



Before Neoliberal Economics, We Had Al-Ouna Concerns of a Citizen

By Aisha Mansour



My grandfather raised sheep for a living. While he never had much cash, his raising sheep provided for a simple home for the family and nutritious food all year. He bought what he could not produce. He sold the excess that the family did not need, which included grapes from the vineyard and milk, yogurt, and *kishek* (dried yogurt balls) from the sheep. Families who did not have the means did not have to pay.

“Don’t take any money from that family,” he would tell my grandmother.

Those were the days when we still had *al-ouna*, informal aid and assistance at the community level. Everyone ensured that their family, neighbors, and community had what they needed - whether they could afford it or not.

I asked some friends what *al-ouna* meant to them. One responded that *al-ouna* is when no one is relaxing at home when there is a community member who is still harvesting his olives. Another said that *al-ouna* means helping each other out: “If I need to build a home to shelter my family, my community builds it with me.” In essence, *al-ouna* is local economy at its finest: using national resources to achieve the desired objective.

Post-Oslo, we have been integrated into the global neoliberal economy. Everyone is expected, and hoping, to have a full-time desk job and earn a monthly salary. The salary provides a means for us to purchase our needs: a home, a car, food, clothing. The banks lend us money to purchase those needs - or luxuries that we cannot afford. The rest of the community is busy doing the same: going to a full-time job to



earn a salary to buy their needs and luxuries. *Al-ouna* is disappearing under the new economic infrastructure. The community is morphing from a tight-knit, socially and ecologically sustainable unit to a mass of high-rise (five floors in most cases) apartment buildings with cars swerving on windy and pot-holed streets where neighbors no longer know each other’s names and no longer ask if you need *al-ouna*. This is development, some say. You are on your own. And those who were not able to obtain a job and a salary must beg in the streets or apply to the Ministry of Social Affairs for the quarterly 750 NIS stipend that is offered to extremely poor families. Over twenty years after Oslo and the influx of international aid, most of us have forgotten that there is a wealth of resources right in our own community.

In Greece, it took a major economic downturn to remind the Greek people of their own national wealth. A news show I watched showed how a group of Greeks met weekly to exchange resources and ensure *al-ouna* in difficult economic times. I remember one lady who used to have a desk job and now foraged for wild herbs to trade or sell at this weekly gathering. What will it take for us to return to our national resources? When will we return to our indigenous economics of *al-ouna*?

Palestinians receive more international aid per capita than any other country. Over twenty years after Oslo and the influx of international aid, most of us have forgotten that there is a wealth of resources right in our own community. *Al-ouna*, our traditional informal aid and assistance at the community level, has decreased as a result.

I recently joined the Dalia Association, the first and only community foundation in Palestine. The Dalia Association is attempting to remind us of our national wealth. While some members of our community possess sufficient cash wealth, others have other types of capital. Knowledge and skills are valuable national resources, too. When we bring all our national abundance together - cash, knowledge, and skills - we have *al-ouna*. Dalia Association’s Village Fund program, for example, works directly with communities to realize and quantify their wealth, monetary and otherwise. In one village, the community is developing a public space. While the renovation requires



some cash investment, the village has been able to utilize the skills and time of its craftsmen. Another village is developing a public transportation route within the village. While the village is raising funds to purchase a bus, the operations and maintenance of the bus will be provided by village volunteers. Income from the bus fees will return to the village fund for future projects and needs in the village.

Our current economic system does not value our resources. We are living in a bubble of frequent injections of international aid. When we are 'naughty,' the intravenous drip bag halts. When the funds stop coming,

we panic wondering what we will do without our salaries. We forget that we live in a blessed country where no one ever goes hungry. We forget that we possess sufficient resources and don't really need the international aid. When we really need it, *al-ouna* re-emerges, ready to feed, cloth, and shelter anyone in need.

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Article photos are from Fareed Taamallah showing al ouna and olive picking in the village of Qira.

