

Protection in the occupied Palestinian territories

By Rafael Eguiguren & Luna Saadeh

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Executive Summary

"They can do projects here for 1,000 years and nothing will change"

I don't understand why the international actors do what they do. They come here with aid and development projects, but that is not effective (...). It is not effective because the problem here is not a specific crisis, but a long-standing occupation. You have to realize that with the present logic, they can do projects for 1,000 years and nothing will change (...). So please stop giving us blankets and do the right thing by holding Israel accountable.

Woman, Ramallah, West Bank

Since 2009, the Local to Global Protection (L2GP)¹ initiative has undertaken action research with crisis-affected communities to better understand protection challenges from a local perspective. Coupled with research on how communities are coping with crisis and their opinions on appropriate and effective solutions, the research hopes to contribute to increased effectiveness of humanitarian actors and action. The present research on the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) is the sixth full L2GP study to date, and it is based on interviews with over 500 men and women living in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.

Threats identified by communities

Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories stress that the main protection threat they face is what they see as the very cause of the crisis itself - the Israeli occupation. Local communities consider this threat more important than any other and the root of any other significant protection vulnerability. Without further probing from the researchers,

conversations about protection and self-protection tend to stop here. Repeatedly Palestinians expressed the opinion - and their frustration - that international protection and humanitarian actors focus primarily on providing a minimum level of survival assistance, and to a lesser extent focus on mitigating the impacts of the occupation. Rather, Palestinians feel that protection and humanitarian actors have a responsibility to protect that involves primarily demanding accountability from Israel on its obligations under International Law (*see details in the full report*) and should increase national and international advocacy efforts.

When probed, Palestinians report on how their protection needs vary significantly by location, even within the same city or between villages close to each other. The other major source of variability in vulnerability and difference in perception of threats is gender. All interviewees emphasize how they depend on the degree to which restrictions are applied by Israel, influencing the degree of economic activity and subsequently employment, freedom of movement, the availability and quality of services and infrastructure, including housing and municipal services, and the policies and practice of local government. This complexity underlines the importance of a context-specific and participatory problem analysis when designing programmes meant to reinforce local coping strategies and resilience.

By geographic location, the main immediate protection threats and challenges can be broadly categorised:

1. In East Jerusalem, protection priorities include the "housing crisis" due to home demolition (and associated psychological trauma) and restrictions on home building, subsequent overcrowding, discriminatory provision of municipal services, risk of losing right to residency, severe lack of economic opportunities and resulting poverty, restricted movement and access to land and other livelihood opportunities not least due to "The Wall"² all of which are perceived as strategies being employed by the Israeli government to encourage displacement or movement out of Jerusalem;
2. In the West Bank (Area C³), extreme water shortages for both domestic use and for livelihoods, the latter resulting in reduced grazing areas and fodder for livestock-dependent Bedouin groups, shortages of electricity affecting livelihoods and schools, land confiscation, restricted movement not only of people but also of goods, lack of adequate transportation, the latter particularly affecting school-age youth and women, lack of private sector investment, and corruption/nepotism in local government. These culminate in a lack of economic opportunity and poverty. Poverty in turn is contributing to increasing school dropouts and child labour. Violence by settlers and settler activity including inappropriate disposal of waste contaminating water sources was further cited as a protection threat.
3. In the Gaza Strip⁴, in addition to the occupation, the conflict between Hamas and Fatah adds another dimension to protection threats. Given its complete isolation, imposed by Israel, a greater percentage of Palestinians suffer from abject poverty. Unemployment is perceived as the major cause of divorce, drug abuse, domestic violence, and theft, and not least, loss of dignity.

All of these protection threats should be considered through a gender perspective. The study reveals important gender-related differences in the perception of protection threats, coping strategies and potential solutions. Whereas there is a consensus among the interviewees, regardless of gender in identifying protection challenges at general level, when the analysis is taken to a deeper level, women's responses were different from men in aspects as crucial as what problems should be given priority to.

