"Support to Village Councils in Area C Programme - Infrastructure" and the "Gaza Vulnerable Communities" Programme

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Introduction

ABC Consulting has been contracted by the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) to conduct two external evaluations of the 'Support to Village Councils in *Area C* Programme' implemented in the West Bank and the 'Gaza Vulnerable Communities Development Programme (GVCD)' implemented in the Gaza Strip. The Municipal Development and Lending Fund (MDLF) was the implementing partner for both programmes and the Palestinian Centre for Democracy and Conflict Resolution (PCDCR) was a second partner in the GVCD programme.

The evaluations aimed to provide an external and independent assessment for measuring impact, understanding the programmes' contribution to achieving their outlined objectives, and to draw lessons learned for future directions and programme development and structure. The evaluations have also shared possible synergies and lessons learned to feed into the next programming cycle. The key objectives of the evaluations, as provided by the Terms of Reference (ToRs) were as follows:

- Assess the impact of the Programme in terms of citizen participation and empowerment of women, youth and vulnerable communities

- Review and assess the current administrative and financial systems of the Programmes.

- Examine the Log frames and M&E systems in place.

- Revisit previous evaluations of the MDLF and if recommendations any follow up measures were built into the programmes.

- Recommend adaptations to the programmes reviewed in view of a next phase, including possible synergies and learning tools between both programmes.

Methodology

Data was collected through a number of different means including desk study, key informant interviews, field visits and case studies. See Annex 2 for a detailed description of the methodology.

Executive Summary

(I) Background

The two projects "Gaza Vulnerable Communities Development (GVCD)" and the "Support to Village Councils in Area C Program - Infrastructure" have nearly the same objectives. As for the Gaza Vulnerable Communities Program, it aims at helping the vulnerable communities in the targeted municipalities enjoy improved access and voice in local service delivery and decision-making. It also has two specific objectives: 1) to deliver improved and accountable local service for vulnerable communities, and 2) to strengthen local authorities' accountability toward citizens and civic groups' and to strengthen citizens' participation in local decision-making processes. The second program "Support to Village Councils in Area C" aims at improving social and economic conditions of marginalized Palestinian communities in Area C, and providing them with basic services including community development projects, small scale infrastructure & social infrastructure projects.

Both programs are funded by the Swiss Development and Cooperation (SDC), which seeks to enhance social inclusion at the local level and improve the provision of quality essential services for all. As for the Local Governance portfolio of SDC, it aims at improving the performance of local authorities and activating their material and human resources to provide quality services to the public. The SDC also seeks to ensure broader participation of citizens in decision-making, oversight of the project implementation, and social auditing of project outcomes.

Most importantly, the SDC gives particular attention to the meaningful engagement of women and young people, including through cultural and educational initiatives. Gender equality, human rights-based approach and conflict-sensitive program management are transversal themes and methodologies of the strategy.

(ii) Findings

Relevance: **In the "Support to Village Councils in Area C Program",** the program as a whole is considered relevant because it targets the needs of a marginalized area with many vulnerable and isolated population groups. In fact, the implemented sub-projects were not only relevant but also a priority for them. Besides, the design of the Area C program has been fully in line with the identified needs and priorities for the social and economic development of marginalized Palestinian communities in Area C. Considering the large number of communities with similar needs in Area C and the ongoing political conditions that suppress socioeconomic development, similar projects will remain relevant and needed in the long-term for both villages already targeted and for others in Area C.

In the "Gaza Vulnerable Communities Program", It was concluded that the GVCD objectives and activities are relevant to the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries in the 24 targeted vulnerable communities. This is because the local community was included in identifying their needs and priorities since the beginning of the implementation process, and the targeted municipalities have implemented the projects that were selected by the local community, which assures achieving the relevance of the program.

Effectiveness: In the "**Support to Village Councils in Area C Program**", the evaluation findings show that all sub-projects reviewed have been completed as planned during the design stage and are currently

functional. Additionally, findings show that the program outputs have been achieved, given the experience and professionalism of the local contracted implementing partners and the expertise of the MDLF. For example, in Yanun village, the project included the construction of a concrete small underground tank and the installation of a water pump on the natural spring of Yanun so that the residents can utilize the spring well. In Sosya, solar-powered light poles were installed. And in Al-Aqaba, a concrete water tank was constructed; in addition to repairing and reconstructing the public park. In Nabi Elias, the project aimed at constructing new roads in the village. This means that the infrastructure sub-projects which were implemented in targeted communities in Area C have contributed to achieving the overall objective of the program that sought the improvement of social and economic conditions of the marginalized Palestinian communities in Area C.

In the "Gaza Vulnerable Communities Program", the program has achieved effectiveness as seen by considerable progress towards its overall objective, that is: making the vulnerable communities in targeted Municipalities enjoy improved access and voice in local service delivery and decision-making. The program has largely succeeded in meeting the desired expectations in relation to its outcomes in the 7 targeted municipalities. The outcomes and the main results were as follows: 1) Improved accountable service delivery for vulnerable communities, 2) strengthened accountability of the targeted municipalities toward citizen and civic groups' participation in local decision-making processes, and 3) Enhancing Policy Dialogue on vulnerability Issues in the LG sector.

Efficiency: The M&E system of the "**Area C Program**" has been useful to understand progress in the implementation of the sub-projects, yet it does not provide a measurement of indicators at the outcome level, and the indicators should also be clear for assessment of the program's success and achievement. Therefore, it was concluded that the project needs a more specific evaluation framework and an M&E plan with accompanying tools to capture the successes and challenges of the program more effectively. As for the work modalities, they had moderate success in developing an enabling environment for the target communities. The MDLF has also a financial manual that creates detail-oriented guidelines to utilize the projects' resources adequately and effectively and obtain financial control over the projects' funds and expenses, however, some targeted communities expressed concern about the general lack of funding.

"The GVCD Program" adopted an innovative work modality by cooperating with a local NGO (PCDCR) as an implementing partner. Thus, all the GVCD activities were designed and implemented in a participatory and empowering manner for the beneficiary communities, which contributed to the efficient management of the activities of the program. Besides, the GVCD program followed proper financial management procedures in order to complete the implementation process within the timeframe that was previously proposed and planned. For example, as for the contractors' prices, they were appropriate for implementing most of the program's activities and initiatives.

