

How Palestinian OPDs Assist Persons with Disabilities in situations of emergency in Cooperation with Humanitarian Organizations

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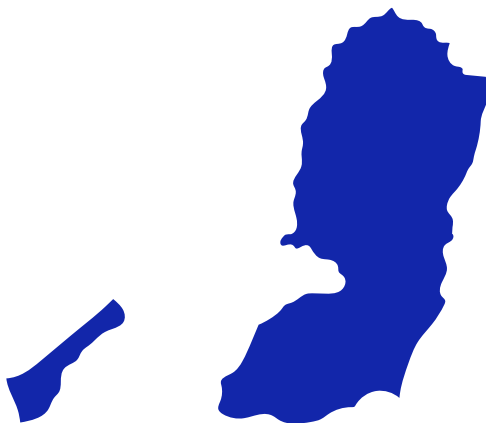
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Background

Palestinians residing in the West Bank and Gaza Strip endure significant economic challenges exacerbated by the stringent embargo imposed on the Gaza Strip. According to the 2021 report from the Office of the Commissioner of Human Affairs, 4.5 million Palestinians grapple with a non-functioning economy, limited resources, and restricted freedom of movement.¹ Earning a decent livelihood proves to be a formidable challenge, further compounded by a diminishing educational competitive edge.



Map of State of Palestine

In the West Bank, daily life is marked by perilous encounters with occupation forces and armed Israeli settlers. Meanwhile, inhabitants of the Gaza Strip face an oppressive siege, preventing the entry of essential assistance and basic materials into their densely populated and confined enclave. Surrounded by hostile Israeli security posts and settlements to the north and east, the unfriendly Sinai Desert to the south, and the forbidden Mediterranean Sea to the west, Gaza residents are trapped in dire circumstances.

1. OCHA Report on Human Rights Situation of Palestinians, 2022, p14.

Since 2006, Gaza's fishermen have been prohibited from venturing more than three kilometers into the sea along the strip's coast, as outlined in the 2023 report from the Palestinian Network of NGOs.²The general population grapples with heightened anxiety, poverty, and substandard living conditions. However, individuals with disabilities experience even harsher living conditions, enduring greater destitution, neglect, and anxiety.³

Several organizations representing persons with disabilities (OPDs) are actively engaged in advocating for and supporting their members, as well as others with disabilities.⁴According to Mr. Omar Al-Saket, the Head of the East Mediterranean office of CBM Global, these organizations exert considerable effort to be self-reliant, despite possessing rudimentary administrative and financial management skills.⁵

In response to my inquiries, Mr. Al-Saket highlighted that these OPDs also make diligent attempts to secure relief funds when possible. Additionally, they strive to initiate and develop small income-generating projects, both individually and as groups, as clarified by Mr. Mohammad Al-Arabi, a disability activist and the chairperson of the Gaza Salaam (Peace) Sports Club for the physically disabled.⁶

However, obtaining accurate statistics on individuals with disabilities—whether born with disabilities or acquiring them through work-related incidents—is challenging. Mr. Haitham Saka, the program officer of Medical Assistance for Palestinians (MAP) in the Gaza Strip, pointed out this lack of precise data.⁷

Regarding those disabled due to Israeli fire, they fall under the care of the Palestinian National Authority, constituting approximately 10% of all injuries sustained in clashes with Israeli forces and settlers, according to information from the Palestinian Ministry of Health.⁸ Despite this, Mr. Al-Arabi emphasized that these individuals do not appear to be effectively integrated into the broader Palestinian disability movement.⁹

2. Linking the Endurance Factors of Palestinians with the requirements of Humanitarian Action and Development, 2023, p12. (The source is published in Arabic in early February 2023 by the Palestinian Network of NGOs active in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with regional coordinators in both parts of the territory under the Palestinian National Authority. It is noteworthy that some of the information in the Palestinian source seem almost compatible with rare reports or commentaries on the living conditions of the Palestinians in both the Economist and Financial Times.)

3. Ibid.

4. Interview via WhatsApp with Haitham Saqqa, Community Program officer of MAP on April 29, 2023.

5. Interview by email with Omar Alsaket, head of the East Mediterranean Office of CBM Global, on March 13, 2023.

6. Interviews via WhatsApp with Muhammad El-Arabi, head of the Salam Sports Club, on March 20 and April 27, 2023.

7. WhatsApp interview with Haitham Saqqa, Community program officer of MAP, on April 29, 2023

8. Ibid.

9. Interviews via WhatsApp with Muhammad El-Arabi, head of the Salam Sports Club, on March 20 and April 27, 2023

In October 2022, Professor Nazem Al-Massri from Gaza Islamic University delivered a lecture at the University of Birmingham. During the lecture, he asserted that the disability rate in the Gaza Strip might surpass 15% to 20%, especially among individuals aged 40 and older—a point affirmed by both Saka and Al-Arabi.¹⁰ Al-Massri attributed the inadequate treatment and services for children and persons with disabilities to the harsh Israeli siege,¹² which denies basic services to the entire population. Persons with disabilities, in particular, suffer even more severely from this deprivation compared to other Gazans.¹³

