

Working together to protect Palestinian children in armed conflict
Report

Prepared By

Sumaya Y. Sayej RN MSN Ph D

AL-Quds University

Submitted to

UNFPA

June /2007

Working together to protect Palestinian children in armed conflict

Introduction

The study design was based on Graca Machel Study questions and has followed the attached facilitator's guide to conduct focus groups with children on "working together to protect children in armed conflict". The study aimed to gain insight into how the children themselves are affected by the armed conflict, the way they view their situation, challenges, and coping mechanisms they or someone in their communities has taken to help them, and efforts made to protect them and grant them their rights

The focus group format allowed the participants to identify with the group and to share their experiences, views and perspectives with one another on the issues presented in the questionnaire

93 children in nine focus groups with an average of 8-14 children in each group participated in the discussion from both sides of the Palestinian Occupied territories; 5 focus groups from Ramallah region in the middle of the West Bank and 4 focus groups from Biet Hanoun region in the north of Gaza Strip.

The study participant's were students selected from primary and secondary male and female governmental schools representing different localities including camps villages and towns in each region. Gaza participants come from the northern region, a region of what is called "hot area", due to the continuous exposure to Israeli jet strikes and military incursions while Ramallah participants come from a relatively quiet region in terms of Israeli invasions

Permission to conduct the focus group discussion was granted from school directors after a thorough discussion by the investigator explaining the purpose of the interview with the children. The sample selection took into account; age group (10-13 years and 14-18 years), gender, and place of residence (West Bank and Gaza). The focus groups discussion was held in a quiet distant place such as the library or any empty classroom in the targeted schools, to allow for privacy and free discussion. The discussion time has ranged from 60- 80 minutes.

The investigator of the study and the facilitator in Gaza has coordinated the activities to have a consensus on obtaining the data from both sides as close as possible. To this end they explained the purpose of the study, encouraged all participants to voice their opinions and regularly were assured that the information given would be kept confidential and for research purpose only. Then they led the discussions, keeping the participants on track and encouraging further discussion and clarification when appropriate



The participants were vocal and got the confidence to express their views, the discussion was lively, and sense of respect toward each other was noted. The older groups manifested interest in discussing the issues presented in the questionnaire and their views have varied, while the younger groups was difficult to obtain a focused responses, also the responses was limited to some children although they were encouraged to participate and express their opinions.

The value of pride, identity and sense of responsibility are symbols stagnating into the minds of Palestinian children and adolescents who opened their eyes on a nation being in siege, destructed in a sequential manner, and experiencing chaos and uncertainty through their daily lives. Yet, most of these children are clearly aware of the challenges, aware of what is going around them and demand safety, security and an end to this chronic conflict to have an independent Palestinian state

Consequences of war

- What are the greatest challenges you have faced as a result of conflict?
- Are these challenges different for boys and girls, and do they differ according to the ages of the children and youth?

It was noted that there were some differences in the responses of children for the exact content of the discussion; these difference are based upon both the characteristics of the groups such as the age and gender, and the external environment including the political affiliation. The focus group discussions among Palestinian children identified a number of issues which constitute risk factors that they need to challenge. Broadly, the responses can be grouped as describing problems derived from their sense of security, socio-economic and educational difficulties on the one hand, and on the other, issues associated with conflict - related violence.

A country like Palestine with long history of armed conflict means that an entire generation has grown up in the midst of war and such people had no peace at all. Affecting the entire Palestinian civilian population of the Occupied Palestinian Territories are measures of collective punishment utilized by Israeli military forces, including the closure, check points, incursions and bombardments on towns and villages. Children in the occupied Palestinian territories are constantly at risk of Israeli military operations in which they could lose their lives or their loved ones. Many children have witnessed the demolition of their homes, the violent death or arrest of a family member or even their own arrest. Defense for Children International (2006) reported that 398 Palestinian children below the age of 18 are currently being held in Israeli detention facilities (www.dci-pal.org). Thus, the overwhelming majority of the interviewed children expressed rage, worries and anxiety related to their safety, daily living conditions and future education and careers.

