photo: © Lys Arango for Action Against Hunger



35,000

PEOPLE WHOSE HOUSES WERE TOTALLY AND SEVERELY DESTROYED DURING THE 2014 ESCALATION REMAIN DISPLACED

Although food is available, it is priced out of reach for many. Poor, food insecure families might spend half of their income on food

47%

OF HOUSEHOLDS IN GAZA ARE MODERATELY TO SEVERELY FOOD INSECURE

42%

OF GAZA IS UNEMPLOYED

with 60 per cent of youth unemployment and over 65 per cent of unemployment among women

THE BLOCKADE HAS REDUCED GAZA'S GDP BY

50%

(Source: The World Bank, May 2015)

80%

OF GAZA'S TWO MILLION POPULATION DEPEND ON EXTERNAL AID
(Source: UNRWA)



INCREASING RESILIENCE THROUGH INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITIES

A decade under Israeli blockade and three full-scale wars has heavily impacted the lives and resilience of 2 million Gazans. There is a worrying lack of access to natural resources, basic services and income opportunities. The oPt Humanitarian Needs Overview (OCHA) has repeatedly underlined women's limited access to resources and markets, which increases their vulnerability to poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition.

During the last conflict in 2014, many households lost their livelihoods and source of income, which exposed them to multiple social and economic risks. It is acknowledged that female heads of households are known to be particularly vulnerable. Their care responsibilities to other household members including children, elderly, and the sick and injured - combined with their limited access to job opportunities - heavily hampers their capacities to re-establish their affected livelihoods.

In response to these findings, an intervention was initiated with support from the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) and the oPt Humanitarian Fund (oPt HF), in which Action Against Hunger launched an FSL project in 2016, specifically targeting 160 female single-headed households whose businesses were damaged or lost during the last war. The main objective was to support small Income Generation Activities (IGA) in order to increase disposable income for these highly vulnerable families.

SUSTAINABILITY IN AN UNPREDICTABLE CONTEXT

The 160 selected beneficiaries all live in the governorates of Rafah and Deir Al Balah, identified as having the highest food insecurity rates (FSS, 2015) in Gaza. In order to enhance the beneficiaries' disaster preparedness and response capacities, the support to IGA has been combined with capacity building of the targeted women. Through managerial training courses and business plan development, the beneficiaries are better equipped to relaunch their lost or damaged business, while simultaneously learning to plan ahead with respect to savings and for further developing their businesses in the future. The phased cash injections into the IGA were made conditional, based on verifiable reinvestment into the business.