It is crucial to highlight Mr. Saka's insightful observation. He notes that organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) and disability-focused institutions do not formulate policies and programs to achieve full inclusion. Instead, they tend to implement projects and programs in line with the prevailing trend among international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and other funding entities. Mr. Saka underscores the divergence in perspectives among OPDs and institutions concerning inclusion and the genuine social rehabilitation of individuals with disabilities. Despite these differences, they all employ a uniform approach in their activities and programs aimed at "encouraging and realizing inclusion."¹⁴

Professor Al-Massri highlights a significant and rapid decline in the living standards of Palestinians, particularly in Gaza. The economic situation in Gaza is notably worse compared to their compatriots in the West Bank, where the average annual income is diminishing each year. The primary income source for Palestinians is the daily wages earned by those employed on Israeli farms and in plants. However, the number of Gazan workers is decreasing due to stringent Israeli security measures and the ongoing siege.

Reports indicate that these workers are not consistently employed, with some days in each month and occasionally extended periods where their services are not needed. As a result, their income is unpredictable and insecure. Professor Al-Massri concludes that these challenging living conditions disproportionately impact persons with disabilities in the Strip, subjecting them to even harsher circumstances and greater, more abject poverty.¹⁵

10. References to Al-Massri indicates use has been made of notes taken during the lecture of Professor Nazem Al-Massri at the University of Birmingham, broadcasted on Facebook on October 22, 2022.

11. Interviews via WhatsApp with both Saqqa and Al-Arabi mentioned before.

12. Linking the Endurance Factors of Palestinians with the requirements of Humanitarian Action and Development, 2023, p19.

13. Notes taken down from Al-Massri's lecture at the University of Birmingham, broadcasted on Facebook on October 22, 2022.

14. WhatsApp Interview with Haitham Saqqa, Community Program officer of MAP on April 29, 2023.

15. Notes taken down from Al-Massri's lecture at the University of Birmingham, broadcasted on Facebook on October 22, 2022.

Al-Massri aligns with the findings of the PNGO Report released in February 2023. Both reports assert that 50% of Palestinians require humanitarian assistance due to the worsening crisis stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, no fewer than 40% of Palestinians face food insecurity, with approximately 80% of them relying on food assistance.¹⁶ Al-Massri has emphasized that, particularly for persons with disabilities, the percentage could be even higher by at least 20%. Approximately 10% of individuals with disabilities in Gaza are employed, but many of them receive significantly lower wages compared to non-disabled workers. All of them face challenges, and in many cases, it is difficult or nearly impossible for them to access foods with good nutritional value.¹⁷ An additional challenge they encounter is the rising costs of essential nutritional items, leading to difficulties in obtaining the necessary high-nutrient food. The supply chain for nutritional provisions appears compromised due to the steep increase in prices for fundamental nutritional substances and items.¹⁸

Methodology

After providing an overview of the living conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the paper proceeds to depict the humanitarian network operating in Palestine, with a specific focus on the besieged Gaza enclave, home to 2.4 million people across approximately 360 square kilometers. The goal is to illustrate the workings of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and their connections with humanitarian entities. These OPDs collaborate and coordinate activities with humanitarian agencies during crises. However, the paper highlights the substantial need for funding from humanitarian organizations for OPDs to execute their programs and establish facilities.

While many humanitarian agencies assist in securing employment for persons with disabilities, OPDs rely on financial support from these agencies to initiate projects and employ individuals with disabilities. Consequently, the studied OPDs emphasize the crucial nature of their relationship with International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) in terms of financial support. The paper delves into the activities and outcomes of two specific OPDs: one dedicated to women with disabilities and the other catering to individuals with hearing disabilities. The conclusion and recommendations follow, with due acknowledgment of the assistance and contributions of those interviewed, who graciously consented to be quoted in the paper.

16. Linking the Endurance Factors of Palestinians with the requirements of Humanitarian Action and Development, 2023, p16.

17. Notes taken down from Al-Massri's lecture at the University of Birmingham, broadcasted on Facebook on October 22, 2022.

18. Linking the Endurance Factors of Palestinians with the requirements of Humanitarian Action and Development, 2023, p37.

Humanitarian actors or OPD partners

Humanitarian actors working actively in the territory under the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) are numerous. They are led by United Nations agencies. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) leads and coordinates the humanitarian country team (HCT) in addition to the Advocacy Working Group. Under the National Inter-cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), two sub-groups are active: the West Bank ICCG and the Gaza ICCG. Each is made up of six clusters: Food Security, Shelter or Non-food Items, Education, Health and Nutrition, Protection, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). According to OCHA, the resident humanitarian coordinator (RC or HC) is responsible at the field level for designating lead agencies for all key humanitarian response sectors in consultation with the HCT and the emergency relief coordinator ERC.¹⁹

The ICCG, composed of cluster and sector leads in the West Bank or Occupied Palestinian Territory OPT, meets monthly under the chairmanship of OCHA. In Gaza the ICCG also meets monthly to discuss humanitarian coordination and operational issues.²⁰ The Disability Working Group works actively alongside the six clusters because disability is a crosscutting issue. The Disability Working Group takes part in the monthly meetings of the different clusters, and shares in the meetings and activities of each cluster. It also holds its special meetings every two months.²¹

During the monthly cluster meetings, participating parties collaborate to coordinate group activities and minimize duplication of efforts. However, it's evident that they do not intervene in the individual relationships and activities between humanitarian actors and Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), allowing for bilateral interactions. This explains why few OPDs may establish enduring and successful partnerships with certain humanitarian actors engaged in sustained relief operations.²²

In any case, the provision of funds by humanitarian actors for development activities, enabling Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) or disability-focused institutes to create long-term programs for skill development and income-generating projects, is not

19. An online pamphlet issued by UNOCHA at the beginning of 2023 to introduce the humanitarian network in the West bank and Gaza Strip.