This week marks the 40th anniversary of the June, 1967 War, which began the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan Heights. As the Palestinians look back at four decades of military rule, which has impacted all Palestinians, young and old, it seems only right to focus on the most vulnerable sector of society – our children. Among the Palestinians, children have had to endure an amalgam of hardships, both directly and indirectly resulting from the ongoing Israeli occupation. Typical of any developing nation, children comprise a large part of Palestinian society. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2005), an estimated 2.1 million children, or 52 percent of the population, live in the occupied territories



There was a relative difference in the responses of children between both regions; this difference is assumed to depend on the type of exposure to violence, the source of threat, and the extent of this threat to jeopardize their lives. The exposure of Gaza children to extreme armed conflict inflicted by the continuous and unpredictable brutal attacks by the Israeli Defense Forces and jet strike made them feel

that their life is threatened, and consequently increased their worries, felt unsafe and frustrated as for example; Fayzeh 17 years girl said “by the time being, there are many violent attacks that may happen at any time, some of us may die in the street, or in school or even at home, which means no safety for any one at any time”. Yassar 12 years old added, “I’m afraid that the Israelis will shoot me and demolish our house over our heads”. The children were not only concerned about their own safety and well-being; they were also sad that other people were being killed and that children were losing parents, homes and jobs. The burden on Palestinians is so huge that children have to carry some of it as Nermin 15 years from Gaza suggested.

It is noteworthy while the focus group discussion was going on in northern Gaza; two Palestinian boys were killed when Israeli Special Forces opened fire at them in an open area



that was once the Israeli settlement of Dugit in the northern Gaza Strip. Ahmad Abu Zubeida, 9 and Zaher Majdalawi, 10 were reportedly playing in the area, shooting birds with slingshots, when they were shot at point blank range. One was shot in the heart and the other in the thigh, causing him to bleed to death.

On the other side; the majority of West Bank children concerns were related to the internal clashes between the Palestinian political factions although its incidence is much less compared to Gaza. Yet they described it as “a political struggle” that should be stopped and believed it is the worse scenarios that Palestinians should have or even think of. Some children were pessimistic and expressed rage, anger and uncertainty about the overall situation as Suhaib 17 years boy from Ramallah said “it is not enough to have the Israeli occupation, but also to have an internal struggle, God knows were we will go and what will happen to us and to our future?”, Haneen 16 added “the whole situation is deteriorating and getting worse” and Razan 15 believed “it is a kind of mental distraction for children to grow up in this situation and forget the initial cause of their struggle, it disintegrate the culture of unity that Palestinians are used to have”. Few children from Gaza discussed the issue of internal clashes and were angry about it as Iyad 18 years from Gaza commented “some people had decided to fight each other instead of working out their problems and defending against their enemy”

On the contrary, other children seems to have the adaptation toward this situation and got the urge to challenge this fear and uncertainty as Mohammad 18 years from Gaza and others said “we got the immunity against fear and got used to all kinds of struggle”, Nidal added “I believe this type of unsecured life is part of our living standards, and this is the price we have to pay for our freedom”. The sense of power and challenges included some girls too, who believed that they should stay still and strong to combat all difficulties until they get rid of the occupation as Fidaa 17 from Gaza said “I will not allow this situation to affect my aims and my future negatively, it should help me to be more stronger”, khadijeh 15 emphasized this

notion by saying “it is shame to accept the humiliation imposed on us, we need to resist it by all means”.

The construction of the Israeli discriminating wall have added another burden to the Palestinian people where nearly 50% of the West Bank population are affected by the Wall through loss of land, imprisonment into ghettos and isolation from their surroundings. However the wall’s location facilitate further colony expansion and unilaterally redraw geopolitical borders, all the while encouraging an exodus of Palestinians by denying them the ability to earn a living from their land, reach their schools or work places, access adequate water resources, or reach essential health care (Report content: Israeli wall in the West Bank at www.btsalem.org website)

The wall unquestionably represents a considerable portion of frustration, a feeling of oppression and insecurity for West Bank children too as their



perception of the wall is that it deprived them the sense of freedom, and kept them under surveillance which increased their sense of rage, humiliation and disrespect. Coupled with the enormous check points and personal search for every Palestinian going through these points; the children considered it as another demeaning factor that makes them feel oppressed and frustrated. For example Asheera 15 from Ramallah area described this situation as “it is a strangulation of freedom, it is the most unethical and ruthless practices imposed on a whole population by the occupier”.