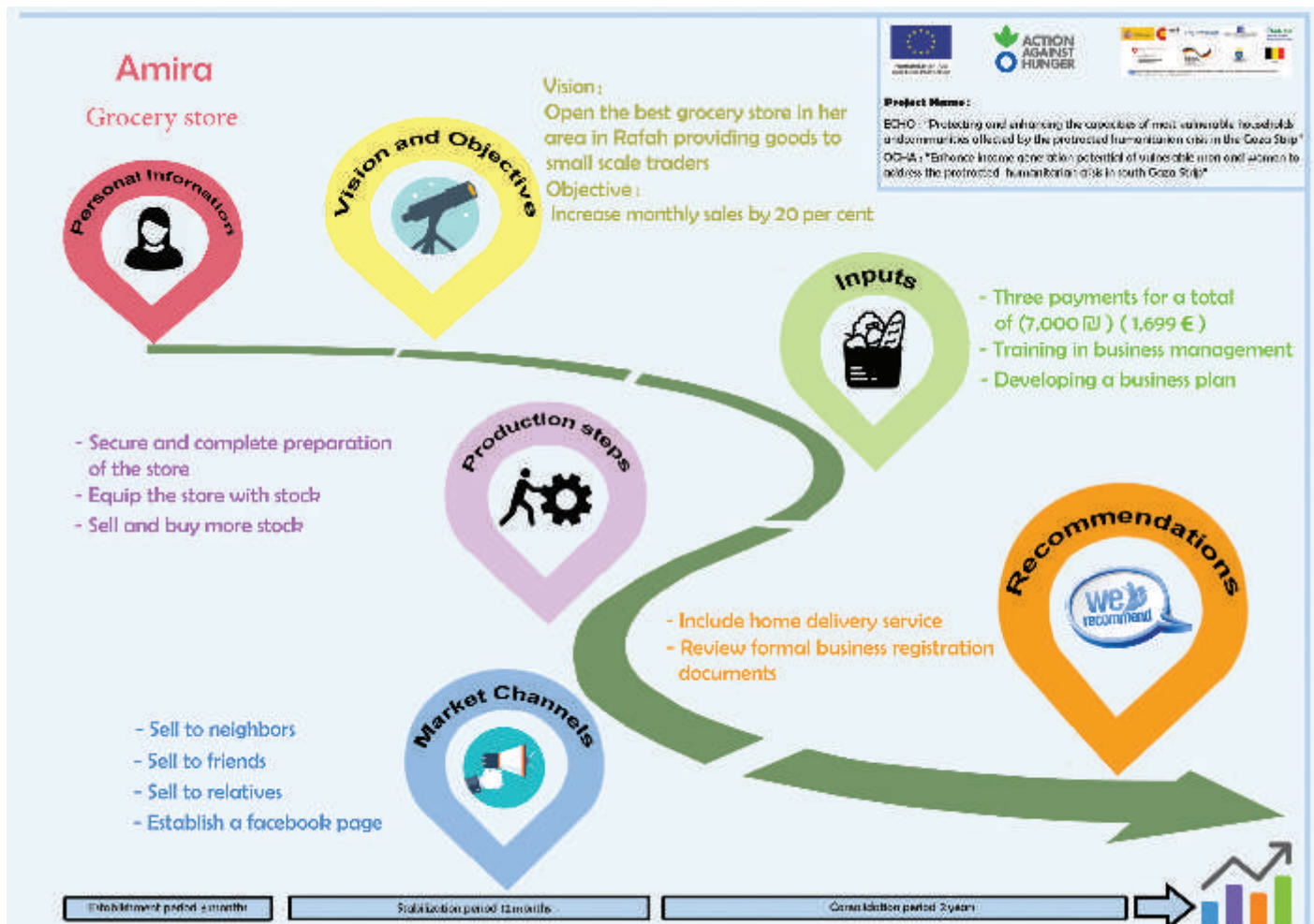


CONTINUOUS MONITORING AND FOLLOW UP

This approach supported the women to prioritize their purchases in line with their business plans, and allowed Action Against Hunger to closely follow up the re-establishment of the businesses. 7 monitoring tools were prepared and applied to all 160 households. At this stage in the process a number of key findings have been identified:

- The establishment of IGA is helping the targeted women beneficiaries to reactivate a sustainable work opportunity and source of income
- The IGA beneficiaries state that traders and shops owners show more trust in their capacity to pay off debts related to business expansion
- Protection issues have also come to the surface during the project implementation. Action Against Hunger will seek to improve organizational capacity to refer cases to agencies with this specific mandate.

In the business plan of every IGA, the priorities have been identified in three phases: an establishment period of 3 months, a stabilization period of 12 months and a consolidation period of 2 years. It is currently not possible to fully assess the overall impact and durability of the approach. Action Against Hunger will continue to closely follow the supported women and monitor their businesses, and provide advice and suggestions when the need arises.





THANK YOU. SHUKRAN.

As Action Against Hunger, we are incredibly grateful to our beneficiaries and right holders, in particular the ones featured in this photo story. These remarkable women allowed us to enter their homes and ask them questions that unwillingly stirred up painful memories. They offered us a privileged insight into **LIFE UNDER BLOCKADE**. Many of them outlived their husbands, children and even grandchildren. Their intimate stories illustrate the devastating impact of the **RESTRICTIONS** imposed by the Israeli Occupying Power and the **REPEATED ASSAULTS ON** Gaza, on the lives and the **MOST FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS OF CIVILIANS**. The ten stories also reveal glimpses of many still untold stories; about domestic violence, social pressure and the multiple hurdles for women in the conservative Gaza society.

Collecting these stories was far from easy. It is challenging to obtain detailed information about the destruction of houses and businesses in a context where people confuse wars. Very often, the initial answer was limited to 'We will find a way, Inch'allah'. The women were not keen on sharing details about **HUNGER AND LACK OF ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES**, like water and adequate sanitation. They however all confirmed that they struggle to make ends meet and that **RELIANCE ON EXTERNAL AID** is a given.