20. Ibid.

21. An interview via WhatsApp with Jamal Al-Rezzi, General manager of the National Society for Rehabilitation, carried out on 26, June, 2023.

22. *ibid*; Mr. Al-Rezzi makes it clear throughout the interview that all funding provided to disability-related organizations in the last five years has been part of relief assistance. Humanitarian agencies are obliged to fund relief assistance because of the policy of the Israeli authorities refusing to offer development funds to the Palestinians in Gaza and the different zones of the West bank. Other factors leading to such policy have been the COVID-19 pandemic, the Israeli Palestinian repeated clashes, particularly in Gaza, which is subject to a strict siege, financial and economic crisis resulting from the pandemic and economic and security restrictions.

a common practice. While disability is acknowledged as a crosscutting issue within various clusters, it doesn't appear to be deeply integrated into their mindset and operations. The Disability Working Group endeavors to embed disability considerations within the diverse clusters, aiming to mainstream persons with disabilities into the varied activities conducted by numerous actors within each cluster.²³

Engaging with humanitarian agencies, specifically those providing support to Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and institutes focused on persons with disabilities, is challenging. Even more perplexing is deciphering their actual stance towards financially and managerially vulnerable OPDs.²⁴ Despite the challenges, it has been possible to successfully initiate initial and fundamental communication with CBM Global and MAP. Mr. Omar Al-Saket, the head of CBM's East Mediterranean Office, indicates that CBM is extensively involved in implementing various projects related to the inclusion of persons with disabilities not only in Palestine but also in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon.²⁵ CBM deals directly with diverse groups of partners (OPDs), community-based organizations (CBOs) and local NGOs. However, "OPDs can be involved through different modalities, either directly as implementing partners or as beneficiary organizations," says Mr. Al-Saket. CBM focuses on developing financial and managerial capacity of OPDs. At the same time, the organisation tries to benefit from their outreach and advocacy capacity," he says.²⁶

An example of CBM's support is the provision of funds and construction of an accessible and covered playground for the Salaam (Peace) Club in the Gaza Strip. This facility allows individuals with various disabilities to engage in a variety of sports activities.²⁷ In partnership with other funding organizations like H.I, CBM provided the Salaam Club with specialized electric wheelchairs. These wheelchairs are used by members of the basketball team for training sessions and friendly matches, as well as in competitions at the local, regional, and global levels.²⁸ Humanitarian actors have also equipped the volleyball team with specialized wheelchairs. The latter, like the basketball team, is quite active locally, regionally and internationally.²⁹

MAP or Medical Aid for Palestinians is a UK-based organization initiated in 1982. A donor agency, MAP serves Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank as well as those in the camps in Lebanon.³⁰ Disability is one of the five areas addressed by MAP, managed through a dedicated department that focuses on advocacy efforts. This department not only trains

23. Ibid.

24. Interview by email with Omar Alsaket, head of the East Mediterranean Office of CBM Global, on March 13, 2023.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Interview via WhatsApp with Haitham Sakka, Community Program Officer of MAP on April 29, 2023.

28. Interviews via WhatsApp with Muhammad El-Arabi, head of the Salam Sports Club, on March 20 and April 27, 2023.

29. Interview via WhatsApp with Haitham Saqqa, Community Program Officer of MAP on April 26, 2023.

30. Ibid

advocates and activists but also assists persons with disabilities in accessing various services provided by other MAP sectors or departments. For instance, individuals with disabilities receive medical assistance through the healthcare activity, while vocational training and funding for income-generating projects are offered through programs and activities managed by different departments.³¹

Five years ago, MAP granted funding to 52 income-generating projects for persons with disabilities. However, a year later, they discovered that 35 of these projects had either failed or were facing difficulties. In response, MAP decided to provide support to those projects that still had the potential to persist. According to Haitham Saqqa, MAP Community Program Officer, approximately 45% to 50% of the initial 52 projects have survived to date and are still generating income for their owners.³²

Noteworthy is the work related to disability undertaken by a few Palestinian OPDs, alongside certain funding agencies and local NGOs, both in Gaza and the West Bank. Al-Wasla NGO, for instance, stands out for its independent disability-related initiatives, operating distinct projects and activities geared towards ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities. This is in addition to its primary community and development programs, as elucidated by Ms. Zayyoun Abadi, the youth program officer.³³

The role of OPDs and the OPDs surveyed

During the survey, two OPDs indirectly provided information about operating in the besieged Gaza Strip: Salam (Peace) Sports Club and the Organization of the Physically handicapped.³⁴ The interviews revealed a notable trait of resilience and patience among Palestinians in general, with a particular emphasis on those with disabilities. While the situation is somewhat improved in the West Bank, it would be unjust to claim that OPDs in that region fare significantly better than their counterparts in the Gaza Strip.³⁵

Humanitarian actors, despite their generosity, encounter numerous obstacles and challenges when attempting to offer assistance to OPDs in Gaza. Despite these challenges, Gazan OPDs persistently strive to continue their work in various domains, such as health services, education, rehabilitation, sports, and more.³⁶

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid

33. Interviews via WhatsApp with Muhammad El-Arabi, head of the Salam Sports Club, on March 20 and April 27, 2023.

34. Interviews with Al-Arabi and Saqqa.

35. A WhatsApp interview with Shatha Abou Srou, the coordinator of the Palestinian Network of NGOs in the West Bank, on March 10, 2023.

