



Stopping Gaza's Downward Spiral



By Robert Piper



In 2012, the UN issued a seminal report, "Gaza 2020," which warned that without a major shift in the practices and policies applied towards Gaza, the Strip may cease to be a livable place by the year 2020. Sadly, this prognosis has not significantly changed since, as the number of people living in Gaza has continued to grow whilst infrastructure and basic services decline.

This year marks ten years since the June 2007 Hamas takeover of the occupied Gaza Strip and the subsequent Israeli decision to intensify the restrictions and closures on Gaza in the form of a land, air, and sea blockade. In addition to the profound internal Palestinian division that also ensued, periodic hostilities with Israel have inflicted major loss of life and injury, devastated homes and public infrastructure, and displaced tens of thousands; an estimated 40,000 persons remain displaced to this day due to the events of 2014.

Israel's blockade has had a devastating impact on all aspects of peoples' lives, exacerbated by Egypt's ongoing closure of the Rafah crossing, which has also been justified on security grounds. Many families are permanently split between Gaza and the West Bank or Israel. Gaza's economy, which was once largely dependent on access to the Israeli and West Bank markets, barely functions today. Most businesspeople and traders cannot exit to meet suppliers. Patients referred to specialized medical

treatment only available outside Gaza and students seeking further education in the West Bank or beyond are also caught up in the severe movement restrictions.

Whilst movement outside is increasingly restricted, public services inside Gaza have also been steadily deteriorating since the takeover by Hamas in June 2007. Despite the establishment of a Government of National Consensus in April 2014, thousands of government workers in Gaza in such crucial fields as education and health still do not receive a salary on a regular basis and have not since 2007.

Shortage of staffing, lack of access to training, shortages in medical and pharmaceutical supplies, and the ongoing energy crisis are all taking a toll on health services. Though the population has doubled since 2000, the number of functioning primary health care clinics in Gaza has actually decreased during this time, resulting in crowded clinics, decreased doctor-patient time, and reduced quality of service. Unsurprisingly given these trends, the number of patient referrals for care outside of Gaza has doubled in the last five years or so, while approval rates by Israel for patient permits to



exit Gaza for treatment has dropped from 92.5 percent in 2012 to only 62.1 percent in 2016.

For its part, the education sector is plagued by a shortage of classrooms and demoralized teachers, many of whom are also only on partial salaries. The building of new school buildings has not kept up with the student enrolment rate, leaving a shortage of over 200 schools. Classrooms now have an average of close to 40 students and 60 to 70 percent of schools operate on a double-shift system, limiting classroom time to four hours per day.

Only through substantial humanitarian interventions by the UN and our partners – supported by many donors – has it been possible to maintain health and education services at a minimum level.

At home, Gaza’s citizens are dealing with a chronic energy shortage that leaves people with daily power cuts of 12 to 18 hours. The electricity deficit also affects the delivery of basic water and sanitation services, affecting more than 300 water and wastewater facilities. This results in irregular water supply and untreated sewage that overflows onto the streets or into the sea. It also means that 40 percent of Gaza’s population receive domestic water supply just twice a week. And over-extraction of the coastal aquifer has resulted in the intrusion of seawater, with 96 percent of the groundwater in Gaza now unfit for human consumption.

In such a setting, the private sector has also been crippled over the past decade. Israeli restrictions on exports and transfers from Gaza as well as on the import of raw materials have significantly impacted key productive sectors such as agriculture, and the textile and furniture industries. Exit of goods from Gaza dropped dramatically in

mid-2007, and only started to recover in 2015, when the export of goods to Israel resumed, but exporters have had to cope with the challenges of restoring production capacity and regaining markets lost since 2007. Goods exiting in February of this year account for only 35 percent of the levels of 10 years earlier.

Comparisons with the West Bank amply illustrate the de-development process that is under way in Gaza. The average annual growth rate in real GDP in Gaza over the last ten years was 2.8 percent as compared to 6.9 percent in the West Bank. In effect Gaza’s average GDP growth rate has been lower than its population growth rate, meaning that on a per capita basis, real GDP has in fact decreased; it is 5.3 percent lower in 2016 than it was in 2006. Per capita GDP in the West Bank grew by 48.5 percent during the same period.

Of profound concern is the impact of this general deterioration on employment. Gaza’s unemployment rate has grown from around 30 percent ten years ago to 40 percent today. The equivalent rate in the West Bank was also a worrying 16.9 percent in 2016, but the growing gap tells its own story. The increase in unemployment in Gaza has been particularly stark among youth and women, with the gap between men and women steadily increasing over the decade.

While some of the Israeli restrictions on movement of people and goods in and out of Gaza have been eased over the decade, they continue to significantly impact the daily lives of Gaza’s two million inhabitants and the efforts of the international community to implement humanitarian and development projects. Many materials needed for humanitarian and development projects are considered by Israel as having potential “dual” use – i.e., civilian or military – and are thus subject to severe import restrictions. These include construction materials, such as cement and rebar (reinforcing



Gaza was once famous for its orange orchards that used to be a major source of income through export.

steel bars), raw material for the productive sectors, including wood and pesticides, medical equipment and chemicals needed for critical water and sanitation projects, among thousands of items. The import of such items is often rejected or faces significant delays. The UN continues to call for a full lifting of the blockade, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1860 and Israel’s obligations under international law as an occupying power. In the meantime, we will continue to encourage Israel to facilitate increased access and movement of people and goods in and out of Gaza.

At the same time, the Palestinian divide also shows no sign of narrowing. Divisiveness and mistrust between Ramallah and Gaza pose significant challenges to the development of the Strip. Securing energy, water, or more open movement of goods will only be possible if Palestinian leaders break from this last decade of division and the PA takes full control of Gaza’s border crossings. The United Nations continues to call for Gaza and the West Bank to be reunited under a single, legitimate, and democratic Palestinian Authority. The international community must rally behind all efforts that will

facilitate reconciliation and improve trust and confidence between Gaza and Ramallah.

Maintaining the “status quo” in Gaza is not an option. Too many social and economic trends in Gaza are pointing in the wrong direction, with unacceptable human consequences. And Gaza is not standing still – existing demographic momentum indicates that the population of Gaza will reach over 2.1 million in 2020 and 4.8 million by 2050.

Everyone must come together to help return Gaza to a rightful and just trajectory of prosperity and peace.

Robert Piper was designated UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Aid and Development Activities in the occupied Palestinian territory in June 2015. In his preceding assignments, he served as the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) for the Sahel region of Africa, and UN Resident Coordinator, HC, and UNDP Resident Representative for Nepal. Following the Indian Ocean Tsunami, Mr. Piper was appointed Chief of Staff to former US President Bill Clinton in his capacity as the UN’s Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery.

Article photos: © Shareef Sarhan, UNDP/PAPP image bank.