Impact: The activities and the workshops implemented throughout the "**Area C Program**" resulted in several successful impacts, the most noticeable one was building the residents' capacities and getting them to work together towards a feasible dialogue between the citizens and their LGUs in the framework of social accountability for better service delivery and better participation in the decision-making process. However, it has been noted that the social participation and engagement of marginalized groups, namely

women, youth and people with disabilities, should be enhanced through the project cycle.

"The GVCD program" has had a positive impact on the beneficiary communities, especially in terms of enhanced community participation and social accountability, in addition to motivation to lead social change. The program was able to raise awareness and build the capacity of vulnerable communities by implementing many workshops and training sessions. Thus, the citizens became more informed and engaged in the social accountability process towards their municipalities, and they became more aware of their rights and duties, and how to claim their rights. Most importantly, the program has empowered citizens (women, youth, PWDs) and enabled them to participate in the joint decision-making processes.

Sustainability: in order to assure sustainability in "**Area C Program"**, the MDLF demanded LGUs write letters in which they indicate their willingness and commitment to carry the responsibility of maintaining the sub-projects one year after the submission. Moreover, LGUs should express their willingness to reach out to competent Ministries once the sub-projects are handed over to them. However, the MDLF usually adopts a lighter approach with LGUs based in Area C due to their limited financial capacities and the lack of human and material resources. Assuming the continued maintenance of the projects, the impact described above is likely to be long-term and sustained.

As for the **"GVCD program"**, the program was able to achieve sustainability on the social, economic, and environmental levels in order to meet the needs of stakeholders. There were many procedures that ensure the continuation of positive influence among beneficiary communities, for example, the contractor who was responsible to implement the projects under the first component in the GVCD program has an operation and maintenance contract for one year after implementation. In addition, it was stated that the Operation and Maintenance staff at the municipalities is qualified to do any maintenance, which will help in maintaining the program's sustainability in the long term.

(iii) Recommendations

Through the conducted interviews, the evaluation team concluded that the two programs were highly relevant to the needs and priorities of the target populations, and were impactful in improving the social and economic conditions of the target communities and in increasing participation in decision-making processes. Therefore, it is recommended to continue the two programs into subsequent phases targeting other vulnerable areas in Area C and the Gaza Strip. It has also been noted that LGUs need more capacity-building sessions in relation to project planning and implementation, so it is recommended that future programs should focus on building LGUs' capacity in these aspects. For both programs, there is a need to conduct a gender audit of participating LGUs and develop gender policies that should go beyond providing theoretical workshops and training sessions related to gender in order to assure just participation of women. It is also advised for both programs to create key indicators and collect data from the target communities once the projects are completed for an effective assessment of the projects' performance and effectiveness.

Area C Support Programme

Overview of the Area C Support Programme

The overall goal of the programme is the improvement of social and economic conditions of marginalised Palestinian communities in Area C of the West Bank with basic services including community development projects, small scale infrastructure & social infrastructure projects.

The specific objective of the programme is the following:

> ➤ Improved access to public services small-scale infrastructure projects delivered in rural areas of the West Bank with a focus on Area C.

Findings

Following the review of the programme's publications and documentation, interviews with different stakeholders, and field visits, an assessment of the programme has been made related to relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact. Additionally, this section presents how the achievements of the outputs have contributed towards realizing, or otherwise, the programme's outcomes and specific objectives as per the revised log frame.

Relevance

The extent to which the identified objectives and activities met the target group's gaps and needs

The relevance of the sub-projects was examined throughout the conducted interviews with key informants, desk and document review, and field visits. The programme as a whole is considered relevant as it targets key needs, namely access to public services, and it targets a marginalized area with many vulnerable and isolated population groups.

The programme is fully aligned with the Palestinian National Policy Agenda (2017– 2022) to develop the most vulnerable communities in Palestine and is in harmony with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The desk review showed that the programme is also in line with the PA's recent Strategic Framework for Area C ''Support Resilience and Development'' for 2018-19, which is based on the principle of preserving Palestinians' right to live, control and invest in Area C, and to be provided with elements of resilience, protection, and basic services. According to the MDLF, the implementation of such a programme contributes to enhancing the role of the Palestinian government in the development of Area C. The implemented projects of the 'Area C Programme' were designed in concurrence with MDLF requirements and procedures which include special clauses for the implementation of projects in Area C.

All interviewed community members agreed that the implemented sub-projects were not only relevant but also a priority for them. The design of the Area C programme has been fully in line with the identified needs for social and economic development of marginalised Palestinian communities in Area C. Almost all of the interviewed beneficiaries in target communities

confirmed that the implemented projects are very relevant as they fulfil their needs. The following are examples:

- The marginalized village of Um Dyouf lacked a road to help students access school and to give farmers and community members easier access to their lands.
- Nabi Elias village also had lands that were not easily accessible by farmers and the community, so they were in need of paved roads to these areas.
- The 'Rehabilitation of Internal Roads' project implemented in Shufa village was picked by community members who indicated that constructing new internal roads in the village has long been one of the main objectives proposed in the village's 2016-2021 strategic plan.
- The 'Rehabilitation of Yanun Spring' project in Yanun was selected based on multiple discussion sessions with community members. An interviewee stated: *"all citizens without exclusion agreed on the project and stressed that it is one of their high priorities due to the fact that they used to suffer from unorganized water harvesting."*

According to LGU representatives, most targeted communities struggle with the lack of infrastructure, and are not financially capable of holding initiatives and implementing infrastructure projects, which was the basis for the adoption of the selection criteria for the implemented sub-projects. In any case, all efforts targeting the development of any sector of the target communities would be highly relevant. They also highlighted that the contextual problems in Area C include the growing unemployment rates, poverty, destruction of property, and the vulnerability of women. Women and youth in Area C face the challenge of finding alternative income-generating opportunities to financially support their households and to cope with household economic insecurity, which were issues that were indirectly addressed through the infrastructure projects (e.g. roads providing better access to farm lands and to transportation that residents can use to reach job opportunities in other areas).

Citizen participation: The extent to which women and youth were included in community-based decision processes

Project documents along with KIIs showed that sub-projects were selected from the Annual Capital and Investment Plans (ACIP) of the target villages that were developed after many workshops were organized by the MoLG that ensured that community members were given the chance to participate in the process of preparing the plans. As such, sub-projects designs were indirectly developed with the local populations in a participatory way and were drafted with women, youth, elderly, and others from the local community.

Community members were also consulted at the time of the selection of the sub-projects in order to select the most relevant and currently needed project from the needs presented in the ACIP.

Village councils held meetings with council members and community members in order to make this selection.

