



Students in Beit Lahiya, Gaza.

As the blockade imposed on Gaza by the Israeli authorities enters its third year, what does it mean for 1.5 million Gazans to have spent the last two years completely shut off from the rest of the world? What does it mean to have lived all this time under a collective punishment.

On 26 and 27 May, Oxfam interviewed women farmers and students in Beit Lahiya, and rural workers in the Al Mawassi area of Rafah, to hear how their lives have changed during the past two years of isolation. They explained how each has strived to help their family survive and maintain their dignity after losing their source of income. According to the UN, more than 80% of ordinary citizens have become dependent on humanitarian aid for survival, while the economy has been destroyed with the unemployment rate nudging 50%. Reconstruction and development remain near impossible because of the embargo on all but the most basic food, medicine and essential household goods. People described being trapped in dependency on aid without any prospect for the future, when all they want is to work and take care of themselves. They asked why innocent civilians were locked inside Gaza.

Despite this, everyone who visits Gaza is struck by the resilience and ingenuity people show in finding ways around the obstacles they face in their daily lives.

The Government of Israel, Palestinian politicians and factional leaders and leaders in the international community are all responsible, to varying degrees, for putting their own political objectives over people's rights and needs. Without concrete action to address the underlying political factors, no amount of money or elegance of mechanisms to channel funds can bring about the desperately needed improvements to the lives of Gazan children, women and men. There can be no progress without an end to the blockade and a beginning to rebuilding Gaza. All Gazans want is control over their destiny.

How does it feel...

- to be unable to meet your children's needs?
- to be overwhelmed by endless problems?
- to have lost your means of livelihood?
- to be dependent on others?

A Rafah worker

"Gazans have the ability, the creativity and the craft necessary to work and be productive. But now we cannot provide for our families and do nothing but smoke all day. I am a man and yet, my family only depends on charity."

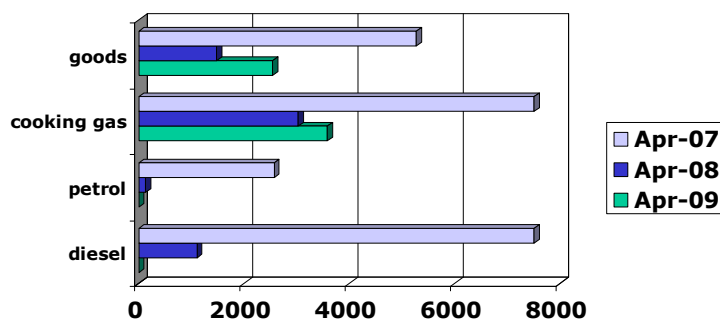
Mohammad Jamal, a Rafah farmer

"Everyone has invested money to buy agricultural equipment, seeds and fertilizers. All this capital is slowly disappearing as farmers no longer have access to their lands, or cannot sell their products for a profit. We all live from nothing."

I have been engaged for the past two years, but I can't get married. I can barely feed myself, I can't afford even one simple room where I could move with my wife. I have no idea when I will be able to marry her. This blockade may never be lifted. Our minds are also besieged. But no one can take our dignity away."

How the blockade on Gaza has reduced supplies for people

(Diesel and Petrol in litres, cooking gas in tonnes, goods in truckloads)



Um Mohammad, a woman farmer

"The vegetables I used to grow have died for lack of water : the water pumps no longer operate due to a lack of fuel. Strawberries are still growing, but I can sell them only on the local market, where there is almost no profit to be made. Gazans depend on agriculture. It used to be a good income, but now we are out of work. Finding even basic staples such as oil or meat has become a challenge. Even if we find some food, it may be past the expiry date.

"The Israeli authorities open the border once to let you breathe, and quickly closes it to let you wither away. They say they want to weaken Hamas, but how come my children are the ones who suffer? They act as if all Gazans were terrorists, including children. They deprive our children of their freedom, and try to strip us of our dignity and our humanity by reducing us to begging, but we will remain strong.

"I would like to go to school and study, so that I can help my children succeed in life. Our children have no toys, no bicycle, no pocket money, no computer, nothing. Children need more than food to be able to enjoy life and keep bad ideas out of their mind."



Students (above) and a woman farmer (right) in Beit Lahiya, Gaza.



Voices of students in Beit Lahiya

• "I can study only because my father borrowed money beyond his capacity. Now I have come to realize that he may have dug himself into debt for nothing. Even if I am about to graduate, there are no job opportunities left for me, and I won't be able to leave Gaza and build my life elsewhere."

• "Since I graduated, I have remained at home, doing nothing but sleeping. Any time I am awake, I feel restless. I think about all the time I have wasted studying, when there are no job opportunities for me. **We girls have the abilities to work, but no job opportunities because of the blockade.** All this leads to poor academic performances. We are going backwards."

• "In 2008, when the wall temporarily fell in Rafah*, I went to Al-Arish in Egypt to see how life looked like outside Gaza. I came back the same day. I had never left the Strip before. Now **I wish I had never come back into Gaza.** The Israeli Government has taken ordinary civilians hostage."

• **"We are like water in a bottle.** Sometimes the Israeli authorities slightly open the bottle, to let some air into it. Sometimes the Israeli authorities close the bottle and we cannot breathe at all"

** In January 2008, an explosion destroyed part of the Israeli Gaza strip wall near the Rafah border crossing. The UN estimates that half of the 1.5 million population of Gaza crossed the border into Egypt seeking food and supplies. Egyptian authorities resealed the border after 11 days.*

Um Suhail, a mother

"Since the blockade began, I have been unable to feed my children properly. My husband used to work in Israel, but he has been jobless for the past nine years. He has had two back operations and is too sick to earn an income. My eldest son cannot work either because of a blood disease. Due to the blockade, neither of them is allowed to travel abroad to seek the treatment they need. They stay at home, where they keep fighting with one another. **I leave the house each time I see my family falling apart because of what the blockade has done to us.**

"Two years ago, we had relatives who could support us financially. Since the blockade, they no longer have money. I have to beg them to give me a few tomatoes and some fruit, so that I can feed my children."

A father

"Since I lost my job, I fear staying at home. **I wait outside in the dark until my children are asleep,** and I get up before them and leave the house early so that I will not have to hear them ask me for pocket money that I don't have to give them."

For further information, or if you wish to meet some of the people who were interviewed, please contact :

**Catherine Weibel in Jerusalem: + 972 (0) 54 639 5002
Michael Robin Bailey in Jerusalem : +972 (0) 57 223 3014
Mohammed Ali in Gaza: + 972 (0) 59 891 0980**