Most of the girls as well as the boys feel worried to go through these check points because they will be subjected to personal search, they feel their privacy is intruded and their basic rights to integrity and respect are denied. Riham 17 from Ramallah commented “we live in a huge prison, deprived from the least simple rights that any individual should have, as for example my sister lives in Jerusalem and we cannot visit her” while Fadel 17 added “we are always under pressure and really this is not a kind of life that any human being should live”.

Formal and informal sources agree that domestic violence has been on a steady rise since the outset of the second Intifada in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem. High unemployment rates, curfews, and closures leave domestic partners and families in close quarters and place them under unusually high levels of stress (Yahai, 2003). Yahia, (2003) study, correlated this increase of violence among Palestinians to be the political stressors the main predictor of most patterns of family violence. Violence creates violence an expression made by Itidal 16 years girl from Ramallah. Thus the majority of the children expressed concerns regarding the growing violence in their localities at different levels including the family, school and street. With emphasis on domestic violence, the children from all regions have discussed the issue, and some of them have had the experience as Yara 14 from Ramallah area said “my father is used to hit my mother and all of us, he has no job and the family needs are enormous, the only way for him to express his frustration is by shouting and hitting”. Another boy Adham 17 said “violence is available every where; I wish I’m not born in this country”

The economic sanction imposed by the international community on the Palestinian government for the last 18 months, coupled with the closure of borders particularly in Gaza, has contributed to make the financial situation worse. This reality includes unemployment, poverty (according to World Bank estimates, approximately two-thirds of the Palestinian

population live under the poverty line of \$2/day), insufficient medical and educational services and the constant threat of Israeli military aggression. The issue of economy and financial status was of major concern expressed by the interviewed children 14-18 years in both regions. The children reported that they themselves had less pocket money, their parents have limited resources, and that they have observed changes in how family members interacted with each other regarding these matters. Riham 18 years girl said "One of the greatest challenges is the financial status that each one of us is experiencing", kadijeh 14 wondered "why do we have to be punished?" Hassan added "my father stopped working and my brother could not continue his university studies, God knows how we are living". Hanan 11 year's girl said "my father could not buy me a new school bag or new cloths", and Enaya 14 years added "I wish to have more pocket money".

Economic decline and lack of financial and/or physical access to schools has resulted into thousands of children have not had regular classes in their schools. There are many reasons for that; the frequent curfews, and military incursions particularly in Gaza, coupled with the frequent strike of the teachers who did not get wages as a result of the financial sanctions imposed on Palestinians since the establishment of Hamas Government. The major concerns expressed by the children interviewed were about the quality and effectiveness of the education they received through the last academic year. Saher 15 years said "we miss a lot of classes and by the end the teachers wanted to substitute for that by giving us huge amount of information and within very short time, which make us wary and unable to pass the exams". Dana 16 years said "this is a year of ignorance", while Sundus was worried about the coming academic year when said "we hope that the teacher's strike will be resolved". The interviewed children have reported that some of their peers left schools because of the interrupted schooling or the lack of income. These concerns suggest that a real big challenge for authorities to take stand and stop the children school dropout and to resolve this problem by granting the children their rights to access quality education and protect them from ignorance

In fact, the discussions with the younger age group 10-13 revealed the extent to which these children sense fear and insecurity. Sleep disturbances and extreme fear such as fear of darkness and fear of sleeping in children's room or alone can be observed on children who witness violence (Clunn, 1996). What it can be said when children witness or experience houses demolition, jet attacks, and military incursions as the case for Gaza children who reported, for example Mahmoud 10 from Gaza said "I ask my mother to let me sleep in her room during the Israeli attacks", Hassan 11 added "I hate nights because it scares me", and Sana'a' 13 added "when I'm at home I feel more safe". This suggest that families are extremely important system to protect their children, although they don't feel safe themselves as Musaab 12 years said "my father refused to take us to the sea, because he is afraid that we may be killed by jets as happened with Huda Ghalia Family".