Some of the stories accumulated so much suffering that they almost seemed unrealistic. Unfortunately, this is reality. Many have rightly questioned the 'post' in 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder' in Gaza. Out of respect for these women, their families, and the members who passed away, we deliberately omitted explicit details about the atrocities of the war.

Through **SUPPORTING INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITIES** with conditional cash transfers, combined with training courses and a very close follow-up, Action Against Hunger hopes to revive the lost or damaged businesses of highly vulnerable female-headed households. We aim to render these families less dependent on external aid and more equipped to face periods of hardship. However, a continued follow-up and support of these women is needed to stabilize their emerging commercial activities.

The women featured in this exhibition and the many women they represent, have great visions for their businesses in the future, **DESPITE THE LIMITS** that the blockade imposes upon them. Their **ENERGY, RESILIENCE AND DIGNITY** is what struck us most, and what we hope you will capture as well.



Photos: © Lys Arango
for Action Against Hunger

AMIRA

Source of figures on page 12-31, unless stated otherwise: 2017 oPt
Humanitarian Response Plan (OCHA)
Photos: © Wissam Nassar for Action Against Hunger



A child of eight years in Gaza has now witnessed three conflicts, and children under 10 have only known life under blockade. One in four children in Gaza needs psychosocial support.



Amira's supermarket is the only grocery shop you can see for miles in this part of Southern Gaza. *'Come in'*, says Amira, welcoming me in as she hustles around attending to customers. *'I am always very busy in the morning. And I need to leave soon, by the way'*, Amira adds quickly. *'I am an environmental activist and I'll be checking up on some trees we planted recently.'*

It strikes me that Amira finds the time and energy to volunteer, being the sole breadwinner of a family of three children and caretaker of her sick mother. When talking to Amira, however, one can easily imagine why she is such a familiar face in her community, known for helping people out whenever she can. She is a very vocal women rights advocate and speaks freely about delicate topics, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, so prevalent in Gaza yet rarely discussed openly. *'My kids are disturbed and are experiencing traumatic distress since the last hostilities in Gaza. I am currently taking my four-year-old son to a therapist because he harms himself physically'*, Amira shares with concern.

Her husband is unemployed; the family lost their only income when Amira's little supermarket was looted during the last war in 2014. With Action Against Hunger's assistance, Amira reopened the store and upgraded it. *'I no longer have to reduce my meals to keep my children fed and I can even buy healthy things like fruits, vegetables and fish'*, Amira says. She prioritizes her children's needs and makes sure they are at the top of their class. *'I can now afford to take them out to relaxing places for fresh air, which reduces their mental distress'*, she adds.

Amira now dreams about building her own house, with two little rooms for her children and a well equipped kitchen. She eagerly talks about the Action Against Hunger business training, where she learned how to track margins and profit. But Amira has taken away much more from the course: *'I met all kinds of women there. We also talked a lot about personal problems aside sharing business ideas.'*

Amira glows with ambition and concludes: *'I want to expand my supermarket and turn it into a famous brand in the whole province.'*



EMAN



Although food is available, it is priced out of reach for many. Poor, food insecure families might spend half of their incomes on food. 47% of households in Gaza are moderately to severely food insecure.



I climb out of the car in a bustling street in Rafah where a smiling girl motions me to come in. The broken windows now covered with plastic sheet remind me that even this supposedly safe area has been affected by the war. *'We currently cannot afford to repair the house'*, says Eman as she notices me looking at the building.

Eman is a mother of two with a passion for photography and videography. *'We had a photography studio in the family. I received my first assignment when I was 14 years old. I was in charge of taking pictures at a wedding party.'* Eman explains how little she used to gain before owning her own camera. *'I used to pay 80 percent of my profit as camera rental fee, which left me with about 50 NIS (€12) per assignment.'* Through Action Against Hunger's assistance, Eman bought her own camera and now earns approximately 5 to 6 times more than she made before.

