



# Education in Gaza Strip in light of the Corona crisis

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This paper will attempt to answer the question of the Corona crisis impact on education in Gaza Strip in light of successive economic and social crises that the Strip has been going through. The situation in Gaza Strip is unique in terms of the unprecedented injustice it's been under as well as the amazing ability of its people to survive in the face of all challenges, especially with regard to education.

The paper will also attempt to analyze the role of civil society organizations in light of the recent crisis and the extent of their involvement in response to the crisis: Did NGOs contribute to the solution? Or were the steps they've taken a reflection of the political, social and economic crises existing already?

## Gaza in the Arab context

Everyone would agree that the Corona crisis has added to the absence of justice and equality for exposed and marginalized groups in terms of their access to education. The crisis has come at a time of many questions raised on how to save the right to education in hot areas under bombing, such as Yemen, Libya, Syria and Iraq, besieged areas such as Gaza Strip, and societies suffering from hunger and extreme poverty in Somalia, Sudan and other countries. These areas suffer from poor infrastructure as well as very difficult social, economic and

political conditions. Sustainable Development Goal SDG number 4 concerning education has not been achieved in these areas and is as weak as the infrastructure. Education has not been able to withstand challenges during regular times; the situation is much worse in light of this unprecedented pandemic that is spreading over time and place. Education seems to be the most affected by the pandemic in those regions which were not well prepared to provide good education to begin with, and things are getting worse as the responsibility is doubling.

## **Educational conditions**

Talking about education may seem too general, or out of context, but discussing one example can help reveal defects that have historically destroyed educational systems in these regions; regions due to continued suffering have become unable to deal with any transient event not to mention a pandemic. For this purpose, we'll be talking about remote learning (online learning) which was used as an alternative to face-to-face learning. This strategy, which did not succeed in reaching all people and areas, has revealed defects of the educational policies.

## **The crisis revealed fragility of the situation**

The crisis came to reveal shame and weaknesses, and emphasize the need for solidarity and belief in values. Most visible weaknesses appeared to be the educational policies and systems, particularly with regard to the less privileged groups such as persons with disabilities, women, and the poor. This coincided with the fact that influencing policies needs open democratic societies that accept criticism and accountability, which, unfortunately, is not the case in the region. This means that the task of reforming education in the Arab region needs a social-educational movement that goes beyond the traditional dependence on implementing activities and projects only.

The crisis demonstrated that education has an important role in protecting people. It is the key to progress and prosperity for all humanity, especially since the scenarios that are presented to deal with the crisis in the long-term situation require qualified and educated people.

## **The education crisis in the Gaza Strip**

The situation in the Gaza Strip remains fragile, amid accumulations of a high number of victims, and the presence of disabilities and psychological and social cases on the long term, and amid high unemployment rate which rose from 43% in 2018 to about 47% in the second quarter of 2019.

Youth unemployment reached 64% while nearly 46% of the population are below the poverty line of \$5.5, and there are estimates that 62% of households suffer acute or moderate form of food insecurity. All of these are miserable facts with evidence of an increase in the use of negative and harmful coping mechanisms by vulnerable groups, especially children. This in turn is reflected in high dropout rates, child labor and early marriage, and the suffering of about 270 thousand children from mental disorders.

The worsening social and economic situation deepened the impact of conditions due to the blockade and the recurrent conflict in the Gaza Strip. The educational system proved unable to provide adequate education to more than half a million children affected by the deterioration of living conditions. Teachers are receiving partial salaries; public schools lack operational budgets; not to mention the limited access to education, especially for persons with disabilities. There are also the issues of psychological problems that affect the majority of children and teachers, and the fact that a large number of schools work two or three shifts per day, in addition to the crowdedness of classrooms.

**On the possibility of implementing e-learning in the Gaza Strip, the question is: Is the large**

number of students in classrooms consistent with the ability to manage remote learning? Do poor students have electronic devices? Is this approach appropriate for the most congested area in the world which suffers continuous power outs?

These questions have no answers. Everyone knows the situation here where people have been under a long-term blockade and successive wars which left school buildings and infrastructure deteriorated; all of this has affected people's lives and the way they deal with each other.

Gaza is unlike any other place in the world. It does not have enough budgets to provide requirements of the educational system. No additional budgets have been allocated for education during the crisis. Educational facilities are closed, the challenges are increasing, and about half a million students are without education.

There may have been some attempts here and there, but were students and teachers prepared to deal with this situation? Are remote learning mechanisms suitable in a complex reality such as the Gaza Strip? There is no ultimate answer of yes or no.

### **Readiness to face crises**

Palestinians in Gaza Strip are not ready for remote learning whether cognitively or psychologically. In addition, indicators reflected in numbers provided by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reveal the impossibility of being limited to this option. A little more than a third of Palestinian families have a computer, 65% of them have access to the Internet at home, and 80% possess basic skills to use information technology.

But even in light of these statistics, which confirm the impossibility of achieving justice and fairness, it cannot be said that these statistics reflect the reality of the situation in the Strip. In Gaza, within two hours, the Internet gets disrupted more than 20 times, and about three times the connection can be unclear. The situation in Gaza is extremely complicated. There is a need for students to continue learning remotely as education facilities are closed. Ministry of Education is in need of electronic learning forums; quality forums that are unified and not affected by the division.

What is required is a unity of position, unity in everything and definitely unity among NGOs so they would direct their programs towards providing home educational materials to people who have no access to the internet in marginalized areas. Children need to receive messages of support and awareness. As the general secondary examinations approach, the need for sufficient supplies of hygiene materials and disinfectants is becoming prominent so schools can be disinfected before students begin their tests. Teachers and children are in need of social and psychological support through innovative methods that use social media and phone calls.

### **The current crisis is pointing our attention to a number of things:**

**First:** Strengthening solidarity and unity at the national level is important to help the Gaza Strip overcome its problems.

**Second:** It is important to develop tools to achieve unity in society within the framework of a social and educational movement.

**Third:** Civil society's immunity is part of the

general society's immunity, and society's readiness comes for the readiness of its civil components.

**Fourth:** It is necessary to develop our abilities to respond, especially those of civil society institutions.

**Fifth:** Strengthening and developing the social responsibility of the private sector towards education.

**Sixth:** The educational movement in the Gaza Strip needs to work in harmony with the Palestinian people and with a strong presence at the regional and international levels.

### **With regard to the educational process, it is necessary to:**

- Provide teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to deal with students in times of crisis.
- Provide adequate budgets to run the educational process.
- Ensure that educational policies take into

account marginalized regions and groups, especially persons with disabilities.

- Serious consideration needs to be given to the position of female teachers, whether in terms of educational policies or societal culture, which undermine their capabilities.

- Serious consideration of remote learning strategies and the use of technology and integrating it with face-to-face learning, as well as teachers' and infrastructure's needs that can support the learning process.

This is the tip of the iceberg, and much more is required, but the Corona pandemic has deepened a crisis that already exists, and increased the gap between the reality of the educational situation and SDG's goal number four, so suffering remains the most prominent factor. At this point, people with disability have not received any attention and have not been part of any plans. In summary, the reality of the situation in Gaza Strip on this level is nothing less than a tragedy.

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