- When key representatives in Nabi Elias village were asked if women and youth have been a part of the process of designing project and working plans, they highlighted that the council have created 4 groups, each includes 4 members who were responsible for working on assessing people's needs in different sectors, including the economic, social, infrastructure, and governance sector.
- Furthermore, interviewed key informants from Sosya village, including the representative of Sosya LGU, indicated that the project of Sosya village, 'Lighting solar system' was selected after many meetings and discussions that were held between the MDLF and community members.
- In Shufa, of the 9 members of Shufa's Village Council, 2 are females. Those two female members are also members of a women's association, so they have a direct contact with most female villagers. They have held group discussions and have brought women's voices and recommendations to the council.
- The interviewed female beneficiaries from Yanun village stated that the programme's participatory process provided them with the opportunity to think beyond one's personal problems and to address wider community matters.
- Villages such as Al-Aqaba and Kisan witnessed high participation rates from male and female residents in identifying the needs of the community and the implementation process.

The participatory approach was also limited to the preparation phase and selection of the projects, whereas garnering the participation of the community throughout the implementation and evaluation of the project would increase community ownership and sustainability of the results.

The extent to which the programmes' objectives are still valid

The programme's objectives are and continue to be valid and relevant to the lives of Palestinians living in Area C. Considering the large number of communities with similar needs in Area C and the ongoing political conditions that suppress socioeconomic development, similar projects will remain relevant and needed in the long-term for both villages already targeted and for others in Area C. In terms of strengthening citizen participation, this is also a long-term goal with much effort needed to fully and sustainably achieve citizen participation in local government decision-making and monitoring.

Effectiveness

This section measures the difference that the Area C Programme has made in the lives of the target groups and to what extent the objectives and indicators were achieved or otherwise. LGU representatives, beneficiaries and relevant stakeholders were consulted about the specific outcomes of the different programme aspects and sub-project activities in order to find out what they believed the programme helped them achieve and the nature of the challenges solved. Due to the lack of quantitative data, the team will consider the Programme's functionality and utilization only - for the sub-projects that have been visited - in a qualitative manner based on the information that has been collected during the site visits and from the LGU representatives.

It should also be noted that the programme's framework lacked measurable expected outcomes and impact. Accordingly, including indicators on the outcome level beyond output indicators is a must for future programme phases. This will help raising the level of focus to a more strategic level and help to prioritize the activities that have the most effect. Being able to demonstrate the outcomes of a project can also help track results on the target areas, attract other donor funding, continue or expand project activities and/or replicate them.

The key results achieved thus far by the programme

Evaluation findings show that all sub-projects reviewed have been completed as planned during the design stage and are currently functional. Additionally, findings show that the programme outputs have been achieved, given the experience and professionalism of the local contracted implementing partners and the expertise of the MDLF.

The interviews conducted with final beneficiaries and key representatives indicate a high level of satisfaction with the quality of the sub-projects and the selection and implementation processes. For example, as mentioned above, residents of Yanun used to have unorganized water harvesting, lacked potable water and had to pay high costs for water for a long time. The project included the construction of a concrete small underground tank and the installation of a water pump on the natural spring of Yanun so that the residents can utilize the spring well. A retaining boulder wall and a fence were also constructed to protect the spring opening. The intervention enlarged water availability for the community and reduced the cost of water.

The village of Sosya lacked solar-powered light poles before the implementation of this project. This project has made roads safer for citizens and has contributed to reducing settler attacks on villagers' properties at night. The project has also helped in facilitating citizens' movement between homes and streets at night. Yet, some interviewees indicated that the performance of solar cells in the winter is somewhat weaker, so participants of a FGD indicated that streetlights

should be 100 watts instead of the 60 watt lights provided through the project. Other participants asked for more light poles in streets.

Additionally, the idea of the sub-project implemented in Al-Aqaba *'Construction of a concrete water tank'* stemmed from the water shortage problems experienced since 2017. Therefore, the village council suggested an infrastructure plan to increase the water supply in the village to meet the needs of the local community – the installation of a water tank of 250 m^3. This project has been effective in stabilizing the water supply to the residents of the area. However, interviewed village officials stated that the water distribution is disproportionate in the village as some residents still face problems with the water supply, and the village's water network still needs improvements. A few possible solutions were suggested for future projects, such as installing two separate water meters to the water tank - one meter to measure how much goes out of the tank and another to measure the distribution of the water.

Repairing and reconstructing the public park was another developmental project the village council placed great emphasis on. The importance of this project manifested itself in the interactive activities that were held for the children in the public park to help them de-stress from the constant fear of the Israeli military interferences in the village. However, the park needs further renovations so it can hold more social and cultural activities.

The road construction project in Nabi Elias has led to a population increase in those areas. As a result, a number of entrepreneurs and businessmen became interested in starting their own business premises and projects in these areas. This, as a result, would increase the availability of various job opportunities and give residents an access to stable sources of income. Moreover, the implemented projects had a positive influence over the agricultural activities in these areas. According to the conducted interviews, farmers are now able to easily access their land and adequately tender and harvest their crops, which has led to increase in the financial return gained from selling the crop in markets.

To conclude, the infrastructure sub-projects implemented in targeted communities in Area C have contributed to achieving the overall objective of the programme that sought *the improvement of social and economic conditions of marginalised Palestinian communities in Area C*. The achievement of programme outcomes demonstrated a high level of ownership in relation to the local context and the needs of beneficiaries.

The main risks/challenges in the programme implementation, and how these challenges were mitigated

According to the annual report of the Municipal Development and Lending Fund (MDLF) in 2020, the Area C Programme faced some obstacles. One of the most prominent challenges was the attempts of the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) to hinder the development projects in Area C.

For example, the new Kisan School project was subject to a verbal stop working order by the Israeli Authorities without any official documents along with a confiscation of equipment twice. The project was suspended for a few months until being resumed in early July 2020. Additionally, an extremist Israeli settler organization (Regavim) was not in favour of building a new school and launched an advocacy campaign against building the school and pressured decision makers in the ICA to stop the building. As a response, community members in these areas frequently launched advocacy campaigns that aim at pushing the Israeli Civil Administration to cancel demolition orders and making Palestinian villagers' voices and calls for help heard by civil society organizations and international human rights institutions. Additionally, thanks to Kisan villagers' determination and their belief that *"education is one of life's necessities"*, the new school premise in Kisan is now ready to accommodate 180 students.

