

UNVEILING HUNGER

THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

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THE WORD 'HUNGER' EVOKES IMAGES OF BARREN AFRICA, where an almost complete lack of food and water leads to the death of millions every year. The truth is worse; hunger is a much wider problem that occurs throughout the world and causes endless difficulties aside from illness and death. This article will explore the issue of hunger and poverty in the Palestinian Territories and the effects malnourishment has on the people there, while looking at new methods of measuring quality of life, so that the effects of hunger can be better discerned.

A report by Oxfam International in April 2007 recorded that 46% of Palestinians did not have enough food to meet their needs and those classed as living in 'deep poverty' (i.e. living on less than USD 0.50 a day) doubled over the course of 2006 to more than one million. This was mainly due to the election of Hamas (The Islamic Resistance Movement) at the beginning of that year and the subsequent suspension of foreign aid and Palestinian VAT revenues (held by Israel). As a result of these suspensions the Palestinian Authority (PA) lost 80% of its usual income. The effect on Palestinian society was devastating, with unemployment soaring to 70% and leaving thousands of PA employees unpaid for months.

Hunger is a serious problem for the Palestinians, in some ways overshadowed by the fact that the percentage of deaths from malnourishment are not as high as in other areas of the world and also by the conflict with Israel, which dominates any discussion on the Palestinians. How do we measure the effects of hunger more accurately, so that we can fully evaluate the situation and the need to take action? The initial solution might be to look at general economic prosperity as indicated by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which has widely been regarded as the indicator of economic prosperity since its introduction in the 1930s. In recent years, however, it has been recognised that GDP is not enough to indicate quality of life (and is not concerned with sustainable development) which has

prompted a number of institutions to look for other ways to take these issues into account. In November 2007 a two day conference, hosted by the European Parliament, set out to do exactly that. The conference, entitled 'Beyond GDP', included participants from a number of worldwide organisations such as the European Parliament, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The opening speaker and President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso acknowledged that GDP remains a good measure of economic prosperity in that it is objective rather than subjective, but that it needs to be adapted or complemented with other indicators as it does not always give an accurate picture. He provided the example of war that can sometimes increase GDP even though it destroys lives and damages resources. In other instances countries' GDPs depend on natural resources which can be relied upon and exported in the short term, but which will someday run out.

Joaquín Almunia, the European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Policy, continued the discussion, explaining that the European Union has developed 150 indicators divided up over 10 themes, looking at economic development alongside issues such as climate change, natural resources, health, social inclusion, demographic change and poverty. He added that there are lots of statistics already compiled which now need to be integrated with one another.

A speaker from the World Wildlife Fund described their methods of cataloguing environmental and ecological information into a 'Living Planet Index', while also calculating the demands we make of our planet. Their latest project has been to attempt to combine this 'ecological footprint' with the UN's Human Development Index, so that quality of life can also be taken into account.

Pier Carlo Padoan of the OECD gave details of their project to produce a handbook early next year entitled 'Measuring Progress in Practice' and to develop a website

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*“Hunger
is sharper
than
the sword.”*

FRANCIS BEAUMONT

described as «a 'Wikipedia' for progress». The aim is to set up systems or institutions in each country to measure progress and make the country accountable for how much it gives and takes in a global context.

With these considerations in mind let us now reflect on the case of the Palestinian Territories. Beginning with GDP per capita, World Bank figures of 2006 put the figure for the Palestinian Territories at 1 USD 120 dollars (compared to Israel's 18 620, the UK's 37 600 and the US's 43 740). What does this figure really tell us about quality of life and sustainable development in the Palestinian territories? How does hunger really affect the Palestinian people? Without fully tried and tested empirical measures we cannot find a comprehensive answer. Nevertheless, by considering some of the issues raised by participants of the 'Beyond GDP' conference, it may help to give us some small idea as to how complicated and detrimental the problem of hunger in the Palestinian territories actually is.

In 2003 the UN News Centre reported that «the Palestinian territories are under constant pressure from water pollution, climate change, desertification and land degradation...» Since then, the problem has been exacerbated by the continuing growth in population and the construction of the Israeli 'security fence', which cuts through the West Bank, limiting the already scarce access to resources.

Meanwhile in Gaza, where the only exit is the Rafah crossing into Egypt, the Palestinian people are suffering as a result of unpredictable and frequent closures. Gaza's two main exports, fresh fruit and fish, are perishable goods which can only be exported through Rafah. Between June 2006 and March 2007 it is estimated that losses amounted to USD 500.000 for each day the crossing was shut. Gaza's closed borders and the numerous checkpoints in the West Bank also have a much deeper and more sinister impact on the Palestinian people in terms of social exclusion. Social exclusion has been shown to cause feelings of humiliation and desperation which in some cases can lead to aggression and violence, especially amongst young men who are unemployed and unable to provide for their families. Such desperate circumstances provide fertile conditions for militant movements and plunge the Palestinians into an even more hopeless situation.



Finally, the dependence of the Palestinian economy on Israel means that although wages are much lower and employment is much more difficult to find due to restrictions on movement, the Palestinians still have to buy commodities such as food, petrol and medicines at the same price as their Israeli neighbours, further crippling them financially.

The result of all of these issues is the 'deep poverty' described by Oxfam which means that aside from poor health, children are missing out on an education because they have to work to help support their families. Those lucky enough to go to school full-time have their days regularly disrupted by Israeli closures, not to mention the traumatic effects of the conflict which many witness.

It is therefore evident, from a brief consideration of the Palestinian situation, that there are many overlapping, interlinking and complicated factors which need to be considered with reference to hunger in the Palestinian territories. The humanitarian cause of the Palestinians is often overlooked because of the difficult nature of the political situation which consumes the world's attention.

Without wishing to attribute blame it is clear that there are many innocent people, mostly children, suffering on a daily basis. Measures such as those discussed at the 'Beyond GDP' conference are definitely welcomed, if only to show more accurate and complete pictures of problems

throughout the world, piercing though any veils of statistical illusion, so that we can begin to do something about them.

MAIN SOURCES

For a list of organisations introducing new methodologies and indicators to complement GDP see: www.beyond-gdp.eu/indicator-exhibition.html

- www.palestinemonitor.org/spip/spip.php?article13
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_the_Palestinian_territories
- www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/09/01/3555/
- www.education-action.org/default.asp?pageRef=30
- www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=5955&Cr=Palestin&Cr1 ■