36. A WhatsApp interview with Kathy al Ju'beh of CBM Global and a Palestinian expert on humanitarian action and OPD activities in the West bank and Gaza Strip, on February 27, 2023.

This paper led to the direct survey of two active Palestinian OPDs. Stars of Hope is based in the West Bank, but has a branch in the Gaza Strip. Founded around two decades ago, it seems to be growing and affecting great changes in the local communities where its beneficiaries seem to be active. The primary objective is to empower women with disabilities economically, by helping them obtain jobs and run their own small businesses.³⁷ They believe that economic empowerment of women with disabilities is the best way to get them out of poverty, negligence and invisibility, while urging them to participate in daily activities and positively contribute to the welfare of their communities.³⁸

Atfaluna, meaning 'our children,' is located in Gaza. The name suggests that it is an organization focused on or serving persons with disabilities, possibly functioning as a service provider. While this assumption may have held true for quite some time, the association took a significant step over 12 years ago by allowing individuals with hearing disabilities to become members of its general assembly and board.³⁹ They now make up a sizable proportion of its members but have no board representation. Although the organization's membership is nearly evenly split between individuals with hearing disabilities and parents of children with hearing disabilities, there is a crucial need for persons with disabilities to actively participate in decision-making processes, if not hold decision-making roles. The organization is dedicated to the education and vocational training of children with hearing disabilities, striving to facilitate employment opportunities for its graduates. By offering part-time or full-time positions and contracting some for temporary work in existing or upcoming projects, the organization aims to empower them economically. Additionally, it extends limited financial support to a select few individuals to initiate their own income-generating projects.⁴⁰

A small percentage of OPDs appears to be struggling to cope with the significant and rapid rise in the annual registration of disabled persons seeking their services. This observation is drawn from interviews with various individuals involved in OPD activities, coupled with the realization of the evolving needs of persons with disabilities. Faced with this challenge, OPDs find themselves compelled to expand or modify certain activities and services to meet the growing and changing demands. For instance, while their rehabilitation centers used to accommodate a limited number of new persons with disabilities throughout the year, there are instances when the numbers can suddenly and substantially exceed the norm. Consequently, counselors, psychotherapists, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists may need to extend their working hours, or alternatively, the organizations may have to hire new part-time therapists to meet the increased demand.⁴¹ If OPDs implement educational programs, there is a necessity to adapt the types of projects and services they endorse. This may involve

37. WhatsApp interview with Safiya Khalid, Chairperson of Stars of Hope, February 16, 2023.

38. Ibid.

39. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on March 20, 2023.

40. Ibid.

41. WhatsApp interview with Shatha Abou Srour, the coordinator of the Palestinian Network of NGOs in the West Bank, on March 10, 2023.

augmenting the number of teachers and teacher aids while providing them with brief but intensified training. Additionally, they might find it essential to adjust certain activities and projects, expanding them to offer new services in addition to those already provided.⁴²

When examining the two OPDs in question, it is evident that Atfaluna was initially established to operate a specialized school for teaching deaf students, especially those with hearing and speech disabilities, with the goal of rehabilitating them for inclusion in regular or mainstream schools. As the number of students increased and their educational levels advanced, it became necessary to enhance the school's services. Consequently, the school began overseeing inclusion attempts and initiatives.⁴³

Subsequently, the organization broadened its services to assist in securing employment for graduates and initiated various workshops and projects to generate funds for its services while employing some of its graduates. About nine years ago, it also started funding individual small income-generating projects for select students who displayed entrepreneurial skills or found it impractical to work at the school due to its distance from their homes.⁴⁴

Stars of Hope initially launched training services to empower women with disabilities by imparting vocational and technical skills. However, they observed that trainees might face challenges in finding and retaining employment. In response, the organization initiated specific projects to create new job opportunities for several trainees. Some of the more entrepreneurial women trainees expressed interest in receiving financial assistance to start their own income-generating projects. To facilitate this, the association sought financial support to provide small loans. The funding of income-generating projects for trainees is largely contingent on the support received by Stars of Hope from donors.⁴⁵ It can be inferred that the loans provided are essentially small grants, complemented by limited technical support from the skilled staff of the association. Alternatively, if the repayment of previous loans in installments had been implemented, it could have established a small fund dedicated to providing new loans to other trainees. However, the association, after each cycle of new projects, awaits fresh donations to support disabled women interested in launching their own income-generating ventures.⁴⁶

In addition to both Mr. Saqqa and Mr. Al-Arabi, who were quoted earlier, Mr. Basim Qirase, the director-general of Atfaluna, and Ms. Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, contributed significantly by providing essential information about the conditions in Palestine and the status of Palestinian OPDs. Special thanks go to Kathy Al Ju'beh of CBM for facilitating

42. WhatsApp interview with Safiya Khalid, Chairperson of Stars of Hope, February 16, 2023.

43. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on March 20, 2023.