Eman's husband, unable to work for medical reasons, is very proud of her. However, it remains challenging for Eman to be the sole breadwinner of the family. *'My oldest daughter has suffered from chronic ear problems since she was born and my husband also needs continuous medical care. I spend the cash assistance of the Ministry of Social Affairs, 252 NIS (60€) per month, entirely on medication.'*

When talking to Eman, one can easily sense her care in spending money. Memories of the last war still linger. *'We could barely pay our bills. We could not afford cooking gas and I was using pieces of cloth as diapers. I cut down on my own meals to keep my daughters and husband well fed.'*

It is very uncommon to be a female photographer in Gaza, which is why Eman piques the curiosity of many other women in her area. *'At the family studio, we often get visits from women who saw me taking pictures at weddings and who would like to become trained. I'm currently training some women for free.'* I ask Eman why she does not include that on her business card and I advise her to make a photo album with samples of her work. *'That is exactly why I will buy a laptop soon, Insh'allah!'*, Eman smiles.



IBTISAM



Palestinian movement to and from Gaza has declined, affecting medical patients, business people and aid workers. Access restrictions have been exacerbated by the almost continuous closure of the Rafah passenger crossing by Egypt since October 2014.



The delicious smell of freshly baked bread distracts me as Ibtisam shows me into her modest house. *'We do not have much, but freshly baked bread can always satisfy hunger'*, says Ibtisam while offering me a piece.

Being a mother of 10, Ibtisam knows all about finding ways to keep everyone fed with little means. Ibtisam lost four of her children to cancer, meningitis and asthma. Clearly touched and unwilling to stir up painful memories, she moves on to tell the story about her most recent loss: *'My son became sick and needed treatment outside. He died while waiting for a permit to exit Gaza.'*

The movement restrictions and permit regime linked to the blockade on Gaza also impacted Ibtisam's family in other ways. Her husband worked in Israel until the beginning of the second intifada in 2000, he was then denied permission to leave Gaza. Apart from some informal jobs here and there, and raising some poultry, the family has had very little to live on. *'During the last war, it was too dangerous to check on the chickens I kept on the roof, so they all died'*, Ibtisam explains.

As a beneficiary of Action Against Hunger's cash assistance, Ibtisam started a grocery shop because she also wanted to actively involve her unemployed son in the business. With the first instalment, Ibtisam reimbursed the vendors from whom she had previously purchased all the goods. *'Reinvesting and expanding my store comes next'*, explains Ibtisam.

In the training courses of Action Against Hunger, she learned how to deal with vendors as well as customers. *'Regular customers only pay at the beginning of the next month'*, says Ibtisam. *'I now carefully keep track of the debts of clients who buy on credit and of my own debts vis-à-vis vendors'*.

Having a more stable income now allows Ibtisam to introduce her family to a wider and healthier variety of food such as fruits, vegetables and even meat in small quantities. As her husband is ill, the family today is fully dependent on Ibtisam's income.



ASBITA AND WEDAD



35,000 people whose houses were totally and severally destroyed during the 2014 escalation remain displaced.



'Have you ever tried wood fire tea?,' Asbita asks with a smile. 'Come in, the kettle is ready.'

Asbita apologizes about the modesty of her house, as her daughter-in-law, Wedad, pulls up a plastic chair for me. The 2014 hostilities had a destructive impact on this family. When a warning missile hit the house, Asbita's 13-year-old grandson was killed. Asbita and her son's family of four children now live in the only two rooms that were not destroyed. *'We also lost our sheep, chickens and rabbits,'* Asbita explains. *'It was the business I took over after my husband's death.'*

This family has been displaced during all three wars, in 2009, 2012 and 2014. Unlike many other couples in Gaza, Wedad and her husband decided to move back together after having been separated during the hostilities. Traditionally in Gaza, a woman is expected to go back to her own parents' house if her husband is no longer able to cover the family expenses. In such cases, the children would then stay with the father, who remains responsible for them, at his parents' house. *'It was too hard to be separated from my husband, he is my rock,'* says Wedad. *'We struggled to keep the children well fed and we reduced our own meals. We did not care about the quality of the food. We just did not want them to go hungry.'*

Even before the last war in 2014, as Wedad gradually took over responsibilities from Asbita who became ill, she went through many rough days to support the family. *'I had to save up to buy milk for my children. Food in general had become more expensive and scarcer since the beginning of the blockade.'*

Despite the heavy losses during the last hostilities, the family resumed the sheep rearing business after the war with Action Against Hunger's cash assistance. Asbita now takes care of the financial side of things, while the animals are Wedad's responsibility. The ladies explain what they learned in the Action Against Hunger training: *'We were taught to make sound business decisions like buying fodder in bulk to ensure availability and avoid sudden price increases. With the first payment, we prepared the barn, and with the second one we bought the sheep.'*

The family already has future plans for the business. They want to expand into poultry and rabbits again and reach full independence; free from external aid. Wedad tells me how reassured she is now that she can offer her children vegetables, fruits and even meat up to twice a week.