Another challenge that led to the delay of implementing some of the projects is the confiscation of the contractor equipment by the Israeli Authorities. The LGUs, in return, asked contractors to work on implementing projects at night. When noticing any movement, staff used to quickly collect all the equipment and hide to avoid having any altercations with Israeli settlers. Despite the difficulty of implementing in this way, this has proved effective in ensuring the completion of the infrastructure projects. Accordingly, it is of a high importance to contract a legal agency to provide legal assistance and consultation to the target areas and to avoid equipment confiscation, detention, or demolitions for contractors.

These are valuable lessons learned for future work in Area C. More organized support needs to be planned for at the start of the project in the case of stop work orders from the ICA or lash back from settler organizations. This could be in the form of a legal support team or a human rights organization with experience in this field. Adding a legal provision item to the programme budget would then be a necessity as well. The modality of construction work being conducted at night to avoid confiscation of equipment is also necessary if current restrictions and detrimental practices on the development of Area C by the Israeli authorities remain in place.

According to MDLF representatives, most LGUs lack the capacity and skills to design their sub-projects to prepare any Environmental and Social Management Plans "ESMPs"; and their capacity in procurement procedures and bidding documents preparation is very low. In order to overcome this challenge, the Local Technical Consultants (LTCs) conducted on-job training focusing on the social and the environmental safeguards in accordance with MDLF working procedures.

In addition, local government units have comparatively limited experience in enhancing community participation and mobilization due to a lack of know-how in this regard as well as, in some cases, a lack of willingness to consult with different groups of community members. Another reason for a lack of full community participation is that many community members were not able or willing to take the time to participate and scheduling meetings at times that would

suit a number of different community groups was challenging. As such, participation of women and youth was not to the level hoped for. As a step towards encouraging women and youth to contribute to the developmental efforts, municipalities tried to invest in projects whose aim was to economically empower women and youth by providing them with paid job opportunities during project implementation periods.

Another challenge was the COVID-19 pandemic and the movement restriction associated with it, which also interrupted and postponed some of the sub-projects. MDLF staff showed its ability and willingness to act flexibly to enable the sub-projects to move forward and achieve their planned objectives on time.

On the other hand, the evaluation team found that there were a number of factors that paved the way for the sub-projects to be successfully implemented. Firstly, the suitable and effective planning, designing, and preparatory actions for the sub-projects throughout the planning phase led to successful implementation in the later phases. The dedication and the flexibility of the MDLF's staff also played a major role in ensuring sound implementation of sub-projects through monitoring and following-up on project activities, establishing continuous communication with the participants and providing the needed support. An LGU representative indicated that the:

"MDLF's staff were very cooperative and have responded effectively to people's concerns, questions, and needs."

The evaluation team recommends developing a better coordination and communication procedure between SDC, MoLG, and MDLF. The MDLF and SDC should consider working on building LGUs' capacities in addition to involving a CSO to mobilize the community in order to be able to establish a healthy environment that understand and value the significance of civil society's contribution to economic and social cohesion. In return, this would help in increasing and improving participation of community members in projects.

Case Study
Kisan School

"It always seems impossible until it's done"- Nelson Mandela

Kisan is a small Palestinian village located in the south of Bethlehem city with a population of around 800 people. Kisan, as many other Palestinian villages, is classified within Area C, where the Israeli authority has near-total control according to the 1995 Oslo Accord. The children in the village are forced to attend an underdeveloped and inadequate school with scarce educational resources because of the restrictive construction regulations placed by the Israeli authorities depriving them of their basic human rights. The village projects committee, with the help of the SDC and the MDLF, sought to find a permanent solution that took the form of a project to provide a sufficient educational institution. After various meetings and relentless perseverance from the community members, the project was launched in January 2020.

Despite the numerous Israeli attempts to hinder the construction process by issuing three demolition notices, confiscating construction tools, and detaining workers, the villagers stood their ground against all the odds and completed the project in August 2021. One of the village officials expressed the importance of this project when he stated, "The new school project will go down in the history of the village as the most important project to be conducted in recent years." He also added, "This project is like the heart's arteries pumping life into the village." And after a long journey paved with hardships, Kisan's new school is ready to open its doors for the joyful bright-eyed children on September 12th, 2021. Thus, proving that hard work and determination pay off even if your goal seems unattainable.

Kisan's school has hosted the village's children for the past 20 years, and despite being an adored site by all the children, it does not meet the basic requirements to be a learning establishment, as it was originally built as caravans and warehouses. This is illustrated by the lack of spacious classrooms to accommodate the students, a proper schoolyard, and educational material resources. One of the problems the students face is the classrooms being overcrowded, thus, affecting their overall attentiveness and engagement. Another major problem the students faced is the lack of a schoolyard, as they

were forced to play and hold activities in the street. This is extremely dangerous because the children were subjected to extreme weather conditions and harassment from Israeli settlers making the children put their safety on the line. In an interview with one of the school's teachers, the teacher pointed out the lack of material resources in the school such as computers and LCD equipment. This can negatively affect the children's learning experience and the quality and effectiveness of teaching. However, despite all the negative aspects of the old school building, the children remained motivated to unleash their full potential with enthusiasm.

Following the initial plan for this project due to the community's high demand, the construction of the new Kisan School was completed in August 2021. A member of the joint service council stated that the workers had to work day and night and during the holidays to finalize the construction of the school. Taking into consideration the flaws the old building suffered from, the new school building was constructed to be a well-rounded educational institute. The new school consists of numerous bigger classrooms to accommodate around 160 children. That can leave a positive effect on their

school performance and the quality of learning. It also includes a safe schoolyard where the children can play and hold extracurricular activities without worrying about their safety and possible harassment from settlers living in the surrounding Israeli settlements. This project received positive feedback from the children, their parents, and the teachers. Kisan's students showed great excitement over the new school. A teacher in the school stated, "The students are extremely enthusiastic to attend a bigger and better school." To celebrate the completion of this project, the school principal said he would let the children come to the first day of school in their festive Eid clothes. Regardless of the various obstacles the Israeli regime put in the way of this project, from confiscating construction tools, arresting workers, restrictive regulations, and opposing Israeli demonstrations, the project defied all the odds and became one of the village's greatest accomplishments.