The Right of children to recreation and leisure under the current circumstances has been rendered because of the presence of the continuous attacks by Israeli military coupled with the unavailability of clubs and centers particularly in Gaza. Omar 10 from Gaza said "there is no summer camp for this year". Sahar said "as girls, we are not allowed to go to play outside homes, denied participation in youth centers or clubs". The girls explicitly were more of concern than boys regarding the frequent school closures as they consider school a place for socialization as stated by some "school is a place that we can go and socialize", other girls said "school gives us a chance to exchange stories and ideas". Under present circumstances, the children find schools an important social forum, and source of support to meet with their peers in recreational, non-formal and social gatherings. On the contrary, some children of

West Bank were relatively more satisfied with the availability of some kind of recreational facilities and have the chance to get involved in scout groups, sport clubs and youth centers, but this is mostly limited to children from towns. This will require establishing more child/youth play centers and spaces for children's activities to have a normal psychological and social development as well as to have the right for rest and leisure.

The challenges were almost the same for boys and girls with slight differences between the age groups as been identified in the discussion presented above. The older group realized the importance of adaptation and challenges toward securing their lives and future and hoping for a settled peace and financial security, while for the younger group manifested more fear and anxiety and wanted to have more leisure time and recreational activities

Coping with war

- What is the best action you or someone in your community has taken to help with the problems children face because of conflict?

Children's ability to cope with the stresses of conflict and violence is to a large extent contingent on the kind of support they receive, including the closeness of their relationships with parents and primary caregivers. Children who are not secure in their environment and do not enjoy sufficient support are more likely to be overcome by the strains of the conflict. In this context, some children displayed a more positive and hopeful attitude toward coping with this situation, while others were restrictive and expressed negative views which is believed to depend on their living situation and their external environment. Most children expressed their coping mechanisms and means of help to face the challenges of conflict and to improve their lives is primarily by developing academically and socially as Salah, Issa, Maram and others said "the best way to cope and to develop is to finish our education". Maintaining ambitions to be educated and to undertake professional careers is further expressed by saying "education is the only and best resource to secure our living and to help our families".

Others reflected their coping mechanisms by engaging themselves in extra curricular and social activities that seems to be constructive and positive in nature as said by Ibrahim, Suzan and others from Ramallah "we enjoy volunteering in any social and national events in our area of residence or the school". Some girls appreciated the importance of their involvement in social activities to be helpful in developing normally and to be a mean for coping as the availability of summer camps, scout groups and other youth centers as said by Riham, Suzan from Ramallah and others "we enjoy our participation in the summer camps and feel well when we help younger children there". Rinad and Iman appreciated being a member in a scout group when said "we learn discipline, control and group work", Razan, Itidal and Nora appreciated their involvement in Namaa' Youth center as said "we really benefit from the training activities held by this center". It is worth mentioning, that youth centers are more available in Ramallah than other localities in its area, these centers usually aims at promoting the youth development through offering them a variety of educational and recreational programs. Others manifested the sense of challenge by helping themselves to be strong and not to give up as Nermin 15 from Ramallah said "we have to face the difficulties, bring new ideas and work on them to bring a change to our lives".

Gaza children coping mechanisms and social involvement have reflected their tragic situation as Mohammad 18 and others said "we participate in demonstrations, and many times we were exposed to violence". Furthermore, children like Mustafa and Iyad felt the sense of responsibility to be active and share even their blood with the wounded as a result of the violence as said "we donate our blood for the wounded". Many times the children in Gaza

have participated in helping other families in evacuation of their houses; those families who were obliged to be displaced from their houses when there was a threat from the Israelis for their house to be demolished as Majed and Munir said “many times we helped other families in evacuating their houses before it was bombarded”. Gaza children further reflected their coping is by engaging in the resistance in peaceful ways as Hassan 12 years said “not to purchase Israeli goods”, older ones considered their involvement in resistance to be affiliated with political factions as Iyad, Mahmoud and few others said “we are not young anymore; we need to resist the occupier by any means so we can live with honor and dignity”.

