

Aid Watch Palestine

A Civil Society Initiative to Claim Rights in Aid

Aid Watch Palestine is a civil-society start-up initiative established after the 2014 Israeli attack on Gaza. Although all start-ups face challenges, Aid Watch Palestine seems to have hit a chord: It is growing, attracting local and international attention, and increasingly influencing the Palestinian and international discourse related to aid. Journalist Majda Al Belbesi spoke with the director, Mohanad Berekdar, for insight into this unique and important effort.

M.A.: What is the problem with the aid system as it is now?

M.B.: For decades, international aid and development efforts have failed Palestinians. We see all the problems magnified in the Gaza Strip, which is suffering not only from the effects of wars and the blockade, but also from the inexcusably inadequate international response. In its current form, aid is essentially consolation for the lack of political will. Further, aid subsidizes the continued violations of Palestinian rights.

At the heart of the problem is a lack of accountability and a culture of impunity. All aid actors – the United Nations, international donors, the Palestinian Authority, international NGOs, local NGOs, and private contractors – plan, negotiate, and implement “aid” with almost no meaningful reference to the people affected. Most Palestinians do not have access to information about the system, actors, or decisions

that govern their lives. As a result, they cannot effectively express their views much less play their rightful role as leaders of their own development.

M.A.: Your slogan is “We invite you to re-envision aid.” What does that mean?

M.B.: We consider international aid to Palestinians problematic, but we don’t just want small, technical fixes such as more core funding or more flexible reporting. We want to transform the aid system so that it actually helps Palestinians claim their rights. Of course, changing a big, complex, international system isn’t easy. We believe that everyone who lives in, works in, or cares about Palestine, can contribute to re-envisioning aid. We do this by



We are not satisfied with the common excuse: “We are doing the best we can under difficult circumstances.” If our only options are no aid and bad aid, then we must develop new options. The word “invite” is also important. We are not a watchdog group. We aren’t out to name and shame, although that is sometimes needed. Our objective is to create space for discussion that is constructive and critical at the same time, and to invite everyone –



After the most recent attack on Gaza, the international community pledged US\$ 5 billion for reconstruction; to date, most Gazans are still waiting.

engaging Palestinians and aid actors in discussions about fundamental issues such as rights, obligations, transparency, accountability, and participation.

Palestinians and internationals, from all sectors – to reflect honestly, think boldly, and create new options that will enable Palestinians to claim their rights.

M.A.: So what exactly is your objective?

M.B.: Aid Watch Palestine strives for a Palestine that does not need aid. Until then, we aim for transparent and accountable aid that respects Palestinian rights and international law and works towards solutions to the root problems that trigger the need for aid.

We believe that the work of humanitarian and development actors should be principled. By drawing on the research, community consultations, and declarations of others, we have pulled together some principles for aid and reconstruction that we think can be the basis of a conversation about how to re-envision aid. These principles are elaborated on our website, but in general we suggest that principled aid should:

- Prioritize Palestinian self-determination
- Let locals lead using local systems and resources
- Prevent aid to Palestinians from enriching Israel
- Implement accountability systems
- Announce an exit plan

M.A.: What do you actually do to achieve your objectives?

M.B.: Aid Watch Palestine works to ensure that information about aid is available and accessible in Arabic as well as in English. We conduct community engagement sessions to widen Palestinians' knowledge about their rights in relation to aid and ways to claim them. Our team proactively monitors aid actors to ensure that they meet their own mandates, believing that they should face consequences when they don't. In addition, Aid Watch Palestine encourages people to speak out about their opinions about aid.

We are especially concerned about the reconstruction process in Gaza, but are interested in all aspects of aid. We often begin by doing new research – for example, about how international aid is subverted to Israel, or about the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism – then we catalyze discussions in the community and with aid actors. This may take the form of policy roundtables or film screenings or community meetings. Nearly all our

work is in cooperation with others, which is one way we maximize our impact and sustainability.

M.A.: How did Aid Watch Palestine begin? And how do you handle the funding challenges that also face start-ups in the private sector?

M.B.: Aid Watch Palestine was established as a purely voluntary initiative by members of the Palestinian community who were concerned that the humanitarian response to the 2014 attack on Gaza would further entrench poverty and dependence on aid. They felt a need for consistent Palestinian monitoring of aid and broad public discussion about the role aid plays in maintaining the Israeli occupation. We quickly discovered that this issue concerns many people, and we decided to scale up and expand. We still have many enthusiastic volunteers, and we combine resources by working cooperatively with other initiatives, organizations, and networks.

But we also need some funding for our small staff in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and a modest office; and



While aid agencies produce reports filled with accomplishments, unfortunately, the reality on the ground is deteriorating.

we need funding to do more research, analysis, and advocacy. Like most civil society start-ups, we seek this funding from various kinds of donors. We recognize that we risk putting ourselves in the same situation of aid dependence that we criticize, so we try to work self-consciously and in a principled way. Moreover, we choose our donors according to strict criteria, and we carefully negotiate power relations. Perhaps most importantly, we try to open ourselves to being held accountable. We are confident that community ownership of Aid Watch Palestine is the best way to keep it honest, relevant, and sustainable regardless of our funding sources.

M.A.: By challenging the current system, are you not risking turning donors away? Why would they keep giving if Palestinians aren't grateful?

M.B. Sincere and professional donors can withstand constructive criticism. In fact, many donors and other aid actors are just as frustrated as we are about poor aid outcomes, and they welcome a fresh discussion about options.

There is no reason why anyone who is genuinely interested in aid that helps should feel threatened by Aid Watch Palestine. It might not be pleasant to talk about our failures, but by upholding a façade that things are working when they're not, the international community becomes complicit.

We are trying to solve problems that exist not create new ones. We hope that all aid actors – local and international, public and private – share this interest. That's why we are an open, community initiative not an NGO or company. We are sincere when we invite everyone to join us so that aid can better serve the Palestinian people.

Majda Al Belbesi is a Gaza-based journalist who covers topics related to women and gender, people with disabilities, social change, politics, and aid to Palestine. She has worked with Al-Quds newspaper for 17 years. In 2010 Amin Network honored her as best journalist in the Gaza Strip.