Efficiency

The extent to which the M&E system has been coherent, and outcome and impact-oriented

According to data collection, key informants, and projects' document, the MDLF has been efficient in their monitoring and data collection to ensure efficiency of the implementation of sub-projects. The regular communication between partners also ensures overall transparency, mitigating reporting and monitoring setbacks. The MDLF coordinated with the key stakeholders effectively (the SDC, the MOLG and the targeted LGUs) to meet the planned targets and to avoid any miscommunication during the implementation. Furthermore, the continuous communication with the targeted communities created solid ties and increased the trust, commitment, and loyalty from the beneficiaries' side toward the project and MDLF in general. Internal reports have been produced by the MDLF describing the progress and the implementation status concerning the disbursements, quality, and procurement where the top management will be able to assess the implementation process effectively.

The M&E system of the Area C Programme has been useful to understand progress in the implementation of the sub-projects, yet it does not provide measurement of indicators at the outcome level. Many indicators are, to some extent, activity based, and do provide enough measurement of the results or progress towards achieving the overall objective of the project. Therefore, an M&E plan should be in place at the outset of the programme and be implemented in concert with the programme's activities. Indicators should also be clear for assessment of programme's success and achievement. In short, the project needs a more specific evaluation framework and an M&E plan with accompanying tools developed to capture the successes and challenges of the programme more effectively and track changes and impact over time.

The extent to which the work modalities succeeded in creating an enabling environment for beneficiary communities

Despite all the challenges and difficulties faced during the implementation process in Area C, the work modalities had moderate success in developing an enabling environment for the target communities.

According to the interviews conducted in certain Area C localities, it was evident that the MDLF's interventions had positive outcomes that contributed to the welfare of the targeted marginalized localities and the promotion of community participation (see previous Relevance and Effectiveness sections).

The community participation modality was also effective although it faced a number of challenges, as discussed previously. Community members in Al-Aqaba, which faced difficulties in fully garnering community participation, stated that conducting a community-wide movement

could help in increasing the participation of women and youth would have been more effective if there had been time to plan for it and implement it.

The extent to which the internal financial, management and administrative systems of the MDLF were supportive and transparent

To select the best eligible projects in the most vulnerable localities during the selection process, the MDLF cooperated with the MoLG and developed a transparent and precise selection procedure. This procedure aims to assess the fund distribution and select the most needed projects in the target communities.

In addition to employing multiple engineers responsible for monitoring the project's implementation process, the village council members in Shufa stated that the MDLF staff were cooperative, and had shown a great response to the community's needs and concerns. However, the LGU members stated that the MDLF should be more precise and transparent about the standards applicable to road construction projects. Villagers said that the MDLF had proposed some provisions to manage the types of projects it is willing to fund where it previously suggested that road construction projects should only be carried out in Area C. Additionally, the villagers had indicated that the 2016-2021 ACIP did not mention the need for having a park in Shufa and stressed the importance of having youth clubs and constructing a high school in the village.

Other than being responsible for the selection process and ensuring its efficiency, the MDLF is also responsible for monitoring and managing the projects' resources, financial policies, and work packages. Their financial manual creates detail-oriented guidelines to utilize the projects' resources adequately and effectively and obtain financial control over the projects' funds and expanses that are indispensable for MDLF's financial operations. Nevertheless, Shufa's LGU members expressed concern about the general lack of funding because it hindered the council's ability to implement projects proposed in the action plan. They stated that the funds allocated for the road construction project (76,000 EUR) did not cover maintenance expenses. Given the limitation of the LGU's resources, maintenance of the constructed roads will be challenging.

Impact
The extent to which the logical framework is structured in terms of measuring results

The Logical Framework created by the MDLF for the Area C Programme depicts a straightforward design and is considered an effective guide to development activities in Area C. The design represented in the log frame is in line with the pre-identified development problems of targeted communities and shows practical interconnection and logical links between its various components. As per the logical framework developed by the programme's designers, the Area C Programme consists of layered constituents that include the overall objective, specific objective, expected results, and activities.

A set of quantifiable indicators were identified to attune the anticipated results. While the project's logical framework was designed in a way that comprised "objectively verified indicators", such as increased percentages of households connected to rehabilitated roads, no baseline survey was carried out before the initiation of the programme. As a result, the suggested objectively verified indicators cannot be compared to the pre-project situation. Additional components may be added to the programme's structure to improve the project's efficiency and guarantee that concerns such as capacity, institutional building, and sustainability are appropriately handled. Also, the MDLF's contribution to achieving the targeted goals should be evaluated more thoroughly.

The effect of the programme on the beneficiary communities, in terms of enhanced social participation and engagement, in addition to motivation to lead social change

Several stakeholders interviewed highlighted the benefits of the participatory process undertaken before identifying the sub-projects. Most of the beneficiaries mentioned how this contributed to a common shared vision and social cohesion, which is also critical in developing the livelihoods and physical and social infrastructure of vulnerable communities. Targeted local communities were provided with awareness-raising workshops to engage them in the design of social/environmental mitigation measures as part of the ESMP. The activities and the workshops held resulted in several successful outputs, including providing capacity building for a good number of participants at each locality. It also resulted in forming support committees. In fact, the most noticeable outcome was getting people to work together towards a feasible dialogue between the citizens and their LGUs in the framework of social accountability for better service delivery and better participation in the decision-making process. Yet, community mobilization activities that were carried out in all targeted localities pre-sub-project implementation are not sufficient enough; they mainly aimed at ensuring that the selected sub-projects were suited to the priorities of the target groups. Accordingly, MDLF should further work on and review the community mobilization scope for future interventions to ensure better outcomes in the social context. As stated in previous sections, the social participation and engagement of marginalized groups, namely women, youth and people with disabilities, should be enhanced through the project cycle.

The empowering effect the programme had on women, youth and vulnerable groups in the communities

According to the MDLF's annual report for 2020, there was a sufficient number of adolescents and women who participated in the various conducted events. Citizen's satisfaction assessment of the sub-projects implemented in the targeted locations was conducted by the MDLF. Data was collected throughout conducting 6 focus groups with a sample of stakeholders in the targeted locations, in addition to a social impact assessment questionnaire which was tailored to the

different types of sub-projects, with specific reference to the roads, school constructions, water tank in Al-Aqaba, providing the health clinic in Iskaria, and providing the lighting through the solar power for Sosya. The sample reached 86 participants; out of which 21 were female participants, and 19 were youth under the age of 29, which shows a positive trend in female and youth participation when usually the participation of these groups was very low in these marginalized areas; also considering the limited experience of the local councils in enhancing community participation and mobilization. The assessment examined Strategic Development Alternative Solutions (SDAS) identified opportunities and constraints i.e., potential synergies and conflicts between them. It was evident that the programme as a whole managed to engage women and youth groups using different tools such as individual consultations with women leaders and focus group discussions. The level of participation was, to some extent, satisfactory and representative of women and youth needs in the targeted localities.