On the contrary, many children expressed hopelessness to recover from this situation and believed that their living is limited and no one can help them as Mohammad 17 from Ramallah area said “we are obliged to agree with this constrictive life”, Essa 16 added “life is very frustrating and I do not think that we have any thing to work for”. Few girls expressed their concerns by having less autonomy, not enough engagement in social activities and company of friends as being prohibited by their families to do so as Shrouq, Amani and others from Ramallah area, Israa and Hanan from Gaza said “our families would not allow us to go any where, we are over protected by our families”. Trust, self-respect and autonomy make people happier and better coping which is really needed for these girls to have.

While most of the children appraised the role of their families in supporting and protecting them, as Asheera, Itidal and many others said “our families are our hope and the only source of help”. Others raised concern regarding the helplessness of their families to secure and protect their children as said by some Nidal, Issa, Haneen and many others “our families need help”. Generally, the children were influenced by the events and circumstances and were enthusiastic to cope with this given situation and to be active participants in their surroundings

- What has your government done to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of war-affected children?

There was an obvious variation between the children responses regarding the government performances, some of the children described the government as helpless and cannot protect any one, and do not expect any thing from this government as many said “the government in siege, how can it be of help”. Tareq, Shahad, Raya and many others found an excuse to the government performance as said “the government is loaded with the political issues”. Mohammad 18 appraised the role of government in offering free health and education services for children. On the contrary, the majority were critical to the Palestinian Government role in providing the minimum requirement to protect the Palestinian children’s rights to survival as Abdulla 16 from Gaza said “the government personnel are busy to keep themselves on their seats”. Others described the Government employees as careless and not empathetic toward children as for example; Majed 16 from Gaza said “by the time we discuss the role of government in respecting the child’s rights, the national television is broadcasting terrifying programs threatening the self esteem of children instead of offering effective and constructive programs”. Few children nearly denied the existence of the government as Mahmoud 17 said astonishingly “Is there a government or Palestinian authority?” Very few children heard about the Rights of the Child decree that was launched by the Palestinian legislative counsel.

- What have about humanitarian agencies such as the UN and NGOs done to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of war-affected children?

The UN-supportive programs in partnerships with government and non government organizations in the occupied Palestine territory have been implementing a number of programs including humanitarian assistance to respond to the increased needs of Palestinian civilians in general and Palestinian children and adolescence in specific. Many children especially those who live in camps are aware of UNRWA as a major UN humanitarian agency that provides them with assistance and appreciate its role in offering free education and health services. Some children in Gaza appreciated the role of UNRWA in renting apartments for whose their houses have been demolished until they can rebuild them again as Fidaa said “we really appreciate UNRWA efforts for its concern and assistance”. Other children were critical to the crowded living conditions and sanitation environment in the camps as Rihab 15 said “most of the families are large and have small houses”. While Alaa’ 18 commented on the sanitation and safety in general by saying “the right to a clean environment is denied for all Palestinians where no money and no resources to build a sewage system, to have safety roads or even to have a clean water”. Iyad from Gaza added hesitantly “safety, protection, respect, these are terms that we hear about but do not have it” while Munir 17 from Gaza commented “no one is safe, at any time, the Israelis can invade the land, kill the people and kidnap the young men and no one can stop them”.

Some other children appreciated the help and support they get from local NGOs particularly those living in the towns and mentioned some of the activities those NGOs provide such as; training programs for youth health and development, issues on reproductive and sexual health, gender and rights, computer technology and sports activities. These local NGOs are supported and funded by UN organizations particularly the United Nations Population Fund UNFPA which is indirectly contributing to the development and empowerment of Palestinian children and adolescents. To further refine the advantages of such programs, UNFPA and in programming with broad range of partners; local government and NGOs have implemented numerous programs with focus on promoting children’ reproductive and sexual health and promoting their life skills. Such programs aimed to provide opportunities for youth to meaningfully participate in community development and to enable them to deal with every day situation. Some children who participate in centers affiliated with UNFPA appreciated their participation as for example, Mohammad 17 a participant in the Youth leadership center said “I feel respected and grown up when I share information or activities with others” and Fadel 17 a participant in Namaa’ center said “at least when we engage in such programs we enlighten our perspectives toward positive attitudes and forget the trivial things around us”

