



Photograph by Sarah Malian

'Why did you let me get hurt?'

Conflict and siege threaten Gaza's young minds

World Vision is a Christian international relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Motivated by our Christian faith, World Vision is dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. World Vision serves all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.

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Dedicated to the memory of Ahmad Khader Sedeh and Mahmoud Khaled Al Masharawi, 17-year-old brothers killed December 30, 2008 by Israeli forces while playing on the roof of their home in Remal, Gaza.

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Foreword

Generations of Gaza's children have had to face day after day of poverty, insecurity and fear. Boys and girls there view the unfettered access to the basics of life—food, water, sanitation, healthcare, safety—as luxuries.

In December 2008, the Israeli Army and Hamas engaged in more than three weeks of intense fighting that intensified the physical and psychological destruction. Hundreds of children were killed and hundreds more injured or disabled. Others were left with the mental distress caused by enduring violence and destruction.

In addition to the destruction in Gaza, neighbouring Israeli schools, farms, and homes continue to live under the shadow of the threat of rockets. Both Israeli and Gazan children continue to live in fear and insecurity. Their future lacks any glimmer of the peace and safety they so badly need and deserve.



Photograph by Fady Adwan

Renewed violence tore apart the Gaza Strip in the fighting that stretched from December 27, 2008 until January 18, 2009. More than 1,000 people were killed in the three weeks of violence, many of them women and children. With the dust now settling over Gaza, what is perhaps most chilling is not the bomb craters or shattered buildings, but the psychological suffering being born silently by Gaza's residents, particularly its children.

World Vision has been working in Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank for nearly three decades. Even before this most recent outbreak of violence, our staff were deeply concerned by the high levels of severe trauma among enclave residents, particularly children. Unsurprisingly, the recent conflict has only made this problem worse. Since 2006 World Vision has delivered services in Gaza to help children cope with the psychological impact of these harsh conditions. Since the beginning of the year, these programmes have been scaled up to reach some 2,200 children. Our staff are providing them with ways to process their emotional experiences and with places where they can feel safe.

This report calls on everyone involved in this conflict to protect and improve the psychosocial wellbeing of both Gazan and Israeli children. This includes prioritising all children's need for peace and security, as well as ensuring access to basic rights like food, education, shelter and water. It also appeals to the international community and the Israeli Government to reconsider restrictions that impact children's mental health. These include restrictions on allowing humanitarian agencies to train teachers and build playgrounds for the children of Gaza; on the access of Arabic-speaking psychosocial support professionals;

and even on toys, paper, paint and crayons used in psychosocial support programmes.

Such interventions are badly needed. However, to live healthy and productive lives, what the children of Gaza and neighbouring Israeli communities need most is normalcy: childhoods free of fear, insecurity and violence. This requires a lasting political solution to the grievances on both sides.

Dean Hirsch, President, World Vision International

“Life here is very bad because of poverty. I would like to leave Beit Lhiya so I no longer have to live near poverty, military occupation and incursions”

- Ma'ali, 17 years old

Troubled hearts; troubled minds

Even before the recent crisis the children of Gaza displayed worrying signs of psychosocial distress. An 18-month blockade of the Strip – adding to a lifetime of turmoil and conflict – has resulted in hundreds of thousands of children living in fear and anger, deprived of a normal childhood.

Recurring violence and conflict in the Strip have taken their toll on Gaza's children, who make up well over half its population. High rates of unemployment and poverty as well as physical insecurity, injustice, and a society on the brink of collapse have led to a generation of children facing enormous psychosocial challenges. They are in need of coordinated and professional psychosocial interventions, but must also have their basic needs satisfied.