In addition, protection threats can also be considered through an age-, ethnic group-specific perspective, with minority groups like the Bedouin bearing a disproportionate share of the protection threats and challenges encountered in the study.

Trying to deal with threats

How local authorities, communities and families cope with the impact of the occupation has both short and long term consequences. The outcomes fall between two extremes, either reinforcing the importance of and capacity for good governance, self-reliance and resilience or, at the other end of the spectrum, corruption, lack of dignity, loss of livelihoods, aid-dependency and even violence. While the research was implemented with the intention of finding ways to support the former, understanding how to avoid the latter is equally important.

The day-to-day efforts of Palestinians to deal with the impacts of the occupation have largely gone unrecognised and unsupported. Their coping strategies are varied, dynamic and unfortunately oftentimes high-risk, e.g. working in the tunnels, building illegally, engaging in exploitive work, risking punishment by illegally crossing "borders" to find work, displacement and subsequent loss of access to livelihoods including social networks and capital, etc. The latter has longer term consequences for maintaining ownership of assets including property, and losing political ground, given the growing inability of Palestinians to remain in the occupied territories. The plight of rural women is particularly worrying as women leave agricultural/pastoral livelihoods and enter the informal sector, risking abuse during travel and/or at the workplace. Given inadequate and unsafe transportation, rural women often accompany daughters to school and this adds to their already significant work-load. Some families eventually decide to remove their female children from education when they reach secondary school.

Other coping strategies include reliance on networks (family and community) as long as these networks remain viable, being thrifty and rationing available space, water and electricity, including rotating or moving between houses, growing subsistence crops vs. for-profit, or conversely increased reliance on the market for purchase, e.g. potable water, and selling humanitarian assistance to get cash. "Depletive" strategies include reducing expenditures including food purchases, selling productive assets, accumulating debt, removing children from school, even early marriage of young girls.

Examples with longer-term positive consequences include being informed and up-to-date on legal rights, self-organising in committees with a focus on rights protection, and safeguarding essential documentation (e.g. residency permits). Communities are organising to buy community generators, to rebuild roads, and to provide essential services. Respondents noted agencies could (and do) help by facilitating access to credit for small businesses, increasing purchasing power either through cash-based safety nets or through employment schemes, support to the private sector, and when possible □ information and advocacy when solutions can be found locally vis-à-vis Israeli legislation and permits, e.g. allowing for and facilitating legal road repair. Women's income-earning strategies include work they can do from home (pastry making, cooking, sewing, tutoring, etc). Women in turn would benefit from support in upgrading their skills and marketing their skills and products.

Women reported that both local and international interventions are gender-blind when dealing with the specific protection threats mentioned above, specifically the cultural, financial and institutional obstacles that limit their participation in the work force. Small but significant efforts to ensure minimum work standards such as tea/coffee breaks and toilet breaks not only meet immediate health needs but also have social benefits that help women cope. Women are demonstrating effective and low-cost solutions to their problems such as "solidarity" or savings schemes, which allow at least one woman once a week to "cook a good meal for [her] family". Palestinian women's organisations are promoting women's economic empowerment and offering start-up capital and loans to women. Gender mainstreaming also means targeting women in information campaigns; finding

ways to ensure that women, who do not often leave the home, are aware of potential assistance/projects. To cope with domestic violence, women are referred to male-dominated 'reconciliation committees' (customary law). Formal law structures are not viewed as just or effective. There are women's organisations that offer advice and counselling, however only a few women reported having access to these. Some reported these organisations' lack of effectiveness in changing violence norms. Men suggested women take a stronger role in mediating domestic disputes, particularly mothers intervening on the behalf of daughters.

While demonstrating short-term effectiveness, due to the protracted and pervasive nature of the crisis, many of these strategies have diminishing returns. Unable to arrest a general decline in living conditions and well being, Palestinians report the disintegration of society, community and family.

Conclusion and general recommendations

The findings of the study are directly relevant for humanitarian agencies and detailed recommendations are provided in the full study. Most important is the request from those interviewed, that humanitarian actors should prioritize and take much more serious their responsibility to perpetually advocate that Palestinians living under occupation should enjoy the full protection and respect of their rights as defined by International Law and International Humanitarian and Law.