Many children appreciated the role of the Red Cross in helping their families and beloved prisoners by visiting them and helping in knowing about any detainee by the Israelis. The children mentioned other international agencies that helped Palestinians with construction of schools in camps as for example the French and German consulates. Some children were aware of UNICEF role in offering counseling and education about taking precautionary and safety measures regarding land mines and shelling in Gaza as Fidaa said “we appreciate what UNICEF is offering us through awareness program they offer”

Other children particularly from villages were the least to have any support even by the local NGOs except for some activities provided by Sheikhs and religious leaders in their communities such as some materials or awareness programs related to health, religion and political issues as Hassan 11 years from Gaza said “the religious leaders gave each one of us 200 NIS” Yassar added “they distributed school bags and clothes”. Other sources of help mentioned was the role of Physicians without Borders as Fidaa 18 from Gaza appreciated that when said “they did many surgeries for many wounded people freely” while Ahmad and

others were thankful for their role in distributing electrical wheel chairs for those crippled and justified that by saying “at least found someone to help those who are paralyzed or have an amputated legs as a result of the conflict”. Majority of children and in both regions were critical to the sanction imposed by the international community that deprived them the right of proper education as Razan 17 years from Ramallah wondered “Is it a problem of the teachers or the students to be punished?”, while Mohammad and others from Gaza wondered “What rights the Palestinian children are given?”

- How have diplomatic efforts, such as resolutions and treaties prepared by the UN and its member states, have helped children affected by armed conflict?

The majority of the older children 14-18 and some of the younger ones agreed to the useless diplomatic efforts and Peace treaties proposed by UN and international communities. Mohammad 18 and Fidaa 17 and many others commented “despite the continuous diplomatic efforts and resolution acts been made by UN for the last 60 years, nothing was implemented on the ground”. Others were critical about the Israeli military practices regarding the safety of children as Shadi, Ahmad and others said “they use children as barriers to protect them when they invade the territories, what the UN can do about that?”. Shahi, Maram and others wondered and criticized all efforts made by the UN and the international community in offering any help to Palestinians and wondered about the outcome visits made by the UN investigation committees who came to OPT to investigate after each brutal massacre executed by the Israeli army in Jenin and Rafah camps for example. Ibrahim hesitantly said “What can any one on this earth do to stop the Israelis?” When referred to the UN declaration of children’s rights; no one agreed to that and believed all Palestinian citizens human rights including the children have been violated. Mustafa and many others said “no one on earth can stop Israeli government intention of confiscating land, terrorizing every single person regardless of the age and gender of this person, and imposing sanction on economy and freedom”

Peace and reconciliation

- What do you think has been the most important factor towards advancing a peace process and building reconciliation in your community and/or country?

The children views have varied based on the age, political and religious affiliation. But the majority agreed that peace process can be advanced if all UN resolution acts is implemented and Palestinians can get their rights to return, end of occupation and Jerusalem is the capital for the Palestinian state. Young children as Mahmoud 10 from Gaza said “when we stop the rockets, the Israelis will stop shelling us”, Israa 10 and others said “when we get our land back then there will be peace”. Riham, Mustafa and others from the older group said “the peace process can be advanced if there is a willing partner to do so.” Many children emphasized the importance of negotiations that should be back on track as Bahjat and Issa from Ramallah said. Some children opposed these comments and said “we hear about diplomatic efforts, but it is ink on papers”, “there is no peace” etc... Few particularly from Gaza and from the older age group believed in the return of all historic Palestine and that the struggle is based on religious beliefs that Palestine should stay Islamic country, an no place for Jews

Many children emphasized the importance of reconciliation among Palestinian themselves and the importance of unity to make them stronger and live in peace together as someone said “it is not enough to have the Israelis, we have ourselves to fight each other”.

- What opportunities are there for young people to participate and express their concerns?

The overwhelming majority in both regions agreed to the limitation of opportunities for them to express their needs and concerns not because they are not allowed to speak out but because of the deteriorating and constrictive environment and lack of opportunities to do so. Mohammad and Tareq from Gaza commented “the impact of socio-economic and political situation has contributed to increase the children affiliation with either political or religious groups as a mean to express their views and energies”.