Already on the brink

Alarming high numbers of children in one North Gaza neighbourhood showed signs of severe distress, found a World Vision study conducted shortly before December's outbreak of violence. Well over half the

teachers and counsellors surveyed indicated that children had no hope for the future, and more than half of parents stated that their children suffered from nightmares, bedwetting, and other emotional problems when fighting would occur.¹

These findings mirrored an earlier study by World Vision conducted in August 2007, in which nearly a third of those surveyed reported witnessing the violent death of a friend or relative. More than a quarter of children interviewed in this study exhibited serious reactions as a result of their exposure to past violence, and more than two-thirds exhibited reactions in the mild to moderate range.²

Even before December's outbreak of violence children were suffering not just mentally, but also physically. Estimates of conditions in the Strip during 2008 put the number of malnourished children at 50,000, and about half of children under the age of two were found to be anaemic, with more than two-thirds suffering vitamin A deficiency.³

Gaza in ruins

December 2008's violence was the worst that Gaza had seen in 60 years, bringing new levels of suffering to the children of the region. For more than three weeks the residents of Gaza were forced to endure a near ceaseless barrage, exacting a heavy psychological toll, particularly on the children. Some 431 Palestinian children were killed, and another 1,872 were injured.⁴

Shells and bullets tore through homes on a daily basis, and destroyed dozens of schools, mosques, and other public buildings. Some aid agencies estimate that up to a third of the residents of Gaza fled or were driven from their homes during the fighting. By mid February 2009, 70,000 people – including 40,000 children – were still believed to be displaced, many living in tent cities despite the winter cold.⁵

Even months after the fighting, explosive remnants of war remain a threat to children. They are often buried in the rubble of homes and schools, adding to the daily threats children face.

Further compounding the suffering of children, a third of Gazans had no access to running water at the height of the conflict, and another third had water for only a few hours a day. Electrical shortages and a breakdown in Gaza's sewage plant made conditions even more unbearable. An already vulnerable healthcare system was brought close to the point of collapse under the sheer numbers of injured, and demand for vital medicines.

In March 2009, the Lancet medical journal published a study into the state of the healthcare system in Gaza, reporting that 10 percent of children in the Strip had stunted growth, and in some areas this figure was said to be as high as 30 percent.⁶

Widespread distress

With the conflict only weeks behind us and with daily clashes still commonplace, it is too early to assess the scale of the psychosocial needs within Gaza. The uneasy ceasefire which exists between Hamas and Israel does little to curb the rockets fired into Israel or the retaliatory airstrikes which continue to tear apart the Gaza Strip and instil fear into its residents. The intensity of conflict may well have decreased, but ongoing violence leaves children with a constant sense of insecurity

and fear. Threats to resume hostilities mean children on both sides cannot rest easy.

The number of people showing signs of trauma is between 20 and 30 percent of the population, according to mental health workers in both Israel and Gaza.⁷ World Health Organisation projections suggest that in an emergency the percentage of people with severe mental disorders can increase by 1 percent, and those with mild or moderate mental disorders can increase by as much as 5 to 10 percent.⁸ With time, the majority of people will recover naturally, yet some will require professional support and others will suffer long-term problems.

Experience from other contexts has shown that the full impact of these distressing events will take time to emerge. It will be months before there is a clear picture of the emotional scars inflicted on Gaza's children and those of neighbouring Israel. But it is clear that what was already a dire situation with regard to the psychosocial wellbeing of children in Gaza will deteriorate significantly if adequate steps are not immediately taken.

“In the past, when I used to work in Israel, I would do a bit of fishing with my sons just to supplement our income. But now our supplementary income has become the primary source of income. This has been the worst time for us in our history”

- Kamal, Gaza fisherman and father



Photograph by Sarah Malian

Twin brothers mend their family's fishing lines. Since the border with Israel has tightened, many families who used to cross for work now rely on fishing off the coast of Gaza as their primary income. Previously for this family, fishing would only supplement a day's wage. But now that times are tough and unemployment is high, fishing alone has to provide enough to support the entire family.

‘Why did you let me get hurt?’

Fatima is a beautiful six-year-old Palestinian girl. Her long black hair used to flow to halfway down her back. On January 17, the F-16 planes were flying low, dropping their bombs in her neighbourhood. Fatima, her four siblings and parents all ran to the school 500 yards down the road, the same as another 400 men, women and children around the area.

