

# Reviving and Reinforcing *O'neh*

Building Community Resilience in the Palestinian State



By Hani Y. Hindiyyeh and Widad M. Boukaileh

In the face of Israeli occupation, political turmoil, economic difficulties, and environmental stress, the Palestinian community is changing. To survive these threats, communities need to foster resiliency. That's where volunteerism comes into play. It supports resiliency by enabling individuals to work together to shape collective opportunities to deal with risk. It also provides a wider system of support for both individuals and the community as a whole.

Volunteerism, as a universal social behavior, is a critical resource for community resilience. Mutual aid, self-help, and reciprocity are important coping strategies for isolated and vulnerable communities. In the absence of wider provisions and services, volunteers can help marginalized groups meet their needs. Many of these people witness and experience firsthand the specific challenges facing their communities, so they are in the unique position of being able to identify and directly respond to these challenges. Volunteers are the thread that binds communities together. By sharing knowledge and skills, they enhance community resilience, bolster economic development, and build global networks.

Prior to the first Intifada, community support was built on *o'neh*, or volunteerism. Given the fragile context of Palestinian society today, this cultural trait needs to be reinforced and revived.

THIS WEEK IN PALESTINE TURNS TWENTY



Alaa Abu Ramadan is a 26-year-old national UN Volunteer in Gaza. She has been working with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs since May 2017, helping to prepare reports on the humanitarian situation in the Strip (UNV, 2018)

**The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program contributes to peace and development through volunteerism worldwide. It works with partners to integrate qualified, highly motivated, and well-supported UN volunteers into development programming and to promote the values and global recognition of volunteerism.**

Committed and active volunteers are vital to support the public interests of their communities and fortify them in times of crisis.

UN Volunteers comprise both national and international professionals deployed with United Nations organizations. They help advance sustainable development, reconstruction, and peace, working closely with UN entity partners, including government institutions and nongovernmental organizations.

In the State of Palestine, 52 UN Volunteers have been serving during

2018 with UNDP, UNRWA, OCHA, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNODC, UNESCO, UN WOMEN, and OHCHR, 30 of them Palestinian nationals. Bringing specialized expertise and skill, these UN Volunteers serve as education officers, community development officers, and geo info system officers, among others. UN Volunteers encourage the spirit of volunteerism throughout the State of Palestine and can always be counted upon to provide critical assistance during times of emergency and adversity.

Within the context of the Palestinian economy, volunteerism creates a framework for development that is based on a collective will to progress rather than dependence on economic incentives – a scarce commodity when economic stagnation occurs. The framework ensures that all members of society have the opportunity to utilize their skills to increase their own resilience and improve their livelihoods.



**The UNV program was established in 1994 in the occupied Palestinian territory. It is based in East Jerusalem and hosted by the United Nations Development Programme/ Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP). Since its inception, the UNV program has been instrumental in responding to the needs of Palestinian society.**



In order to create this framework and a culture of volunteerism, governments and other stakeholders need to endorse this service and provide non-economic compensation to volunteers. They can strengthen volunteerism in two ways: 1) by nurturing an ecosystem for effective volunteering; and 2) by forming partnerships that value

the community's own contributions. These efforts will ensure that localization processes under the 2030 Agenda build on the commitment and innovations of citizens everywhere. Local volunteerism must be included in national policy planning and promoted by mainstream development strategies.

**I joined the UNV program because I was seeking an opportunity that would allow me to grow as a person and as a Palestinian woman, enhance my knowledge of the realities Palestinians face, and most importantly, provide a way to effectively contribute to my community. My UNV assignment is at OCHA with the oPt Humanitarian Fund, supporting the delivery of humanitarian aid to Palestinians. Working with OCHA's HF has allowed me to see firsthand the immense effort that goes into providing lifesaving and life-sustaining activities to the most vulnerable Palestinians living under occupation."**

Dalia Bitar, UNV Humanitarian Fund assistant at OCHA.

All community members, each with his or her particular capacity, have a responsibility to give back in order to develop and support the resilience of the community in which they live. And it is up to institutional stakeholders to build an enabling environment for volunteerism and direct the capacities of volunteers. In this way, Palestine can turn *o'neh* again into the impactful development tool it used to be.

**Every year on December 5, the world celebrates International Volunteer Day (IVD) to recognize volunteers worldwide. Special focus is on local community volunteers who contribute to making their communities more resilient against natural disasters, economic stresses, and political shocks. Local volunteers, of whom 60 percent are women and marginalized groups, embody the values of volunteerism and are acknowledged on IVD for their contributions to building more resilient communities.**

**This International Volunteer Day, join the United Nations Volunteer program in celebrating the contributions made by volunteers in all walks of life. This year, the UNV program in the State of Palestine will be launching a one-year campaign with the theme: Volunteers Build Resilient Communities.**



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