The extent to which the programme succeeded in raising issues of vulnerability within the MDLF and other stakeholders

The Palestinian population in Area C is among the most vulnerable and marginalized in the West Bank. Strengthening the livelihoods of marginalized and vulnerable communities in Area C is a central aspect that many humanitarian and development programmes take into consideration. The Environmental and Social Management Plan (ESMP) remains a vehicle for raising issues of vulnerability. This plan focuses on communities' needs and priorities (tangible and intangible) along with their vulnerability context. The ESMP outlined the measures needed to address the issues identified in the Environmental and Social Management Framework (ESMF). More specifically, the main environmental and social mitigation measures, as well as the environmental and social monitoring, were included in the ESMP.

However, the Area C programme addressed infrastructure sub-projects and has not paid adequate attention to the extent of vulnerability in targeted communities. Therefore, many of the interviewed beneficiaries highlighted the necessity of ensuring the adaptation of long-term perspectives in humanitarian work and stressed the idea that future development work has to address issues of social and psychological vulnerability and risk besides infrastructural rehabilitation, although rehabilitation is considered an opportunity to bring about positive socio-economic change by many of interviewees.

Analysis of the achieved positive unintended results and impacts

The collected data demonstrates that the sub-projects succeeded in creating a positive impact on the direct beneficiaries and the indirect beneficiaries. The impact of the Area C Programme was remarkable and perceivable when comparing the targeted communities' situations before

and after the implemented sub-projects. For example, one of the roads that have been constructed connects the target village to its farm land and the nearby villages, which can increase job opportunities, especially for women. In addition, when asked if there were any positive/negative changes the sub-project (directly or indirectly) brought on, intended or unintended, one village council's deputy reported that the assembling of the developmental plan for Al-Aqaba incorporated youth and women, making participation in the village a priority regardless of gender, age, or social background in designing and conducting the action plan. It was noted that the village witnessed a significant increase in women's participation recently due to the village council's attempt to integrate them into their community and make them active members of their society. The knock-on effects of the projects assessed are described below:

- The pavement of the road within Um Dyouf helps school children access their school and farmers and community members to access their lands. As a result of the project, urban expansion and witnessed 12 new accommodations were built due to the implementation of this infrastructure project. Moreover, the rehabilitation of the road helped to preserve and protect more than 200 dunums of land and encouraged their owners to invest in them.
- Similarly, the newly rehabilitated roads in Nabi Elias Village through the Area C Programme have facilitated farmers' access to their farming lands, which has helped in increasing their economic gain and increased lands' selling prices. These roads also facilitated people's movements to and from Jayyous village (a nearby village close to Qalqilya) and saved their time and effort.
- The 'Rehabilitation of Internal Roads' project in Shufa has encouraged many families to move to live in areas that were previously abandoned. Community members indicated that the increase of population in those desolate areas has helped in reducing the number of settler attacks against villagers and the upsurge in settlement expansion.
- Additionally, the installation of a solar-powered lighting in Sosya has improved the community's living conditions and enhanced their sense of security and safety when carrying their routine and social practices in the village at night.
- The park construction project in Nabi Elias has been successful in achieving the desired long-term outcomes. Children now have a safe space in which they can play, run, and get involved in extra-curricular activities with their peers. This park has allowed kids living in the village to handle and release the stress caused by their fear of Israeli settlers and their academic stress in a healthy way. The park has also served as a relaxing space in which caregivers can gather, socialize, and share their worries and interests.
- In Kisan, the constructed school has increased the number of children who can enjoy their right to education in a safe learning environment in the village. The school's bigger classrooms and the availability of material resources have elevated the quality of teaching and facilitated students' learning experience. The constructed playground within the

school walls has allowed children to play safely and release their pent-up energy without getting attacked by the Israeli settlers or subjected to any external danger such as accidents, for example.

- When it comes to the road construction project in Shufa, the roads have served about 600 people and improved their life quality on different levels. The greatest beneficiaries of this project are farmers who are now able to easily access their farming lands and regularly tend and harvest the crops. The newly paved roads have also facilitated trucks' access to those lands, which has reduced the amount of time and effort usually spent on distributing and marketing the crop production. Subsequently leading to increased economic gain for farmers.
- The installed water tank in Al-Aqaba has helped increase the people's supply of clean water.

Overall, the implemented sub-projects have enhanced people's life quality in the targeted areas in the sense that it has increased and facilitated their access to the essential services. The interviewed beneficiaries have shown high satisfaction with the accomplished projects. They indicated that the interventions have improved their morale, increased their sense of responsibility towards their community, promoted them to contribute to future developmental efforts of their towns, and strengthened the resilience of Area C Palestinian inhabitants.

The evaluation team noted that there were no negative unintended effects that happened as a result of the sub-project on the direct beneficiaries, their communities, or in the society in general.

Sustainability
The extent to which the programmes' impacts and results are sustained

The MDLF has always shown a high commitment to ensure the maintenance and sustainability of the projects and programmes it holds. To be able to achieve its objectives, the MDLF usually focuses on enhancing LGU ownership and stresses the need for having operation and maintenance plans which should include documents that go into details about the maintenance budgets and staffing for the appointed sub-projects. The MDLF demands that the LGUs write letters in which they indicate their willingness and commitment to carry the responsibility of maintaining the sub-projects one year after the submission. Moreover, LGUs should express their willingness to reach out to competent Ministries, including the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (in the case of building schools), once the sub-projects are handed over to them. This method ensures that the targeted communities make full use of the sub-projects that have been executed in their region. However, the MDLF usually adopts a lighter approach with LGUs based in Area C due to their limited financial capacities and the lack of human and material resources.

It was indicated that all the projects introduced in the proposals have been successfully implemented, and are currently being actively utilized for the purposes they have been designed for. Assuming the continued maintenance of the projects, the impact described above is likely to be long-term and sustained.

When it comes to the enhancements that occurred on LGU performance, it has been noted that their capacity in project planning and implementation has improved drastically during the programme. Furthermore, through communal committees, the LGUs were able to build a fruitful relationship with community members who were allowed to actively contribute to the efforts made. The communal committees that have been created contributed to increasing the community members' trust in the municipality since it became highly responsive to people's needs and concerns.