44. Ibid.

45. WhatsApp interview with Safiya Khalid, Chairperson of Stars of Hope, February 16, 2023.

46. Ibid.

my connection with Mr. Saqqa and Mr. Al-Arabi, as well as to Ms. Shatha Abu Srour, the coordinator of the Palestinian Network of OPDs, particularly those active in the West Bank. Ms. Abu Srour offered a comprehensive overview of the general situation of Palestinians and their NGOs and OPDs, providing a valuable background on the existence and activities of OPDs in the two enclaves.

Additionally, Mr. Basim and Ms. Safiya kindly responded to a set of basic questions to elucidate the work, programs, and priorities of their respective organizations. It is important to note that the written answers, sent via email, were divided into two parts: the first four received in March, and the remaining six in May. The interviewees clarified some fundamental facts in their responses as follows below.

1 . What is the most difficult humanitarian or social issue facing the organization, and the most important issue facing Palestinian persons with disabilities?

Safiya Khaled, a physically disabled woman who lives in the West bank with her siblings and colleagues, insists that “what we all, Palestinians with and without disabilities, face is a common social and political issue. The most important issue for us in Stars of Hope, however, is the economic empowerment of persons with disabilities in general, and women with disabilities in particular. The latter need to be offered propitious opportunities to make good use of beneficial funding chances, as well as proper employment opportunities and jobs. Poverty is quite widespread and much more prevalent among persons with disabilities, especially women with disabilities, who experience hard and complex living circumstances. One aspect of their plight seems quite clear and painful with respect to their being exposed to violence, while suffering from isolation, and the lack of their political and social participation.”⁴⁷

Basim Qirase, who lives with his family and deaf daughter active in Atfaluna in the Gaza Strip, emphasizes that “the most significant political and humanitarian issue is the end of the siege under which Gaza Strip lives and suffers. That will put an end to the suffering of the Gazans and allow them to live in a dignified manner and enjoy basic human rights. That would provide the chance to realize the rights of persons with disabilities much more efficiently and in a more comprehensive manner. Atfaluna feels that it has many common interests and goals with other OPDs. The most prominent and urgent humanitarian issue for OPDs and institutes for persons with disabilities is to put an end to the politically conditioned funding.”⁴⁸ This last phrase indicates that OPDs feel a little confused and upset with the PNA delegating government employed teachers to few specialized schools, while not providing any support to other OPDs and specialized schools teaching hundreds of students with disabilities and supporting their inclusion in mainstream schools run by the UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Work Agency) as well as by the government.⁴⁹

47. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on March 24, 2023.

48. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on March 20, 2023.

49. WhatsApp interviews with Mr. Al-Arabi and Mr. Saqqa mentioned before.

2 . How does the organization satisfy the needs of the actual and potential beneficiaries?

Safiya explains that her organization, Stars of Hope, "provides specialized programs allowing persons with disabilities in general, and women with disabilities in particular, to access different fields and areas at several levels. These levels include work, temporary employment for women with disabilities, and access to the support of income generating projects run by those women trained by the organization, which also runs several additional advanced training courses in such areas. A network of urgently needed direct as well as indirect multi-level services with respect to protection is made available through different partners. Stars of Hope runs such programs and activities by using the funding provided by different parties and partners or via networking with different partners active in the social, rights and development fields."⁵⁰

On his part, Basim makes clear that the organization "exerts great efforts to satisfy the needs and demands of persons with hearing disability in the fields of education, vocational training, employment and working on their own, i.e. running their own small businesses. That way persons with hearing disability could also feel that they are not less capable than, and not different from, their hearing counterparts, and can thus stand up on their own. It is necessary to support them and to empower them—or, rather help them enable and empower themselves—to allow them to interact properly and efficiently with their own community, while they prove themselves to be independent and capable of determining their life paths and affecting the daily life and fate of their own community."⁵¹

3 . Which humanitarian organizations provide support to you?

Safiya illustrates that her association "seeks the money from funding organizations that provide unconditional grants at the regional or international levels." (This is to make clear that Stars of Hope does not lend money to women with disabilities wishing to start their own income generating projects, and therefore looks out for small funds it can grant minimal sums to enterprising disabled women.) The association attempts to run such programs and to satisfy different needs via various funding links and activities. "Stars of Hope submits proposals for the funding opportunities announced by different parties. The association could sometimes get some funds by means of networking with various parties that may offer some funding. We also fervently seek to secure the economic sustainability of our organization to guarantee sustainable services as well as the economic sustainability of beneficiaries by means of several interventions, that might preserve the sustainability of their projects and resources."⁵²

50. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on March 24, 2023.

51. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on March 20, 2023.

52. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on March 24, 2023.

