



## Addressing child labour at distribution sites in Gaza

Photo: UNRWA

***This case study describes how UNRWA addressed child labour issues at distribution centres in Gaza through an integrated education, economic-strengthening and protection project.***

### Background

In Gaza, child labour is a major child protection concern driven by complex socio-economic causes. It is sustained by inadequate protection systems, repeated conflict, ongoing political instability and ongoing blockade. These conditions have impacted the local economy heavily and de-development has set in, resulting in a vicious cycle of unemployment that affects 44 per cent of people. Poverty affects about 70 per cent of Palestinian refugees. With poverty as the single most important driver of child labour, it is not surprising that while globally the number of child labourers has dropped,<sup>1</sup> in Gaza child labour is increasing<sup>2</sup> and forms a serious threat to the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children.

Child labour is a common coping mechanism, particularly for boys. It occurs more frequently in larger families with six or more children, in households with parents with limited education and in households that have lost their source of income or livelihoods or their primary wage earners.<sup>3</sup> Child Protection Rapid Assessments in 2018 showed that 88 per cent of key informants knew children who were involved in hazardous work. Common forms of child labour include heavy manual labour such as transporting goods or working in the construction sector, which means that the more visible child labourers tend to be boys. Children who are working in the streets are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse, both psychologically and physically. The limited financial contribution they can make to their families comes at a very high cost for their wellbeing and futures.

1 International Labour Organization (ILO) (2013). Marking progress against child labour – Global estimates and trends 2000–2012.

2 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) (2016). Status of the Right of Palestinian Children.

3 Child Protection Working Group Gaza and Terre des Hommes Foundation (2018). Child Protection Rapid Assessment Report. UNRWA GFO was part of the Child Protection Rapid Assessment Technical Steering Committee and assisted with data collection in the field.

UNRWA developed a multi-sectoral project to offer alternatives for children who were working as porters around UNRWA distribution centres and to establish a conducive environment for their continued education and development. This one-year project was included in the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan in Gaza and was funded by the Swiss Development Cooperation.

## **Multi-sectoral child labour project**

The objective of the project was to mitigate child labour risks and find alternatives for children working as porters around UNRWA distribution sites. Key components of the project included: individual support including classes and reintegration into school, vocational training and direct assistance such as school uniforms or clothes. Families were targeted through small family income-generating projects. The project targeted 138 children aged between 7 and 17 years old, as well as their siblings and families across 12 distribution centres.

The following activities were considered the best way to achieve this objective:

### **1. Identification and referral of children at risk of child labour**

- Managers of the 12 distribution centres, social intervention supervisors and operations support staff identified child labourers working in and around the centres. As expected, all children identified as working outside the distribution centres were boys.
- After identification, counsellors from community mental health teams established contact with the children's families to obtain consent and plan a meeting.
- Counsellors interviewed each child and their family. Basic information was sought during the initial interviews including:
  - Refugee status: Of the 138 children identified, 115 are Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA and 13 are non-refugees.
  - Age: All were between 7 and 17 years old.
  - Family composition: The majority (127) come from families of more than six members.
  - Reasons for work: Many families could not meet their daily needs and in some cases, children were supplementing their household income. In addition to financial difficulties, a child's poor performance at school and parents not seeing the value of education also emerged as important factors.
  - Earnings: Most of the children (86) were earning less than 10 shekels (3 USD) a day.
  - School attendance: nearly 60 per cent (81) were not in school.

Children who were not refugees were referred to the Palestinian NGO Ma'an Development Centre which assessed each child and provided case management support and intervention plans. Only one of the 13 families did not want to participate in the assessment or the project.

### **2. Case management services**

- Case management was initiated for each identified child. The caseload included 138 children in 103 families, as several children were from the same families. A total of 16 social workers were assigned six to seven cases each.
- Needs assessments were completed working directly with each child and their family to understand their needs and to discuss and agree with them the appropriate response and intervention plans.

### 3. Tailored interventions

Interventions looked at the needs and potential within each family, which was key in the effective response for the majority of cases. For instance, in some cases families valued education but did not have the financial resources to support their children. In other cases, parents could not see any value or reason for education, or simply did not know what services were available to support children who needed extra help with learning. There were also cases where families had clear capacity and skills to develop businesses to improve their economic situation but who lacked the financial resources. Interventions were tailored to the specific situation of children and their families, and included:

- financial assistance to families for school uniforms and stationery so that children in child labour continue or resume school;
- support classes for children who had dropped out of school or were falling behind, as well as the siblings of children in child labour who were at risk of dropout or child labour;
- vocational training for older children and those unable to integrate back into school;
- income-generating support for families with small business ideas;
- psychosocial support;
- education advocacy sessions for parents and families.