Procedures that would ensure continuation of positive influence among beneficiary communities after the completion of the programme

During field visits, it has been observed that the implemented projects seem to be well preserved and regularly maintained. The sub-projects' good condition is indicative of the efficiency of the MDLF approach in enhancing beneficiaries' and LGUs' sense of ownership to increase the projects' sustainability. The following are concrete examples of how LGUs have already taken steps to ensure the sustainability of the projects:

- The mayor of Nabi Elias municipality indicated that to be able to increase the sustainability of the established park, a park-keeper was employed. The park-keeper's responsibility is to ensure that no damage is reflected on the facility and no mess is created by community members. The park-keeper is also responsible for keeping the park clean, watering the plants regularly, and improving the park's aesthetic appearance.
- When asked about the measures that need to be taken to ensure the new school building in Kisan remains in good quality, it was suggested that imposing penalties on students who damage the school's facilities, increasing students sense of responsibility and belonging to their school, raising students' awareness about the amount of effort that has been made to construct this school and the significance of this school for the future development of the town are important measures to maintain the school. In addition, staff members were employed and charged with cleaning the building, monitoring the electrical and plumbing systems, and providing general maintenance for the building and playground.
- To ensure the sustainability of the constructed roads in Shufa, the municipality has focused on constructing an adequate water system with high-quality water pipes to avoid having to destroy the surface of roads for maintenance purposes in the future.

Additionally, the LGU is currently working on increasing its accessibility to materials, tools, and specialized maintenance staff needed to repair these roads.

- When it comes to the solar-powered lights in Sosya, the mayor indicated that the lack of equipment and tools needed for maintenance might hinder their ability to increase the project's lifespan. However, the LGU has tried its best to ensure the sustainability of the project by raising citizen's awareness about the significance of this project to the development of the village and imposing penalties on locals who damage the public facilities.

Nonetheless, LGUs in the targeted areas haven't developed any specific operation and maintenance plans, so the MDLF should focus on supporting LGUs in this sense in the future. The LGUs' capacity to maintain the projects in the long-term is questionable, considering their lack of financial and in-kind resources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The programme was shown to be highly relevant to the needs and priorities of the target populations and was impactful in improving the social and economic conditions of the target areas and increasing participation in decision-making at the local level. The objectives of the programme remain relevant and the needs and gaps in other similar communities are many. As such, it is recommended to continue the programme into subsequent phases targeting other vulnerable areas in Area C.
- The modality adopted in the GVCD Programme – that of synergy between the MDLF and an NGO with experience in human rights based programming and community participation – was found to be quite effective in bridging the gap between community members and local governmental units, empowering vulnerable groups (such as women, youth and PwDs), and increasing community participation in the programme. It is recommended that this modality be adopted for the West Bank programme as well in future phases by including a West Bank-based Palestinian NGO with similar experience to that of the PCDCR and extensive experience in Area C as a partner to support the work with communities.
- It was noted that LGUs have relatively low capacity in relation to project planning and implementation, so it is recommended that future programmes should focus on building LGUs' capacity in regards to infrastructure planning, project identification, scoping, management, and local governance through workshops and trainings to be able to satisfy future infrastructure demands.
- The sustainability of the programme outcomes was found to be highly likely. However, the sustainability of projects that need a higher level of maintenance was more questionable. It is recommended to allocate a sufficient budget for the maintenance of existing projects and develop a maintenance strategy for future development projects initiated by community members. Another option would be to fund projects that are low maintenance to ensure sustainability regardless of future funding.

- The modality of flexibility of implementation of the infrastructure projects in Area C – for example working in the night-time to avoid confiscation of equipment and vehicles - was effective and should be repeated. Additionally, legal support must be offered to Area C communities to combat potential stop-work orders and other restrictive policies and practices.
- It is advised to create key indicators and collect data from the target communities once the projects are completed for an effective assessment of the projects performance and an improved evaluation of their effects.
- The project lacked a clear framework of measurable expected outcomes and impact indicators upon which it could be assessed. The theory of change of the project should be clearly articulated and aligned with activities and expected outcomes. In addition, the project need a more specific evaluation framework and a monitoring and evaluation plan with accompanying tools should be developed to capture the successes and challenges of the project more effectively and track change and impact over time.

GVCD Programme

Overview of the GVCD Programme

The main objective of the GVCD programme is to support the vulnerable communities in targeted municipalities in order to enjoy improved access and voice in local service delivery and decision-making. Specific objectives are the following:

➢ Improved and accountable local service delivery for vulnerable communities.

➢ Strengthened local authorities' accountability toward citizens and civic groups' (youth, women and Neighbourhood Committees) and citizens' participation in local decision-making processes.

The MDLF worked closely with the Palestinian Centre for Democracy and Conflict Resolution (PCDCR) to implement the programme.

Findings

The findings in this section are based on conducted interviews with key informants, desk and document review, field visits, and FGDs.

Relevance

The extent to which the identified objectives and activities met the target group's gaps and needs

The GVCD objectives and activities are relevant to the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries in the 24 vulnerable communities in the 7 targeted municipalities. The local community was included in identifying their community's needs and priorities since the beginning of the implementation process, and also in planning, designing, and implementing the municipalities' projects, which makes all the carried-out activities very much related to the targeted community's needs. Most importantly, the municipalities have implemented the projects that were selected by local community through the PCDCR facilitation, and the MDLF has employed a social and mobilization advisor who worked with the municipalities to support the effective implementation of those projects in the targeted communities.

Besides, by reviewing the GVCD programme documents, the evaluation team found that there is a logical relevance among the overall objective and the outcomes of the programme, which indicates a good fit and relevance across the internal design elements of the GVCD programme components. Also, the GVCD programme activities are highly relevant to the vulnerable groups' needs discussed in detail in the context analysis (See Annex 1). Almost all the interviewed beneficiaries indicated that the relevance aspect is strong and obvious, and one of the interviewees said:

"Our municipality has invited us and some relevant organizations to participate in the workshops and meetings they carried out to investigate our community's most important needs.

Accordingly, all projects implemented in the area, especially the road construction projects, are very relevant to our needs and priorities".

Additionally, the needs assessment studies carried out by the MDLF during the GVCD programme demonstrated the extent to which the 24 selected vulnerable communities in the 7 targeted municipalities need to gain more knowledge and awareness about the concepts of community participation and social accountability. The conducted studies also highlighted the needs of those 24 vulnerable communities to access infrastructure services, basic services, enhanced social and economic living conditions, better community participation, and social accountability; it was very obvious that the beneficiaries of these communities lack infrastructure and basic services since they are the most densely populated areas.