At night they slept on the floor in a classroom, approximately 15 families to a room. Early one morning, the planes flew low and dropped their deadly cargo of white phosphorous bombs. These crashed through the school roof and hot phosphorous rocks settled on top of the innocent sleeping children and women. Three rocks hit Fatima, instantly burning her hair and face... Many people were burned.

Fatima's external scars are now healing, but the scars on the inside are still raw. Every time Fatima hears a plane she runs inside. She is too scared to go to school. She is angry at her mother and asks, ‘Why did you let me get hurt?’ Fatima and many children like her will need time and special care for all of the scars to heal.



Photograph by Judy Moore

Suffering and survival

Prolonged exposure to violence and poverty has left hundreds of thousands of children in the Gaza Strip facing severe psychosocial risks and in need of immediate support. At the same time, the capacity of parents to manage their children's distress is reduced due to their own psychological burdens. And the decimated economy and society within Gaza mean that children are left vulnerable both physically and mentally.

Today 9 out of 10 Gazans are registered with the United Nations to receive food aid.⁹ Despite the enormous aid programmes in Gaza, however, access to food and the poor quality of food remain a key concern. Respondents to a World Vision study carried out in February 2009 identified access to affordable food as a key problem,¹⁰ prompting concerns for the nutrition of children in particular.

The same study found that more than two-thirds of respondents were depending on food aid as a predominant method of meeting household food needs. And more than one

third of those surveyed considered food aid to be a standard method of meeting basic needs, rather than regarding aid as a temporary coping mechanism.

Employment too has suffered since the crisis. Widespread destruction of agricultural land and equipment, as well as the need to rebuild houses, are adding to the already enormous economic burden that many bear. Exports continue to be prohibited with few exceptions, leaving little prospect for an economic revival in the Strip.

A shattered economy

The poor economic conditions are a significant contributor to both the psychological and physical suffering inflicted upon Gaza's children. The entire Gazan economy has been strangled to the point of collapse by 18 months of blockade, affecting all aspects of life. A joint NGO report from 2006 described the border closures in Gaza as having "decimated the economy and seriously depleted stocks of essential goods in Gaza."¹¹

As a consequence, unemployment in Gaza reached over 45 percent in July 2007 reported the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA),¹² the highest rate in the world at the time.¹³ Few prospects exist for children to dream and plan for their future.

Education also provides little reprieve for Gaza's young. Although school attendance has traditionally been very high in Gaza¹⁴ – thanks largely to the enormous investment and support provided by the UNWRA – the poor state of the economy has meant that education, qualifications, and skills have not been sufficient to guarantee a job for the majority of Gazans.

The blockade of Gaza has brought high levels of poverty to the Strip. Four out of five residents were living below the poverty line at the end of 2008, according to one survey.¹⁵ The flow of goods and labour in and out of Gaza has been virtually non-existent during past years, and the private sector has been all but paralysed by export prohibitions.

Gaza's already crumbling economy has deteriorated further since the fighting earlier

this year. The livelihoods of Gazans, already jeopardised by the lengthy blockade, are now more precarious than ever. Moreover, thousands of families have lost breadwinners to death or injury in the conflict, leaving even more vulnerable widows and children.

In the face of adversity

The people of Gaza have demonstrated immense resilience in coping with conditions in the Strip- but at a dear price. Economic hardship and poverty forced many to resort to selling off their assets and using up family savings. Some have even had to reduce their daily food intake. Others have borrowed, amassing debt.

One inter-agency report outlining the humanitarian crisis in Gaza in 2006 stated, "these [coping] strategies have caused further impoverishment and are now virtually exhausted."¹⁶

The culmination of widespread displacement, highly distressing events, daily struggle for adequate food, and ongoing threats to safety has seriously undermined the psychosocial wellbeing of both adults and children. The cost of allowing this situation to deteriorate further will be a generation of people deprived of a normal childhood. Something must change.