It is recognized that finding a long-term solution to the Occupation does not appear forthcoming, but given its centrality in the source of protection threats, it should take center-stage in the strategies of protection agencies in whatever form is appropriate to the capacity and skills of each organisation. As for the continuation of these agencies' work to alleviate immediate suffering, it is important to change their approach in order to increase their effectiveness. The full study includes a detailed discussion of numerous general and specific recommendations. Many of the general recommendations relevant to humanitarian (protection) agencies center on themes and issues such as:

- Assessments need to shift from an exclusive focus on needs to a focus that also includes local capacities, assets and strategies, with flexible program approaches that allow for context- and target group- specific design,
- The context-specific nature of protection threats in different Palestinian communities and their impact on different gender- and age groups demands a much more specific and intense participatory approach to problem analysis and solutions,
- Monitoring and evaluation systems need to shift from a focus on merely monitoring and evaluating how activities are executed to an emphasis on results obtained, so as to understand which solutions actually deliver the desired results which do not work, and why,
- In spite of the existence of gender-related rhetoric, genuine gender approaches are seldom present in programs. This aspect becomes especially important as the study documents very important differences based on gender, both in the perception of problems and in their possible solutions/mitigation,
- Respondents demand that agencies (including donors) take a more "developmental" approach to project management, avoiding inadequate short-term goals and instead aim at real complementarities between relief, development and advocacy initiatives,
- Increased support is needed for the development of the collective capacity in existing local committees and coalitions as well as the development of new ones.

Notes

1. Previous L2GP studies have been carried out in Burma/Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe. A paper published with ODI HPG summarizes key findings from previous studies (HPN Paper 72 - L2GP Summary). Currently L2GP has ongoing action research on Sudan, Myanmar and Syria. For more about L2GP go to <http://www.local2global.info>
2. The wall between the West Bank and Israel is commonly referred to by Palestinians as the “racial segregation wall” (jidar al-fasl al ‘unsuri), the “annexation wall” or “apartheid wall”. Israelis most commonly refer to the wall as the “separation fence” (Geder HaHafrada) or “security fence”. In keeping with the 2004 advisory decision by The International Court of Justice, this study will use the term the “Wall”, “as the other expressions sometimes employed are no more accurate if understood in the physical sense”.
3. Area C was created under the Oslo II Accords signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1995. Under the Accords the West Bank and Gaza Strip were divided into three areas with different status for a five-year transitional period.
4. The fieldwork for this study was primarily carried out during 2013, before the Israeli bombardment of Gaza (start 8 July 2014) that affected heavily the civilian population and infrastructures. The authors consider that these events may affect some short-term protection needs, but they do not affect the results of this study for two main reasons. Firstly, the study methodology and aims focus on capturing long-term protection needs, not momentary ones; secondly, the recurrence of wars in Gaza and the population’s awareness about the constant possibility of attacks puts this last one in a context already considered by the respondents.

Authors’ bio:

Rafael Eguiguren has worked in over 60 countries focusing on policy advice and field work in the fields of Conflict Resolution and Intercultural Dialogue, Civil Society, Gender, Human Rights and Development issues. He has extensive experience in evaluation and project management, social research, advocacy and a strong dedication to training and capacity building both in academic and in informal settings.

Luna Saadeh has a Master degree in Women’s Development and Law from Bir-Zeit University (2001). She is Gender and women rights expert with 20 years of experience working from the Middle East with international development agencies and local government. She has consulted on gender related issues such as women political participation, gender based violence, women health and women rights with numerous international and national organisations.

Find the full report at the L2GP web site - including a detailed list and discussion of findings and general and specific recommendations.

L2GP is an initiative, which works to promote effective, efficient and sustainable responses and solutions to humanitarian and protection crises with an explicit focus on enabling locally-led responses.

Contact us at info@local2global.info and read more at <http://www.local2global.info/>

