Focus Group Discussions with Affected Communities in Palestine

Main Findings

Background and Methodology

In preparation for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) regional consultation for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held in Palestine on 27-28 January 2015 with people affected by humanitarian crises. The discussions were facilitated by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) with the support of the Sharek Youth Forum (SYF), a Palestinian national NGO working closely with affected people, in addition to being a member of the Regional Steering Group for the WHS MENA regional consultation. The FGDs were held the premises of SYF in Ramallah and Jericho ‘Ariha’. Participants in Gaza were consulted via Skype and included youth, women and community leaders.

The sessions were structured in three parts: first, the WHS global and regional process was introduced; second, participants discussed their experiences and views of humanitarian action, guided by a ‘listening questionnaire’ developed with the support of a WHS advisory group on Communicating with Communities; and third, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire to complement the findings of the discussion. A total of 34 people were consulted, with 50% of the participants having received humanitarian aid. Thirty respondents completed the questionnaire. This report represents a summary of both the views expressed during the discussions as well as the survey responses.

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<th>Group</th>
<th>Target group</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Palestinian – Youth (West Bank and Jerusalem)</td>
<td>18-30</td>
<td>M &amp; F</td>
<td>Jericho, 27 Jan 2015</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Palestinian – Women (West Bank)</td>
<td>18-40</td>
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<td>Jericho, 27 Jan 2015</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Palestinian – Community leaders (Gaza)</td>
<td>+26</td>
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<td>Ramallah, 28 Jan 2015</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Palestinian – Community leaders (West Bank)</td>
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On a 10-point scale where 10=high and 1=low, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire that included questions on access to humanitarian services, priority needs and evaluation of performance of humanitarian actors.
Main Findings

In line with civil society consultations held in Palestine, the main finding from the FGDs was the need to address the root causes of people’s suffering, which in the context of Palestine requires an end to the occupation. Participants expressed how this would eliminate the need for continued humanitarian response and lay the foundations for development. However, in the absence of addressing the root causes, participants called for continued support through sustainable interventions that address people’s medium to longer-term needs and seek an end to continued human rights violations. Around 40% of the FGDs participants claimed to have been affected by the humanitarian situation for more than five years, and stated that the continued provision of short-term relief was not sustainable. In Gaza, however, participants did emphasize the need for improving short-term delivery of emergency relief, with discussions significantly informed by their experience of humanitarian action during the conflict in Gaza in the summer of 2014.

The following are the main issues highlighted by the participants consulted in Palestine:

Responding to Protracted Crises

- Participants highlighted the importance of capitalizing on development gains under occupation, which was deemed necessary for their empowerment. Short-term projects were deemed unsustainable and participants called for interventions that promote their reliance, self-empowerment and ability to cope with the impacts of the occupation. They recognized the fact that the lack of stability makes it difficult for organizations to work on sustainable projects and infrastructure; however, they called for greater commitment, risk taking and innovative solutions in this regard.

- Participants also expressed frustration at the fact that due to the protracted nature of the crisis, and that there have been many other new and deteriorating crises in the region, the level of attention and resources to the Palestinian cause has dwindled. They pointed to the reduction in assistance provided by UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Palestine Refugees in the Near East) as an example, which has significant impact on the lives and well-being of affected people.

Humanitarian Financing

- Participants expressed concern at the politicization of humanitarian financing, particularly the impact of donor country’s counter-terrorism measures, which require national NGOs to declare and prove that they do not provide assistance to terrorist organizations or to those who are affiliated with such organizations. These measures require organization staff and in some cases beneficiaries to undergo

“Given the fact that Palestine is under occupation and there are chronic problems in Gaza, donors and organizations are still unable to work on sustainable projects and all the solutions are short-term with no long-term impact. The funding shouldn’t be based on the donors’ agenda but serve the beneficiaries.”

Palestinian youth, West Bank
extensive examination to determine whether they are engaged in terrorist related activities. This was considered a lengthy and in some cases degrading procedure, that undermined legitimate humanitarian work and hampered the timely provision of assistance based on need.

- Another concern related to funding is the perception that donors have insufficient oversight and monitoring of implementing agencies, and that despite the fact that a lot of money is available for Palestine, it is not transparently and appropriately spent. For example, some implementing agencies, including the government, were deemed by participants as selecting beneficiaries based on their political affiliation and/or personal connections rather than need.

- They also complained about the shortage of funds for UNRWA, which have affected the quantity and quality of the services provided in schools and primary health clinics. This shortage has also affected the salaries of many UNRWA employees, impacting their livelihoods and subsequently the quality of services being provided to beneficiaries.