Access is critical

If conditions in the Strip are to change, the level of access restrictions must change also. Produce cannot reach outside markets so farmers are unable to generate an income and sustain their families. Import restrictions limit the flow of some humanitarian aid, such as pasta and paper, as well as critical materials like concrete and glass necessary to reconstruct and rebuild Gaza's crumbling infrastructure, including sewage works, power stations, waterworks, homes, schools and businesses.

The blockade is a significant contributor to the dire conditions which are fostering psychosocial problems among the children of Gaza.¹⁷

Security concerns are cited to justify the restriction of vital humanitarian supplies into Gaza, supplies which are needed to alleviate the enormous poverty and suffering faced daily by Gazan families.

Legitimate security concerns should not be discarded, but if Gaza is to be given a chance at recovery and its people given an opportunity to live healthy and productive lives, access both to and from the Strip is needed. Limitations by the Israeli authorities must also be open and transparent. Genuine

aid in the form of humanitarian goods or staff must not simply be denied. Furthermore, goods must be allowed to leave Gaza if its economy is to be given a chance to recover, and its children given a chance for the future.

“Most of the children have to work helping their fathers, so they have no dreams. They have to leave school and that destroys their dreams. We would like to live in peace but we need rights”

- Gaza fisherman, father of five



Photograph by Judy Moore

Children play in the wreckage of a car, destroyed in the December-January violence that brought to an end the lives of some 431 children. More than 3,300 homes were destroyed in the violence, and over 11,000 damaged, leaving some 70,000 people still without homes to return to.

‘Where is my father?’

Nine -year-old Amir and his family of eight hid in their house as the F-16s flew overhead. When the bombing started they moved to the house next door. They were told it would be safer.

In front of the house was a small field. Amir's father looked outside and saw his brother had been hit by some of the artillery from the plane. Amir's father and uncle ran out of the house to try to rescue their brother, only to be shot dead by the helicopter gunship hovering above.

Amir's house collapsed after a bomb landed on it. The family then ran from the second house through the field where Amir's father and uncle lay. Amir looked at the body and thought he recognised the shoes on the feet of the dead person... His mother pulled him along saying, 'Lots of men have shoes like Daddy's.'

After five days, Amir asked, 'Where is my father?' His mother knew she had to tell the truth and said that he was dead and that grandfather had buried him, after the planes and the tanks left, under the big tree. Amir rushed out. It was then discovered that Amir ran to the big tree and dug with his hands to find his father.



Photograph by Judy Moore

Bringing hope

Despite the suffering and setbacks faced by the December-January conflict, a number of programmes are underway to bring hope and recovery to young Gazans.

Most of those who suffer under the psychosocial burden of their environment do not need specialised care or treatment. They need only a sense of normality and to have their basic needs met.

Security

Whilst politicians continue to debate the way towards peace in the region, today's children need safety and security now if they are to cope with what they have experienced and what they continue to live through. Not only do they need to be safe, they need to feel safe.

In addition to our development and relief activities, World Vision has been providing programmes to support 2,200 children across Gaza, offering them safe places to play, grow and learn. These child-friendly spaces are safe environments where children learn many of

the skills they need to cope with what they have experienced and lead more normal lives.

Meanwhile, a lasting resolution must be found to the very real grievances that exist on both sides of the political fence. World Vision, as well as many other agencies in both Israel and the Palestinian Territories, work to bring peace one step closer for the children of Gaza and their neighbours. But much work is still needed.

A degree of normality

One of the most essential elements to helping children to address psychosocial threats is something approaching 'normality'. In addition to security, children need a supportive family, a place to go to school, and regular nutritious meals. These basic rights are critical to a child's normal development and psychosocial wellbeing.

World Vision is providing food parcels, hygiene kits, and blankets to some 78,000 Gazans in the north and the south. Meeting these basic needs is essential, but marks only one step towards providing some sense of stability and

normality for these families. Thousands of families across Gaza have lost their homes, are living in tents or sharing with friends and relatives. They need to be able to rebuild their lives, and construction materials must be allowed to enter the Strip so that they can do this.