'A friend recently asked me for tips on how to create her own business,' Wedad smiles. *'I offered her my business plan!'*



WAFAA AND HANAA



Longstanding access restrictions imposed by Israel have undermined Gaza's economy, resulting in high levels of unemployment, food insecurity and aid dependency. These include restrictions on transfer of goods to the West Bank and Israel.





'Not in my wildest dreams did I imagine exporting our handicrafts to the West Bank', Wafaa says while proudly showing me the pillow cases and bed linen she designed and sewed together with her older sister, Haana.

Initially two individual applicants to Action Against Hunger's income generating program, the two sisters now work together in a room at the elder sister's house, which saves them the cost of renting. It was the eldest sister who first saw Action Against Hunger's project announcement at the local women's association. She now supports her siblings with the general management of their joint business.

Wafaa and Hanaa both dream of transforming their joint business into a small factory. The restrictions on movement of goods and people between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, however, do not allow them to run a normal business. *'We can only leave Gaza under very restrictive conditions'*, Wafaa explains. *'We have not been able so far to deliver the big orders we started receiving from the West Bank through our Facebook page.'*

Both sisters have come a long way to arrive at this point. 35-year-old Hanaa, mother of six, and currently the sole breadwinner, saw her life change when her husband could no longer work in Israel during the second Intifada in 2001. Throughout the three wars in Gaza, Hanaa and her children lived on the income of the husband's temporary jobs and support from the family-in-law. *'My elder sister convinced me to take sewing courses at a local women program'*, Hanaa explains. *'At that time, I didn't realize I was paving the way for my future business.'*

The 2014 hostilities also impacted Hanaa's younger sister, 25-year-old Wafaa. The home-based sewing workroom that she had established to cover the cost of her university studies, was completely destroyed. Through Action Against Hunger's project, both sisters realized that their businesses would be stronger if they would work together. *'The training showed us how to operate a business; we even learned about advertising through Facebook!'*, Wafaa smiles.

Hanaa praises herself lucky for having a supportive family. *'During the Action Against Hunger training, I met women who suffer from domestic violence. I dream of managing a little factory operated by women who come from such vulnerable backgrounds.'*

Wafaa nods and adds *'Every woman dreams of marriage and motherhood, but right now my work comes first'*.



SUJOOD



1460 Palestinian civilians, of whom 556 children and 299 women, died during the devastating hostilities between 7 July and 26 August 2014. At least 790 women were widowed as a result of the 2014 hostilities (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2015).



I was greeted by a beautiful little girl with a huge burn scar across her face. After calling her mother to announce our arrival to no avail, she goes and yanks her jacket to alert her. *'Sorry, my mom only hears in one ear,'* the girl explains.

Sujood's daughter's scar leads the conversation straight to the horrors of the last Gaza war in 2014. Their house was bombed while they were sleeping. Sujood was severely burned and lost hearing in one ear. Her husband died on the spot. *'My seven-year-old daughter was found under the body of her dead father,'* Sujood shares with me. *'She underwent plastic surgery and still needs very expensive creams to treat the burns. She was greatly traumatized and stopped speaking for a while because of the shock.'*

As the bombing destroyed the whole house, Sujood had to resort to seeking shelter in a school until the war ended, after which time she received cash assistance to rent a house. *'My husband used to sell o'ouga (sweet bread) before he passed away, but we had no savings,'* Sujood explains. *'Therefore, after the war, I and my three daughters relied on food coupons and support from neighbors and family'*

With Action Against Hunger's support, Sujood eventually started a chair rental business. Whether it is a wedding or a funeral, people always need chairs. Although Sujood is still suffering from her burns, she is active and ambitious. She even dreams of combining her current commerce with a photography business in the future. *'During the war,'* she explains, *'I realized how important it is to document people's suffering. And that is possible through photography.'*

Sujood learned about saving up money and marketing: *'I placed a banner outside and I tell everyone around that I am renting out chairs.'* I ask her why she does not have business cards and stickers to spread the word. *'That is a good idea, I will look into it!'*, Sujood smiles.