Basim explains that Atfaluna “depends on contributions and donations in addition to the separate financial management of each of the seven departments of the organization. For example, the departments of handicrafts, embroidery and exhibitions secure almost 30% of the total income of Atfaluna. The clinic for hearing tests as well as fixing and fitting hearing aids contributes 20% to the full income of the organization. The proportion of the contribution of the department of projects is equal to 50% of the total budget. The projects are initiated and run by the organization to employ individuals with hearing disability and are separate from personal income-generating projects the organization finances through grants and loans offered to persons with and without disabilities, who are trained by the twenty vocational training courses the association runs each year. The two categories of projects intend to help individuals with hearing disability earn their living and enjoy economic independence on one hand, and to offer new production facilities and capacities to satisfy certain demands in the local market on the other hand.”⁵³

4. Which humanitarian organization could you apply to for assistance and support?

Safiya insists that “there is no specifically clear response,” but “we may apply for, and receive support for projects focused on achieving the goals of Stars of Hope, i.e., economic empowerment of women with disabilities, as well as their protection against violence, helping them with advocacy and inclusion. They strategically manifest the demands of women with disabilities. This is why we usually apply to any party that distributes unconditional grants. It does not matter whether it is a regional or global party.”⁵⁴

Basim explains the parts of the funding process. “The bulk of funding for big projects or investments (building the school and the necessary facilities to help with the academic and vocational education of students with hearing disability, for example), comes from CBM, G.I.Z or the German International Development Agency, and the European Union. These are the parties that could be asked to fund new similar projects and continuous programs and regular activities. The important things we may obtain from other parties are necessities for relief. However, the actual support that we acquire is related to the projects of inclusive schooling, employment, protection, psychological support, project finance, early intervention services, etc. We also receive funds to run inclusive educational programs, advocacy activities to support women with hearing disability in compliance with the CRPD, legal advice to persons with disabilities, and relief assistance in the case of wars and emergencies. The auditory clinic demands fees and payment for testing, fixing and fitting hearing aids, and cochlear implant operations. These are services that are paid for by those making use of them. The financial yield is used to run the daily expenses of the clinic and is directed to the finances of the

53. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on March 20, 2023.

54. 54. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on March 24, 2023.

organization. The different vocational departments, such as those of embroidery, ceramics, furniture of different types and kinds, and the permanent fair both in Gaza and Berlin ensure a financial yield to the departments and the organization. Atfaluna employs more than seventy persons with hearing disability, sixty of whom are deaf or hard of hearing women."⁵⁵

5 . What is the kind of support that you may obtain?

Safiya emphasizes that "we seek funding for projects with activities and goals going alongside the objectives and programs of Stars of Hope. Those are economic empowerment, inclusion, protection from gender-based violence and advocacy for the rights of women with disabilities. Those are the needs, demands and rights of women with disabilities. That is shown by the different studies carried out by the organization. Such studies usually serve as the basis for initiating interventions to assist and serve our constituency. In addition, we run continuous consultations with women with disabilities, whose views are reflected in the proposals and projects planned by Stars of Hope. It is not possible to overlook the basic funding that supports the organization's basic running costs in addition to its field work."⁵⁶

Basim insists that "the actual support we obtain is directed to our inclusive educational programs plus our early intervention services. We may also benefit from the support offered by humanitarian actors or funding partners and directed towards protection, employment programs and new projects we start for this purpose. Any programs aiming to empower women with hearing disability may also receive new or extra funding."⁵⁷

6 . How many projects does your organization fund annually?

Safiya declares that "Stars of Hope funds annually six new income-generating projects. It has financed eighteen projects during the three years of 2020-2022 in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. We, however, have to remember that funding was negatively affected during 2020 with the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic."⁵⁸

On his part, Basim declares that "Atfaluna has begun to fund income-generating projects since September 2014. It funds annually sixteen and more projects run by persons with and without disabilities."⁵⁹

55. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on March 20, 2023.

56. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on May 10, 2023.

57. 57. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on May 10, 2023.

58. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on May 10, 2023.

59. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on May 10, 2023.

7 . How many projects continue to work productively since they have been started five years ago?

Safiya does not cover the period before the COVID-19 outbreak but states that “out of 18 projects only one has faltered and stopped working. The percentage is almost 5%, i.e. one out of 18.”⁶⁰

Basim covers the whole period. “Atfaluna has been funding income-generating projects. He announces that 90 out of 150 projects continue to work productively in 2023. They make products in the sectors of agriculture, animal production, bread making, sweets, pastries, ceramics, embroidery, weaving, hairdressing, barber shops, technology and carpentry. The rate of failure is 40% in total.”⁶¹

8 . Does the organization follow up on funded projects after they have started their production?

Safiya answered positively explaining the reason and the goal of such follow-up. “Yes. We follow up on our beneficiaries by repeated field visits to the workshops carried out by the specialized vocational team of Stars of Hope as well as by the special trainer, who trained the project owners during the initial stages of founding and launching. We also have phone contacts with the project owner; we investigate the project clients to know exactly their opinions about the products and their quality. The objective is to help them upgrade the quality level of their products and services.”⁶²

Basim makes it clear that “Atfaluna follows up on the projects by visits paid by a special team led by the head of the follow-up and evaluation department. The team includes three other persons in charge of different departments of the organization, such as the school for the deaf. Most projects have stopped working as a result of the frequent rounds of fighting or “repeated wars,” closing down the crossing points and the deteriorating economic situation.”⁶³

9 . What are the projects that seem most able to survive and succeed?