**Accountability to Affected People**

- One of the biggest concerns raised by the participants was the perceived lack of accountability and transparency of humanitarian organizations. They felt they were unable to access key information about project costs and criteria for selecting beneficiaries, thus questioning organizations’ commitments to principles of accountability and in some instances suspecting of corruption in humanitarian aid. Some participants spoke about perceived favoritism, corruption and a lack of real needs assessments informing project proposals in some organizations.

- Several participants called for greater monitoring and evaluation for many humanitarian projects carried out by national and international NGOs, as they suspected manipulation of funding and instances of corruption. Moreover, there is a perception that project budgets are not spent appropriately, focusing on high-visibility activities, such as repainting building walls and paying for media coverage. In Gaza, participants claimed that distributions were carried out in places where there would be media coverage rather than the greatest need.

- They also called for greater affected community participation in project planning, arguing that there is no clear mechanism for follow-up to suggest ideas or provide feedback to respective organizations. Sometimes they hear in the news that there is large amount of funding available for them but they feel what they actually receive is minimal in comparison.

- The survey results reaffirmed that there is weak engagement between humanitarian organizations and affected communities, with responders ranking aid groups’ efforts in listening to and taking into account affected peoples' opinions 3.7 out of 10. The survey also indicated affected Palestinians felt they were treated with only a limited amount of respect and dignity, ranking aid groups 5.2 out of 10 in this regard. These sentiments differed by gender, with women rating aid groups lower than their male counterparts, averaging a score of 1 out of 10.
United Nations Relief and Works Agency for the Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

- Some participants stated the importance of the UNRWA’s role in meeting the needs of Palestine refugees, particularly in the fields of education, vocational training, development of water resources, employment projects, and small loans for refugees. They also deemed it a symbol for the creation of a Palestinian state and maintaining the refugees’ right of return. However, there were numerous criticisms towards the agency. Participants claimed that UNRWA’s mandate was too broad and in some instances vague, which they felt lead to the agency in some instances to exceed their primary duties in providing assistance to Palestine refugees. For example, some perceived UNRWA as seeking to interfere in some of the responsibilities of the Palestinian Authority in order to promote its role and prominence. In other instances, the lack of clarity in its mandate was deemed to be leading the agency to avoid its responsibility and accountability towards beneficiaries, such as in protection.

- Additionally, there was some criticism concerning UNRWA’s and the broader UN’s procedures for acquiring assistance and getting projects started, which at times were deemed complex and bureaucratic. There was a call for stronger monitoring and supervision to ensure projects are meeting agreed objectives and standards.

Localizing Humanitarian Response and Humanitarian Coordination

- Participants spoke about the role of international and national NGOs in Palestine. They mentioned the fact that there are a high number of foreigners recruited in humanitarian organizations compared to national staff, despite equivalent experience and knowledge and greater understanding of the context. Given limited funding available, hiring more national staff was seen as an effective cost reducing measure that would also support local employment. They agreed that internationals have an important role to play but that they should not replace national staff when the expertise and experience exist locally.

- They also called for greater support to first responders, which were mostly affected communities themselves. The humanitarian system was deemed not to be effectively supporting them and focused more on their more formal role. The role of youth was also highlighted as central in times of emergency but they are not supported or sufficiently engaged.

- Participants also felt that there was a lack of coordination among aid agencies, which leads to duplication of projects or a lack of impartiality in the aid or services being distributed and provided. Participants expressed frustration at this lack of coordination especially since these organizations have been working in the same context for many years.

“UNRWA’s mandate interferes with the Palestinian Authority’s responsibilities in order to ensure its own survival, and this affects the sovereignty of the Palestinian Authority.”

Palestinian community leader
Participants also felt there was a need for stronger coordination between UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority and for greater clarity in the division of roles and responsibility, with a few participants calling on UNRWA not to undermine the sovereignty or responsibility of the government. Some spoke of UNRWA competing with the Palestinian Authority for funds from donors, and that this has a negative impact on the affected populations. They called for the government to be further included in responding to crises.

Protection and Safety

Protection was repeatedly mentioned as a top priority, with participants expressing the fact that they are vulnerable to arrest by Israeli security forces, and neither UNRWA nor the Palestinian Authority provide adequate protection. Survey respondents ranked the extent to which they feel safe and protected from violence to be 2.7 out of 10. Women rated their feeling of protection 3.1 out of 10, higher than the average for men. They felt the government and humanitarian organizations could do more to promote human rights, particularly in the context of the occupation, where Palestinians deal with recurring outbreaks of violence, security restrictions, curfews and harassment. They also felt that concerns with the safety of humanitarian staff meant that their presence to do protection work was often limited. However, they also recognized the limits of what humanitarian organizations could do in this regard.

In Gaza, whilst aid agencies speak of promoting the dignity of people and applying “do no harm” principles, participants mentioned this is not always the case in practice. They spoke of organizations leaving aid packages during active conflict for beneficiaries to pick up. They felt this put their security at risk as they had to venture out to receive them. Given the repeated cycles of violence in Gaza, participants reiterated the importance of their safety and protection and the limits of providing material assistance in the absence of a means of protection. They also called for greater support from the government and humanitarian organisations to build shelters and help repair destroyed houses.