GHADA



Acutely vulnerable communities such as IDPs and food-insecure households, resort to negative coping mechanisms (child labor, early marriage) disrupting the right to education for boys and girls.

In Gaza, one in three women who were married in 2015 were below the age of 18.



Even before I met Ghada, I understood her vision when I saw her shop. On one of the central streets of Rafah, only a few steps away from Ghada's house, sits the hair salon that she will soon open. The work has advanced by leaps and bounds to be ready for the opening date.

'I chose a shop nearby so I can immediately transfer all valuable equipment and my cash to a safer room at my home if anything happens', Ghada tells me. Even though Ghada lives at her parents' home, and could rely on them for water and electricity expenses for her business, she insisted on buying separate water tanks and having an independent electrical system. *'The business training of Action Against Hunger showed me the importance of carefully keeping track of my own expenses and profit'*, Ghada explains.

As Ghada opens up to me about her troubled past of domestic violence and divorce after 20 years of marriage, I understand what independence must really mean to her. She explains it is a dream come true for her to have her own hair salon. *'Being a divorced woman is not easy in Gazan society'*, Ghada stresses. *'My family, however, supported my decision and registered me in different courses, which eventually allowed me to start working as a home beautician in 2010.'*

Being the caretaker of two sisters, one divorced and one disabled, Ghada is an avid believer and advocate for women's rights. Action Against Hunger's project further inspired Ghada to help other women: *'I would like to train as many women as possible to offer them a career that guarantees a sustainable income'*, says Ghada enthusiastically. *'Hopefully I can employ them when I manage to expand my business.'*



YASMEEN



72% of the IGA (Income Generating Activities) beneficiaries face threats affecting their households due to their proximity to potential war targets (border area, police station, mosque etc.). 16% of the IGA beneficiaries state that they face threats affecting their personal well-being - mainly Gender-based violence (Action Against Hunger, 2017).



I can immediately see Yasmeen's life's journey in her eyes when she welcomes me into her humble hairdressing salon. *'I live alone, so it was convenient to have my business inside my house, I made a space for it as you can see'*, Yasmeen explains as she leads the way. *'This house was partially damaged during the last war. We fixed a few things with compensation money, but much more work needs to be done. Look up, can you see the destruction?'*

Yasmeen is a single woman living on her own in this conservative part of Gaza. She openly talks about her deceased parents, in particular about her dad, who died during the 2014 war. *'My parents always supported my wish to finish my studies and to become financially independent.'* She points outside to the surrounding houses, where her brothers live. *'They wanted to control me, and my business. I suffered from abuse from them and their spouses more than once. It makes me appreciate my independence; I hold onto it tightly'*, Yasmeen explains.

After graduating from a professional hairdressing and beauty course in 2007, Yasmeen started working as a home beautician and hairdresser. The three assaults on Gaza since that date, however, complicated her work. Still determined to ensure her independence, she started a sheep breeding business, about which she knew nothing, until Action Against Hunger's program allowed her to pick up the thread and open a home-based beauty salon again. *'I only have my business to wake up to every morning. Even if I ever decide to get married, leaving my business is not an option'*, Yasmeen stresses. She aspires to have an actual salon outside her home, and to train and employ other women. *'Hopefully I will not need external funding anymore in the future'*, Yasmeen adds.

Since the Action Against Hunger business training, she started marketing for her business actively through social media and street banners. Yasmeen convincingly adds: *'I also learned to save up money and to soon expand my business!'*



MONA



Over the course of the 2014 summer hostilities 12,620 housing units were totally destroyed and 6,455 were severely damaged, displacing 17,670 families or about 100,000 persons. At the height of the conflict, an estimated 485,000 people – 28% of the population – were displaced.



