



## Implications of the Corona Pandemic on Social Protection in Gaza Strip

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The Corona pandemic has put social protection interventions under the test. It has seriously affected the dignity, livelihood and welfare of people. This is making it necessary to focus on social protection policies, and to have a well-designed and implemented protection system in order to reduce poverty and inequality and to contribute to social inclusion, leaving no one behind. There is also a need for adaptable programs that respond to specific needs and address weaknesses facing vulnerable groups in the events of conflict and emergency.

Social protection for the poor, marginalized and sick groups is a basic human right. It plays an important role in protecting them from poverty and alleviating it, and seeks to achieve equality and social justice to preserve the inherent human dignity of people.

The Corona pandemic revealed the fragility of social protection policies and procedures, whether governmental, international, or civil society, in the Gaza Strip, which has suffered for many years, and is still suffering, from division, siege and marginalization.

It has also become apparent that the health system is incapable of facing any risks, and that there are no food security policies, which have left all affected groups including workers, patients and the elderly, uncovered by social protection services.

The absence of a Social Security law, which was frozen before the beginning of 2019 due to many faults and deficiencies in it, has a big impact which is evident in the absence of policies and procedures that guarantee protection from various risks that negatively affect decent living for the protected groups.

The social condition of poor Gazan families worsened, where percentage of registered poor families increased to more than 75 percent at the beginning of the year, and according to estimates by the Ministry of Social Development, the poverty rate is expected to reach 80 percent. This increases the suffering of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip which continues from 2000, due to the accumulated aggressive Israeli practices, and depriving thousands of workers of their livelihoods.

However, the weak Palestinian local economy has not been able to create new job opportunities for skilled trained labor, along with the disastrous effects of the Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip since 2006, in addition to three destructive wars, and an abominable Palestinian division that has weakened life in Gaza leading to extreme poverty. Meanwhile temporary employment programs did not succeed in providing an alternative to the absent social protection program.

With the Corona pandemic, all service providers have become unable to cover social

security services for all poor and marginalized groups and day laborers, who have lost their income after establishments, markets and commercial activities had stopped working in order to limit and prevent the spread of the novel Corona virus. This indicates the need for fundamental reforms in the mechanisms, procedures and policies of social security, at the forefront of which is the re-consideration of the relief model and policies emanating from it, as well as the components of the health system, in order to become a new model that is based on the human rights system which includes the rules of social protection.

This is evident in the increase in the number of poor families and the entry of daily workers into the category of poverty, with the absence of a law that guarantees their compensation and protection for measures taken against them by their employers. There has also been an increase in violence against children and women, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

It has become evident that the health services and their preparations of human resources and facilities to face the risks are weak. There is also a limit of the concept of social protection to being concerned with food security, with no programs that target the poor and the unemployed, such as psychological, family, health or education... etc. Even Waqfet Ezz (Dignity Fund), which was established by the Palestinian government in the city of Ramallah to confront the pandemic, collected 60 million shekels, or about \$ 17 million, when distributing the funds, it discriminated between West Bank workers and their counterparts in the Gaza Strip (according to the Workers Union statement in Gaza).

## **The pandemic's impact on social groups:**

- Increased number of poor and destitute people, especially an entire sector of daily workers, workers in small and very small economies, and the lack of protection policies for them.
- Inability of the social protection system to cover all poor and marginalized areas with all its components.
- Lack or weakness of medical services such as medical staff and equipment.
- Shortage in trained staff that can deal with crises and emergencies.
- Weakness in comprehensive food security system.
- Fragility of the local economy, and the lack of effective policies that protect workers or secure their benefits and compensation.
- Lack of adequate and guaranteed basic income, whether in cash or in kind, for those not included in the special protection program, such as day laborers and the elderly in all economic sectors.
- Weak coordination with the private sector, and measures to protect labor rights.
- High rates of domestic violence, clear gender-based discrimination, and the inability of the poor to fulfill obligations and debts, which made them vulnerable to legal prosecution.

## **The role of NGOs**

### **(protection is not a cost but an investment):**

There is no doubt that Palestinian NGOs are making a good effort and an integral role with the governmental and international institutions working in social, relief, health and labor fields. However, most of the relief aid is emergency and not continuous, and does not meet 50 percent of the basic needs of poor families in Gaza, according to estimates of Ministry of Social Development.

In light of the increase in poverty and the numbers of families in need during the previous months, due to precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the Corona virus, social protection activities provided by social, health and labor service providers, were not able to include everyone. At the same time, an important segment of marginalized groups, the new poor from the daily workers, remained uncovered by services. Meanwhile, NGOs cannot achieve a concrete progress in improving the lives of marginalized groups, without partnership and strong efforts between the Palestinian Authority, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees «UNRWA» and international and non-governmental institutions working in this field, even though NGOs working in the social service sector have offered clear contributions toward social protection thus contributing to social inclusion and no marginalization of the poor in order to achieve the goals of sustainable development 2030, especially the goals aimed at eliminating poverty in all its forms everywhere, fighting poverty and providing adequate health services.