Some children especially girls highlighted the role of school counselors as a resource person whom they can talk to and express their concerns as said by Dana 13 and Raya 13 from Ramallah area “If we have problems, the school counselor help us in finding a solution”. Other girls in the older group were critical of the school counselor’s role and competencies as said by Bayan and others “sometimes we need to discuss private matters with the counselors; but they either do not listen or do not know how to resolve problems”

Most children emphasized the importance of extra-curricular activities for them as a mean to channel their energy, the boys emphasized the importance of sports and were critical to the availability of playgrounds but Musab, Nidal and others said “we play sport in the neighborhood as alternative to playgrounds”. Few children have the opportunity to participate in some activities through some local organizations as mentioned in previous discussion, but others were critical to that and said “how many children do benefit or have an access to these NGOs”. Some girls as Riham, Razan and others emphasized the importance of the use of the computer and net, it was astonishing that they have established their own website aiming to that their voices reach the external world as much as they can as Riham said “we can benefit ourselves and develop personally, and we can contribute in spreading our cause to people outside Palestine too”.

It is noteworthy that most children and in most groups held appeared to enjoy the opportunity to openly and freely reflect on their lives, challenges and coping mechanisms and found the sessions to be informative and engaging. Many said they felt relieved to know that others thought and felt like they did, others were somewhat surprised to learn about some of their peers’ experiences. They all have appreciated the discussion and they were willing to discuss and talk further about anything. The participants’ enthusiasm was particularly evidenced by the eagerness with which they spoke out about their problems and their repeatedly expressed concerns and desire for more such sessions, as voiced especially by the older children. This is a description to the case of frustration these children are going through and the need to be listened to where it can serve as an important source of strength and support in conflict situations.

Recommendations

- Are there any issues and/or groups of young people who are affected by conflict that have not been mentioned and should be addressed?

The older age group mentioned four important issues regarding child care and right to live in dignity that should be addressed by the Palestinian government, NGOs and UN agencies in order to offer the assistance for the; disabled children who got injured by the Israeli army and the importance of their integration into the society, education and in finding job opportunities for them. Care for orphanage children who are many as a result of their father deaths in this struggle or any other orphan that they really lack institutional or any source of assistance. To work on releasing the arrested children, those below the age of 18 and currently being held in

Israeli detention facilities. And last to work on detainees whom were obliged to leave their own homes into other places.

- What would you recommend to be done – and by who – so that all children affected by conflict have their rights respected, protected and fulfilled?

The majority of the children recommendation was suggested from the older age group and has focused on the role of the government institutions, the National and international agencies and human Rights Agencies to:

- Promote the governmental institutions effectiveness in executing constructive programs related to children rights with monitoring and follow up for these programs; based on comments and experiences of Tareq, Kadijeh, and others from Gaza and Issa, Maysoon and others in West Bank “many times we hear about a program, then it is not there, when we ask they say the funding is over”, other children said “if the school system was not running well this year, what can we expect from other institutions?”
- Development of the media campaigns to raise awareness of the society regarding the children’s rights. Iyad, and Mustafa have criticized the Palestine TV as well as other satellite programs especially for broadcasting any thing except programs on the rights of children to live well and the means to protect them. Some girls as Haneen and Liela said “we need a constructive effective awareness programs to be directed to families, schools and all adults so they can improve their communication with children and understand their needs and concerns”
- Demand from the international community to provide rights and safety for Palestinian children and to expose all inhuman acts done by Israelis against children. The children criticized the inhuman acts by Israelis imposed on Palestinian civilians and on children in specific as said by Hassan and Ibrahim 12 years from Gaza “Who knows what the Israelis do when they use children as protective barriers to protect them when they invade our land”
- Provision of rehabilitative services for all injured, disabled, detained and orphan Palestinian children. The majority of children were concerned regarding these issues because of its tremendous incidence among young men and youth. Some of the children interviewed were injured one day or some of their family members or relative was arrested or martyred. Children manifested concerns regarding that as Musab17 still has a wet wound when he was interviewed for this study. Mohamouad 16 from Gaza said “my cousin is in jail for last three years and no body care except his family”. Fidaa brother was wounded and said “God knows how much we suffered for that”
- Launch awareness programs for the parents and teachers to be able to deal with children in such armed conflict situation. Many children expressed concerns regarding the way they were treated by their primary care givers; the family and teachers particularly from the younger age group as Anas 10, Ashraf and other said “the teachers hit us for any reason” while some girls expressed concern regarding their family constraint as said by Nora, Yara and other “our families do not respect our views or even listen to us”. Programs should be introduced that attempt as much as possible to re-establish a sense of “normalcy” in the lives of Palestinian children by providing them with greater

opportunities to participate in on-going recreational/ cultural/sport and other non-formal activities.