Safiya announces that “the most fitting projects to survive and continuously succeed are those related to farming and the manufacture of different kinds of foodstuffs.”⁶⁴

60. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on May 10, 2023.

61. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on May 10, 2023.

62. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on May 10, 2023.

63. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on May 10, 2023.

64. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on May 10, 2023.

Basim explains that the projects that are more capable of succeeding and continue to work and produce are those making foodstuffs, sweets, cosmetics and hairdressing, carpentry and Arabesque, embroidery, animal production such as poultry and simple cattle farms as well as fixing mobile phones and PCs."⁶⁵

10 . What training courses are run by the organization?

According to Safiya, "the economic empowerment program includes training courses on daily life skills, in addition to marketing, selling, and purchasing skills besides proposal and plan writing, preparing simplified financial lists. In addition, project owners are registered to attend short and medium-term training courses to improve their skills and develop their new knowledge and abilities."⁶⁶

Basim responds by clarifying that "each year twenty training courses are organized by Atfaluna. They focus on teaching trainees the aforementioned different vocational skills and abilities."⁶⁷

Conclusion

Several humanitarian actors or funding agencies are engaged in supporting the Palestinian disability sector, but they choose to collaborate with only a select few OPDs. For instance, CBM has a history of working with the Atfaluna Association in Gaza and another OPD in the West Bank.⁶⁸ H.I. also chooses one or two OPDs in Gaza and as many in the West Bank.⁶⁹ Other humanitarian actors could run their own disability programs in cooperation with OPDs or on their own.⁷⁰ Despite being an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO), MAP has a dedicated focus on disability. It operates a distinct disability section or desk, led by a community program officer specializing in disability inclusion. This department concentrates on advocacy and raising awareness about the various rights of persons with disabilities. In other departments, disability is considered in the context of providing healthcare or promoting economic empowerment. MAP also engages consultants with disabilities for specific projects related to disability. Moreover, the organization actively

65. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on May 10, 2023.

66. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on May 10, 2023.

67. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on May 10, 2023.

68. Interview by email with Omar Alsaket, head of the East Mediterranean Office of CBM Global, on March 13, 2023.

69. A WhatsApp Interview with Haitham Saqqa, Community Program officer of MAP on April 29, 2023.

70. A WhatsApp interview with Shatha Abou Srouf, the coordinator of the Palestinian Network of NGOs in the West Bank, on March 10, 2023.

monitors beneficiaries with disabilities who are undergoing vocational training. CBM and HI, for example, have worked to support building the covered accessible playground for the Salaam Sports Club.⁷¹

In contrast to various local organizations in the disability sector, the Atfaluna Association uses its ⁷²own funds to provide monthly salaries to its teachers and teacher aids. This was initially highlighted by Basim Qirase and later confirmed by Mr. Saqqa. However, it's worth noting that only six or seven OPDs, which have schools or specialized institutes, receive support from the PNA or the government governing the Gaza Strip.⁷³ The support manifests in the form of assigning government-employed teachers to these schools. However, the rationale behind this arrangement and the criteria for its implementation as a form of government assistance are not clearly understood. OPDs are responsible for covering the costs of teacher aids hired to assist in various classes. The specifics of how and why the government support arrangement was established remain unclear. Some individuals criticize government-employed teachers, arguing that they lack proper training to effectively accommodate and integrate students with disabilities into mainstream classes.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, these teachers become part of specialized schools that cater to students with specific academic and disability-related challenges. In response, OPDs that benefit from government support emphasize their role in providing specialized on-the-job training for government-employed teachers. Additionally, they may conduct specific training courses for these teachers and their aides during the summer, in the few weeks leading up to the start of the academic year. By taking these steps, OPDs utilizing government-employed teachers aim to address their main deficiency. However, the degree of success in these efforts remains uncertain.⁷⁵

As for funding, Atfaluna Association receives the bulk of their funding for big projects from CBM, and to a lesser extent from HI, GIZ and the European Union.⁷⁶ Stars of Hope applies for grants to help women with disabilities start their own income-generating projects, and seek to secure funding to run its regular activities.⁷⁷ This highlights the precarious conditions faced by persons with disabilities and their respective organizations, raising concerns about the ability of OPDs to sustain their service provision, community support, and advocacy for the disability cause. While a few OPDs receive modest donations during Ramadan from countries like Malaysia, Qatar, and Turkey, these Zakat contributions, a form of charitable giving, may

71. WhatsApp Interview with Haitham Saqqa, Community Program officer of MAP on April 29, 2023.

72. WhatsApp interviews with Muhammad Al-Arabi and Haitham Saqqa.

73. A short WhatsApp interview with Basim Qirase (about the qualifications and training of their teachers and to make sure whether the government provides them with some educational staff as is the case with other OPDs), on March 16, 2023.

74. WhatsApp Interview with Haitham Saqqa, Community Program officer of MAP on April 29, 2023.

75. Ibid.

76. Interview with Basim Kirase, the director general of Atfaluna Association, written responses by email on March 20, 2023.