The Corona pandemic revealed the weak health capabilities and shortage in medical staff. It was revealed that there were only 60 respirators in the Gaza Strip, and the Ministry of Health recruited doctors and nurses from recent graduates to work in quarantine centers in exchange for a small amount of money, thus endangering their lives, in view of the insufficient experience they have. In addition, there has been an exacerbation of unemployment, poverty and gender-based violence, which interferes with the concept of a decent living for poor and marginalized groups. NGOs need to understand that their important role can only be achieved through participation of the poor and marginalized groups and not through replacing them and that they are civil entities that express the interests of people, their priorities and their role is to pressure international organizations and to influence government policies to meet the needs of the poor and marginalized groups.

### **Therefore, NGOs must work on the rules of social justice to focus on vulnerable groups through:**

- Developing a clear vision of the social protection mechanisms of NGOs at the national level, starting from their participatory and complementary role with governmental, international and UN bodies, as a pressuring force for correcting the path of social policies within the international measures of social protection.
- NGOs should be aware of their societal role without fulfilling governmental or international roles, because doing this will double their tasks and burden them,

and will lead to the gradual escape of those bodies from their duties.

- Setting priorities of the poor and marginalized regions and groups on the top of the priority list for fundraising, instead of adopting donor priorities and trends.
- Pressuring and influencing governmental and international social protection policies targeting various sectors and regions in Gaza while maintaining the role of a development partner, and working to ensure that there is a development of the concept of social protection so that to include developmental aspects alongside relief ones for the poor.
- Adjusting beneficiary targeting mechanisms to improve coverage and reduce targeting errors.

### **Recommendations for NGOs:**

- Mobilizing resources and pressuring donors to develop social protection mechanisms
- Pressuring the National Authority to pass the Social Security Law in a manner that meets the needs of the people.
- Investing in capacity building to ensure effective action in times of crisis.
- Establishing mechanisms to implement the labor law, guarantee protection of workers 'rights, and open coordination channels with the private sector.
- Pressing international organizations and donors to increase health, humanitarian and relief aid.

- Creating programs to combat gender-based violence, and activating mechanisms for social inclusion and gender equality.
- Providing new high quality initiatives that enhance social protection and pressure governments and international organizations to develop new policies that increase fragile and poor groups' resilience and improve quality of life.
- Embracing charitable youth initiatives, training youth, developing a guide and a code of conduct for working with the poor, and activating social inclusion initiatives and policies.
- Developing the health system in coordination with the Ministry of Health to create a health condition that can respond to the risks on the basis of complementarity.
- Investing in science, data collection, and capacity building to address the knowledge gap, in terms of the impact of social protection in situations of emergency and conflict.
- to avoid duplication and enhance the complementarity of roles.
- Enhance coordination and complementary action among social service providers to ensure reaching the largest number of those targeted to ensure a decent living for them.
- Building a comprehensive and integrated social protection system based on investment for the benefit of the target groups.
- Establishing policies that protect daily workers from exploitation of employers and ensure a decent life for them at times of crises.
- Developing a programmatic system for managing crises and contingency preparedness for situations such as the Corona pandemic.
- Designing long-term and sustainable national social protection plans and strategic plans that clarify the roles of the various actors involved in an emergency response.
- Designing social protection targeting mechanisms that improve the scope of comprehensive coverage of targeted regions and groups with the aim of reducing errors.

### **General Recommendations:**

- Passing the Social Security Law.
- Keeping social protection policies away from political conflicts.
- Development of early warning systems and crisis management plans.
- Improving the health system in terms of human cadres and medical equipment.
- Creating a unified database for all workers in the social security sector,
- Supporting the policies of the social protection system in the private economic sector.
- Working immediately on a contingency plan for social protection at times of crises.



## Definitions:

**Social Protection:** It is concerned with preventing, managing and overcoming cases that negatively affect the welfare of the people. It consists of policies and programs aimed at reducing poverty and vulnerability by enhancing the efficiency of the labor market, and reducing people's exposure to economic risks, such as unemployment, exclusion, disease, disability, aging, and contributes to positive labor market interventions to promote employment (United Nations Development Research Institute).

**Social inclusion:** It is the process of efforts exerted to ensure equal opportunities, so that

everyone, regardless of their background, can realize their full potential in life (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017).

## Social protection measures:

1. A basic income with a decent amount, whether in cash or in kind.
2. Everyone has access to basic social services at a reasonable cost in the areas of health, water and sanitation, education and food security (ILO 2011).

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