Conclusions

The study was designed primarily to gain insight into how the children themselves view their situation, and to provide them with an open forum in which to speak. The study results attest to the children's ability to be their own spokespersons and to clearly identify challenges, coping mechanisms and efforts made to protect them and grant them their rights

The main concerns articulated during the focus group discussions were rather prioritized as follows; Inability of children and their families to be protected from Israeli attacks neither from the internal clashes among Palestinian factions. The fear and insecurity has varied and accordingly; Gaza children fear and sense of insecurity was primarily to the Israeli attacks and the siege imposed on all Gaza, while for West Bank children the Barrier wall and the check points.

Disruption of education was of the major concerns as well as the quality of education has irritated those children which means they are aware of the consequences that may jeopardize their future. And last the decline in economy that is so severe and limits their quality of life, also it was evident that Gaza children were more affected than West Bank children as their economy is more deteriorated. Beside the financial and material limitations, and the lack of control over external events, the care Palestinian children receive from their caregivers-parents and teachers mainly - is further compromised by the fact that the caregivers need help and support as been noticed from the children views.

The younger group was more fearful and felt more insecure, needed to be more protected. They focused to have more recreational activities and leisure time. Most of the responses were almost the same for the girls and boys except for the free movement of the girls which they complained as their families are the reasons behind it

It is hoped that by listening and learning from the children themselves, that governmental, non governmental, National and international agencies and human Rights Agencies will be in a better position to design and implement programs to reduce the armed conflict impact on those children and to grant them their rights to security, protection and normal development.

References

Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2005). Health Survey. Palestinian Authority. Ramallah: West Bank

Haj-Yahia (2003) Wife Abuse and Buttering .Bisan Center for research and Development. Ramallah Palestine.

www.btsalem.org website

Interactive Guide: Israel and the Palestinians: Fencing Off the West Bank - The Guardian at www.dci-pal.org

Annexes

The focus groups names and localities in Gaza and West Bank

GAZA			
Age group 10-13 No. 17		Age group 14-18 No. 19	
Male	Female	Male	Female
1. Mohammad	1. Sanaa	1. Majed	1. Fayzeh
2. Hassan	2. Hanan	2. Saher	2. Riham
3. Mahmoud	3. Nirmin	3. Mustafa	3. Suzan
4. Yassar	4. Huda	4. Tareq	4. Khadijeh
5. Omar	5. Alaa	5. Mohammad	5. Fidaa
6. Hassan	6. Israa	6. Mohamouad	6. liela
7. Mosaab	7. Fatmeh	7. Iyad	7. Sirin
9. Ibrahim		8. Munir	8. Maysoon
10. Ahmad		9. Salah	9. Reem
			10. Fatama

WEST BANK			
Age group 10-13 No. 26		Age group 14-18 No. 31	
Male	Female	Male	female
1. Mouhammed	1. Noora	1. Essa	1. Razan
2. Eassen	2. Ashera	2. Mouhammed	2. Narmeen
3. Esslam	3. Razan	3. Fadel	3. lama
4. Amjd	4. Haya	4. Mousab	4. Riham
5. Mouath	5. Sondous	5. Akram	5. Raghada
6. Shadi	6. Yara	6. Tariq	6. Hanen
7. Omama	8. Dana	7. Saif	7. Maram
8. Ashraf	9. Shahd	8. Abdalla	8. Elaa
9. Jamal	10. Ranin	9. Essa	9. Essra
10. Anas	11. Alaa	10. Ibrahim	10. Aya
11. Ahmed	12. Raya	11. Bahjat	11. Rynad
12. Shadi	13. Essra	12. Nidal	12. Eman
13. Mahmmoud		13. Hussam	13. Bayan
		14. Alaa	14. Amani
			15. Shouriq
			16. Christine
			17. Jumana
			18. Enass