### 4. Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring was conducted through analysis of case management data and through regular project monitoring, management and follow-up. The relevance and effectiveness of the interventions was evaluated through:

- children's school attendance and vocational training attendance (monitored for children who were reintegrated into school after a period of non-attendance);
- scholastic results (exam results of school-attending children were evaluated against their grade point average assessed before the project began);
- feedback from parents and teachers;
- reports from social workers.

A lesson-learned exercise with project staff included group discussions about what was working, the challenges that were faced and the adjustments that could be made to improve effectiveness. In-depth interviews were undertaken with children and parents to gain insights directly from them about the benefits and challenges with the project's approach.

## Successes

Key successes of the project included:

- 126 of the identified 138 children (91 per cent) agreed to receive various forms of support, including case management and psychosocial support;
- 45 children (32 per cent) as well as 89 at-risk siblings received educational support including in Maths, Science, Arabic and English;
- 113 children out of 134 enrolled children receiving educational support (out of 134) performed well in school in the first semester;
- 43 children (31 per cent) were enrolled in vocational training;
- nine families started income-support activities;
- six children enrolled in literacy classes (with more to be enrolled soon);
- 19 children who had dropped out returned to school full-time and those who were still in school but falling behind improved their grades after attending support classes;

- changes in attitudes and wellbeing included positive changes in the attitude of parents and children about the importance of education; significant positive changes in personal confidence and self-esteem for many children; families are more engaged in their children's lives; and more parents reported that they follow up on their children's progress with joy and pride.

## Challenges

The project faced several challenges, mainly related to the complexity of the cases and the shortage of available resources.

- **Workload:** The project was managed in-house, with no subcontracting of activities and no additional staff, except for the instructors providing vocational training. All staff involved took on the tasks related to the implementation of the child labour project in addition to their normal duties. This meant a significant increase of the workload, in particular for social workers, who dealt directly with the individual children and their families, in addition to their regular cases.
- **Complexity of cases:** The complex nature of many child labour cases required a lot more staff time than was initially anticipated. In addition, some cases were not eligible for the available interventions. For example, 22 of the children initially identified were too old to be reintegrated into school; at the same time, they did not meet the criteria for enrolment in vocational training, which required completion of the sixth grade. In addition, there were also challenges with placing these children in basic literacy courses due to the timing and locations of these courses.
- **Financial means:** The limited financial resources available in the project were insufficient to address the scale and complexity of the child labour. Financial constraints also limited the extent of support available for support classes and income-generating activities.

## Lessons learned

- The project is an example of an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to child labour in a humanitarian context, which was effective in addressing the entrenched, complex and sensitive issue of child labour. The effective collaboration enabled multi-disciplinary planning, implementation and learning.
- Another successful aspect of the project was the emphasis placed on the entire family, and the support system around the child to build resilience and capacity within the family that could provide more durable support beyond the life of the project. This involved engaging the whole family and building a deeper understanding of their vulnerabilities and capabilities.
- The project has provided concrete support and outcomes to children in serious protection situations, exposed to daily violence and exploitation. Many of these children were in the worst forms of child labour and out of school while others were attending irregularly and at risk of dropping out. Most families had limited expectations and hopes for the future of their children. This situation has been reversed for many of the children in the project. Parents widely acknowledged the impact the project has had on their lives, as it effectively removed their children from child labour.
- The project, and in particular the case management process, has deepened the teams' understanding of addressing child labour in Gaza and the complex underlying factors that bring about these serious protection situations. The children in the project were involved in some of the most visible forms of child labour. The project has allowed UNRWA to better understand these forms of child labour for possible intervention (for example, children working during the night on fishing boats or collecting junk metal and plastic on garbage sites). However, in the prevailing political and socio-economic situation and without additional support, urgent and severe child protection concerns, most visibly child labour, will continue to increase.

More information and resources are available at:

<https://alliancecpha.org>

<https://alliancecpha.org/en/child-protection-hub/child-labour-task-force>