Children must have hope for their future, and seeing parents and older siblings out of work adds to the uncertainty and stress they face. Gaza's shattered economy must be allowed to recover, allowing businesses and livelihoods to improve. Until the near-total ban on imported goods into Gaza is lifted, and until opportunities exist for exporting products from Gaza, the people of Gaza will face a grim economic future.

Schools are a critical provider of stability and protection for young children. But many of Gaza's schools were damaged or destroyed in the recent conflict and must be rebuilt. Double-shifting in schools (when the supply of schools is inadequate, double-shifting can be used to teach two sets of pupils in two shifts) was already taking place before the December violence. The increased pressure on the system threatens to result in triple-shifting,

further jeopardising both the quality of education and the protective qualities of school.

Training teachers is another essential component of World Vision's work in Gaza. Teachers – who are often parents themselves – are a critical actor in the lives of children, particularly when many parents are suffering the psychological effects of violence and other pressures, and are unable to offer the level of support, structure, and comfort that these children so desperately need. World Vision is working with teachers to help them better address the needs of distressed children.

But legal restrictions imposed by several countries limit World Vision's ability to work in public schools because these schools are ultimately controlled by Hamas-affiliated

“I think it is possible that Israelis and Palestinians could live together in peace one day. Please tell the world we need help to continue our jobs”

- Nabil, a fisherman from Gaza

Ministry of Education. Organisations that undertake activities such as training public school teachers, reconstructing classrooms, or providing crayons and paper to schools risk incurring criminal penalties.

These laws, designed to restrict the financing of terrorism, prevent organisations like World Vision from training public school teachers to better address the psychosocial needs of the children in their care. A revision of such legislation should be undertaken, taking into account legitimate security and humanitarian concerns.

Hope

A World Vision study of the effects of the separation wall in the West Bank found that it is often forgotten that children are part of a political conflict: “she or he lives it, sees it and feels it,”¹⁸ the report found. Sadly, the children of Gaza and Israel have felt the impact of the political struggles of their parents, and they continue to live with the consequences. And this reality is clearly visible in the children of Gaza today.

Gaza's children need both a sense of security and normality if they are to address their suffering and contribute positively to the region's future. But children in both the Palestinian Territories and Israel also need a

lasting and equitable peace that offers them hope. They need the opportunity to lead lives without being confronted regularly by death, hunger, and fear. Children need to be given hope and prospects for the future.

For Gaza's younger generations what is needed most is a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach to their psychosocial wellbeing; a response that takes into account their need for peace and security, and their rights to essentials like education, shelter, food, and water. And this requires genuine efforts to put in place a lasting and equitable ceasefire, the easing of Gaza's blockade, and a long-term coordinated recovery response.

Recommendations

World Vision calls for the following actions to be taken to support the children of Gaza:

To the International Community

- Press for a comprehensive peace accord that provides meaningful stability for the children of Gaza and Israel.
- Urge governments to reconsider legal restrictions that prevent NGOs like World Vision from building playgrounds, playrooms, and other safe areas in public schools.
- Press governments to re-evaluate legal restrictions that prevent NGOs like World Vision from training teachers in psychosocial support methodology at public schools.

To the Government of Israel

- Immediately end all restrictions on goods brought into Gaza for humanitarian purposes, and be transparent with security concerns that limit the importation of certain goods.
- End restrictions on the import of toys, paper, paint, crayons and other materials traditionally used in psychosocial support and other educational programmes.
- Ease restrictions on the export of goods from Gaza that constrains economic growth, hampers livelihoods, and fuels tensions and suffering.

Endnotes

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Photograph by Judy Moore

World Vision currently supports some 25,000 sponsored children throughout the West Bank and Gaza, with thousands more children and family members also benefiting. In response to the recent conflict World Vision has been providing food, blankets, and hygiene kits to 78,000 individuals within Gaza. Psychosocial programmes supporting 2,200 children are also underway, as well as activities to train teachers to better care for children suffering distress.

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