I am standing on what was previously the family house of Mona and the business of her mother. This neighborhood was completely razed during the 2014 hostilities and is now being rebuilt. *'I'm sorry I can only offer you a plastic chair'*, Mona apologizes, *'I'm sharing this floor with my brother's family until the whole building is reconstructed. We currently can't afford furniture.'*

Mona quit school at the age of twelve to take care of her sick parents and her siblings. She had to learn how to manage the sheep and poultry breeding family business. *'I grew up running around my mother who took such good care of our animals, without realizing that this business financially covered the whole family. Being put into my mother's role when she became ill felt like a huge responsibility.'* Mona couldn't have known that things were about to become even harder when the war started in 2014 and she would find herself as a 28-year-old responsible for a family of 5, but this time without a house, a business or a mother watching over her shoulder.

Shortly before their house was destroyed, Mona and her family moved in with relatives who lived in an area that was considered safer. When Mona found her complete neighborhood, including the family home, flattened to the ground right after the war, she decided to start renting a house. *'After two months, and having sold most of my personal belongings, we had no more savings to spend on either rent or food. Cooking gas was very expensive, but food coupons kept us afloat.'* The family eventually decided to return to the rubble of their previous house and to live there in a plastic shack until the reconstruction started.

As a single woman and breadwinner of the family, Mona applied for Action Against Hunger's program to kick start a business of her own and follow the footsteps of her mother, who had followed the footsteps of her grandmother. *'The training courses showed me the importance of saving money to reinvest in my business and prepare for future emergencies'*, Mona explains. *'Things will start getting better soon, Insh'allah.'*



KAMELIA



Female heads of households in Gaza are known to be particularly vulnerable. Women have limited access to resources and markets, which increases their vulnerability to poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition.



'So where is Kamelia's house?', I ask the driver while I climb out of the car carefully not to get my shoes muddy. As I am trying to locate the beautiful house that people have talked to me about, I notice a small villa with a well maintained front yard. Only a few minutes later I realize there is no furniture inside the house. No one would ever consider this family has suffered from having so little.

'We used to live in a room at my husband's family house with our seven children, before building this house', says Kamelia as if she is reading my mind. Unlike what you would intuitively expect in a place hit by recurrent wars and massive damage to infrastructure, Kamelia is one of the many women in Gaza who believe owning a house is a safety net. *'We put all our savings into building this house, but walls do not feed children'*, she sighs. Little did she know about the future political changes that would turn her life upside down.

In the early days of the blockade on Gaza, Kamelia's husband lost his job. He had been working for many years in a Palestinian construction factory that was fully dependent on imported materials from Israel. In return for food, her husband started helping out his sister at her little supermarket. *'No longer having an income, forced us to cut down on meals and count on support from my family'*, Kamelia explains. *'My neighbors kept telling me that I should sell the house. I refused and even after being displaced twice during both the 2008 and 2014 wars, we always went back to our house.'*

After many fruitless attempts to find a job, despite having a Bachelor degree in teaching Arabic, Kamelia eventually came across Action Against Hunger's income generating program and her application was accepted. *'It was such a relief to have a social worker considering my case beyond the first look at my house.'*

Kamelia's family members are all closely involved in the sheep breeding business she established with Action Against Hunger's cash assistance. Her son, an engineering student, built the sheep shed and her husband helps her with the daily chores. *'My community was very skeptical about me starting a sheep breeding business, but I gained confidence during the training courses. I was taught how to manage my commerce; I also learnt how to plan ahead and save money for future investments.'*

Kamelia explains that she considers her small business as a first step towards a more sustainable income. She smilingly adds: *'The sheep are just like my children now. I check on them constantly!'*



**FOR FOOD.
AGAINST WALLS SEPARATING
PEOPLE FROM THEIR LANDS.**

**FOR CLEAN WATER.
AGAINST UNEQUAL ACCESS.**

**FOR CHILDREN THAT
GROW UP STRONG.
AGAINST WAR.**

**FOR CROPS THIS YEAR,
AND NEXT.
AGAINST BLOCKADES
ERODING LIVELIHOODS.**

**FOR CHANGING MINDS.
AGAINST IGNORANCE
AND INDIFFERENCE.**

**FOR FREEDOM FROM HUNGER.
FOR EVERYONE. FOR GOOD.**



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