Participants also mentioned that the large number of Palestinians working in the settlements continues to grow because of the high rate of unemployment in the occupied Palestinian territories. These workers were deemed to be facing economic, social, and sexual exploitation and require protection.

Health and Education Services

Participants criticised the level and quality of educational services in the camps, stating that they are available only at the elementary level. The poor quality of the services was linked to a lack of funding and proper external oversight. This was a priority for the participants, which was deemed one of their most important needs even in times of emergency.
• On average, Palestinians survey respondents ranked health as the sixth most important need out of fourteen in the event of a crisis\(^2\). They spoke about difficulties in getting cancer treatments as they are expensive, and some types of treatment (such as chemotherapy) are not available.

• The delays in treatment lead to a deterioration in patients’ condition including physical and mental suffering that patients endure given the uncertainty of whether they will get treatment.

• They also spoke of the significant need for psychosocial support during times of conflict. For the Palestinians in Gaza, one of the most important needs expressed was psychosocial support, which they felt was not a priority for humanitarian organizations.

Preparedness and Resilience in Conflict

• When asked about preparedness for crises, participants stated that they were not familiar with the preparedness concept and no one had approached them about it. Some participants who were aware of the need for preparedness mentioned that no organizations had taken the lead to take it forward, with most geared towards response. In Gaza for example, they spoke about a lack of adequate evacuation centers despite three rounds of violence in recent years.

• This finding was confirmed by the survey results, with participants on average rating the degree to which aid groups help them, their family and their community prepare for future crises 2.9 out of 10. This confirmed the need to strengthen preparedness with affected communities, which was deemed critical to building local resilience to future emergencies.

Neutrality and Impartiality

• Participants spoke of a lack of neutrality by humanitarian organizations, with the UN refusing to work with the Hamas government in Gaza. They also questioned their impartiality, with assistance being provided on the basis of access rather than need given how frequent checkpoints are closed. Survey respondents rated aid agencies’ adherence to neutrality and impartiality to be 4.1 out of 10, confirming their view that the principles of neutrality and impartiality are not always upheld.

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\(^2\) These included: Safety/security, food, shelter, water, cash, education, emergency health services, regular health care, mental health services/counseling, information about humanitarian goods and services, information about what is happening in the country (news), employment, space for children to play and ‘other’.
Recommendations

The below are the recommendations put forth by members of affected communities in Palestine to improve the humanitarian system:

Protection of Civilians

- On the issue of protection, Palestinian refugees called for better guarantees from conflict parties to protect aid workers and relief goods during conflicts, ensuring better compliance with International Humanitarian Law and holding perpetrators of these laws accountable. They also stressed the importance of instilling protection mechanism for refugees working inside 1948 borders.

- Preparedness efforts should support civilians in learning how to deal with recurrent violence rather than just on how to distribute aid in conflict zones.

- To address difficulties of delivering humanitarian aid in conflicts, refugees suggested establishing humanitarian “committee” that is known to and recognized by armed actors. This committee should be able to safely access the affected areas to deliver assistance. Maintaining communication between local communities was considered vital by refugees, especially during periods of violence.

Addressing Root Causes of Conflict

- Putting an end to the occupation, which was identified as the main cause of human suffering in Palestine for the last 66 years, was strongly called for by Palestinian refugees.

- They also called for providing sustainable interventions that focus on economic empowerment projects aimed at building the resilience of Palestinians to withstand the effects of the occupation. This should involve both the humanitarian and development community.

- Political imprisonment of Palestinians was also raised as a key concern for the participants, who emphasized the importance of finding solutions to resolve it.

Accountability

- Refugees called for establishing a neutral body that can carry out independent evaluations that assess the effectiveness of humanitarian work.

- More resources and efforts should be invested in building local preparedness and response capacity, especially for youth groups.
• Engagement with affected populations should be in both the planning and implementation of projects, building on their know-how and capacity as first responders is needed.

• Feedback mechanisms should be provided for affected communities to evaluate the humanitarian response and services.

• Donors should enforce stronger accountability and transparency measures when dealing with implementing partners. They should also take measures to mitigate the impacts of counter-terror measures and ensure flexible funding mechanisms, especially in the case of sudden onset disasters.

Coordination

• Coordination mechanisms for both humanitarian and development organizations should be further enhanced and strengthened, to be guided by a joint response plan for addressing humanitarian needs in the country. These coordination bodies should take into account the efforts of national governments as well as private efforts.

• Crisis management coordination activities should take place before, during, and after crises. There should be adequate communication between different actors to reduce unplanned and arbitrary responses after crises.