77. Interview with Safiya Khaled, chairperson of Stars of Hope, written answers by email on March 24, 2023.

appear generous but often lack a meaningful impact. They do not address long-term needs or necessarily contribute to realizing the rights of persons with disabilities. Despite being well-intentioned, this assistance typically has a transient yearly impact and is not effectively directed to meet the enduring needs and rights of persons with disabilities in a manner that aligns with their best interests. OPDs that receive Zakat rarely have comprehensive plans to make optimal use of such assistance, as it is often designated for specific purposes like providing meals or foodstuffs to persons with disabilities during the 29 or 30 days of the Ramadan lunar month.⁷⁸ This could support the view that OPDs may have shortcomings in both managerial and financial capabilities, highlighting the need for them to enhance these skills. OPDS must develop improved managerial and financial abilities, particularly for the more efficient execution of certain recurring annual or seasonal activities.

Recommendations

Given the extremely challenging conditions under which Palestinian OPDs operate and considering the distinct services each of them offers, it appears impractical and unhelpful to provide unrelated general recommendations. Instead, it seems reasonable to put forth ideas for enhancing collaborative efforts between humanitarian actors and OPDs, as well as fostering cooperation among these organizations. This necessitates a greater understanding by political authorities of the imperative to secure additional relief funds specifically designated for certain development activities. It is crucial to note that relief funds are the only form of assistance permitted by the Israeli occupation authorities to be allocated to Palestinians in both the West Bank and Gaza.⁷⁹ That consequently leads humanitarian agents to appeal for more relief funds to be dedicated to persons with disabilities as they need greater aid and efforts to help include them within their communities.

In addition to enhancing their own managerial and planning skills, OPDs should improve coordination among their efforts and programs, focusing on addressing and fortifying their weaknesses. This involves better information sharing and collaborative efforts to enhance the abilities and skills of individuals with disabilities. It is crucial to demonstrate a genuine commitment to inclusion rather than merely using the term to attract donors.⁸⁰ The aim should be to move individuals with disabilities out of isolation and encourage their integration into society, emphasizing the capabilities and contributions of disabled individuals when included, with their talents and skills developed and honed. Both OPDs and humanitarian actors should view themselves as genuine and full partners.

78. WhatsApp Interview with Haitham Saqqa, Community Program officer of MAP on April 29, 2023.

79. WhatsApp interview with Jamal Al-Rezzi, General manager of the National Society for Rehabilitation, carried out on 26, June, 2023.

80. WhatsApp Interview with Haitham Saqqa, Community Program officer of MAP on April 29, 2023.

Given that humanitarian actors are restricted to providing relief assistance to Palestinians, they should consider all assistive devices and treatments as integral components of their relief provisions and efforts. Assistive devices are often as essential for persons with disabilities as medicine and food, contributing to their proper rehabilitation and full inclusion in their communities. Rehabilitation efforts should extend to assisting individuals with disabilities in employment or starting their own businesses, providing opportunities for skill and ability development to become productive members of society. Humanitarian actors should actively seek partnerships with OPDs, treating them as equal and genuine partners and finding ways to enhance cooperation and improve their joint assistance to individuals with disabilities. Such an approach would not only benefit OPDs as organizations but also yield positive outcomes for their beneficiaries.

The Palestinian government bears full responsibility for the rehabilitation, education, training, and skill development of Palestinians with disabilities. This necessitates the development of real and complete partnerships with OPDs as integral components of national society. While the government may not have sufficient financial resources to assist OPDs directly, it can facilitate their access to various forms of aid to cater to a significant portion of the population, supporting them based on proposals and suggestions offered by the OPDs themselves. Authorities can also assist OPDs in receiving Zakat funds from Muslims in sisterly Arab and Islamic societies. If the amounts are substantial, authorities should encourage OPDs to allocate a portion to running programs and projects that enhance the abilities and opportunities of persons with disabilities, fully integrating them into local and national societies.

These recommendations are urgent and significant, with practical applicability and the potential to connect all stakeholders, including OPDs, humanitarian actors, and government authorities. Collaborative efforts and a shared perspective are essential for planning and implementing a comprehensive and long-term strategy compatible with the CRPD. Cooperation among all parties is critical to effectively serving persons with disabilities.

Acknowledgements

It is my obligation to express my deep gratitude to Katherine Aljub'ai, who has provided me with a good background on the work of INGOs in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. She also helped me get in touch with Shatha Srour, coordinator of the Palestinian OPDs in the West Bank. She also helped me get introduced to Mohammad Al-Arabi, the chair of the Salam (Peace) Sports Club for persons with disabilities, and to Haitham Saqqa, who is MAP's community program officer in Gaza. I extend many thanks to Mr. Omar Alsaket, The head of the East Mediterranean office of CBM. I also appreciate all the explanations and information generously provided by Mr. Al-Arabi, Mr. Saqqa and Ms. Zayyoun Abadi of Alwasla NGO. Thanks to Ms. Shatha Srour. However, my real cordial gratitude goes to Ms. Safiya Khaled, the head of Stars of Hope OPD, and to Mr. Basim Qirase, the school director of the deaf of the Atfaluna Association. They have agreed to provide me with all the information presented in this paper about their associations. I highly appreciate that everyone mentioned here has agreed to be quoted in the paper, and has not hesitated to verbally consent to my quoting one sentence or even a phrase of their conversation.