The GVCD programme also aligns with the Palestinian Authority strategies and policies, namely the National Policy Agenda of 2017- 2022, and the draft of the Local Government Strategic Framework and the new MDLF Strategy (2017-2021). It further implements the state-building agenda, the Human Right Based Approach (HRBA) of the current Cooperation Strategy (2015-2018), which corresponds with the Federal Dispatch to Parliament (2017-2020) as well as with the regional political-strategic framework for the region.[1]The program fits in well with these strategies because it seeks to enhance the provision of the basic services to the targeted vulnerable communities on one hand, and to promote social accountability and gender equality in addition to the application of democratic practices in the Palestinian society by increasing Municipalities' accountability and vulnerable groups' participation in decision making processes on the other hand.

Finally, the evaluation team can conclude that there is a clear relevance, harmony, and interdependence between the identified objectives and activities with the target group's gaps and needs.

Citizen participation: The extent to which women and youth were included in community-based decision processes

Focus group discussions and the key informant interviews conducted with target groups showed that the activities and interventions undertaken by the GVCD programme were highly relevant to the needs of women and youth in general, and they also took into consideration gender equality issues, especially in the community-based decision and planning processes.

First, during the community mobilization phase, the participation of vulnerable groups (women, youth, the elderly, PwDs) was encouraged to a great extent; and a diversity of members of the local communities in the 7 targeted municipalities were attracted to participate in the activities of the GVCD programme. During the phase of project identification and during the capacity building courses about community participation and social accountability, a space was provided for women to participate and to raise their voices about different issues. The number of

[1]http://www.mdlf.org.ps/Document/MDLF%20Annual%20Report%202020.pdf

participants in the training courses in this phase reached 285 trainees, 153 of which were females; the sessions also included 11 persons with disabilities.

Moreover, the PCDCR formed a Committee for Development and Social Accountability for each of the 24 vulnerable communities. The participants in these committees included all vulnerable groups (women, elderly, PwDs and youth), while the leaders of these committees are youth and some of them are women. The committee aims at qualifying the vulnerable groups in the targeted municipalities to have an effective role in promoting community participation and social accountability.

The extent to which the programmes' objectives are still valid

Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world, with around 2.1 million individuals living in a total area of 365 square kilometres. The isolation caused by the Israeli occupation, in addition to multiple episodes of conflict and a damaging internal political divide have created a fragile infrastructure in Gaza that was exacerbated by the recent hostilities in June 2021.[2]

In fact, the targeting of infrastructure has long been a part of conventional wars. Since the beginning of the siege on Gaza and severe economic and movement restrictions imposed in 2007, the Palestinian people in Gaza have experienced 14 years of continued deterioration in the conditions surrounding them. Efforts at revival have been made, with interventions focused on large infrastructure and other development projects. However, the destruction of infrastructure in Gaza by prolonged siege, severe economic restrictions and recurrent rounds of hostilities have had a grave impact on access to electricity and clean water, as well as on the roads, schools and the WASH system.[3]

This was confirmed by a study conducted by the OCHA in 2017 which indicated that some 60 communities in low-lying locations across Gaza have been identified by the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene cluster (WASH) as being at risk of flooding, even from light rainfall. These areas are home to over 560,000 people, 15 primary health centres and 69,000 students and teachers in 65 UNRWA and public schools. In 2021, due to the last hostilities on Gaza by the Israeli occupation, the Infrastructure Sectors, covering Municipal Services, Transport, Water and Sanitation, Energy and Digital Infrastructure, have incurred between US$ 60 – 85 million in damages.

CAPACITY BUILDING COURSRS

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: 285

NUMBER OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS: 153

NUMBER OF PWDS: 11

TOT TRAINING SESSIONS

FEMALE PARTICIPATION RATE: 44.23%

PWDS PARTICIPATION RATE: 2%

Additionally, vulnerability in Gaza is heightened by the precarious state of the infrastructure,

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[2] https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/gaza-rapid-damage-and-needs-assessment-june-2021
[3] https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/a75d310_en_1.pdf

which has undergone minimal upgrading or repair over the last decade despite rapid population growth and widespread damage from recurrent hostilities.[4] It's also important to note that because of the continuous wars and attacks on Gaza, and because of the high rates of unemployment and poverty, people's priorities are not focused towards community participation or social accountability. They rather focus on finding jobs or any kind of work so that they can earn an income that helps them get their basic needs and daily sustenance.

For these reasons, support to Gazan municipalities in vulnerable areas is of lasting importance, and the GVCD objectives are still valid.

Effectiveness

The section examines the extent to which the objectives of the programme have been achieved or are likely to be achieved. It examines how well the programme's results have influenced the achievement of programme's objectives.

The key results achieved thus far by the programme

By reviewing MDLF documents and by conducting a number of interviews with the KIIs and the targeted beneficiaries, the evaluation team has concluded that the GVCD programme has achieved effectiveness as seen by considerable progress towards its overall objective, that is: *making the vulnerable communities in targeted Municipalities enjoy improved access and voice in local service delivery and decision-making*. The programme has largely succeeded in meeting the desired expectations in relation to its outcomes in the 7 targeted municipalities. The outcomes and the main results were as follows:

Outcome 1: Improved accountable service delivery for vulnerable communities

Since the very beginning of the implementation process, the programme has successfully achieved the following results in regard to improving service delivery for the targeted vulnerable communities:

- First, 9 infrastructure projects have been completed. These include a sewage network project and 8 road projects which were implemented in the 7 targeted municipalities.
- Second, the project contributed to raising the community's awareness, and empowering women and youth on issues about how to supervise the implemented projects and how to hold their municipalities accountable; for example, the local committees started to conduct regular visits to supervise the projects and to provide the needed feedback to the municipalities for improvement.
- In addition, the project encouraged the local committees and the community representatives to help in solving problems with citizens, especially problems related to social safeguards.

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[4] https://www.ochaopt.org/content/poor-infrastructure-and-lack-funding-put-over-560000-people-risk-flooding-gaza-strip

- The project also encouraged the local committees to provide reports on citizen's complaints concerning infrastructure and the implemented projects and worked with the concerned municipality to solve them, which contributed in achieving the first outcome successfully.

Outcome 2: Strengthened accountability of the targeted municipalities toward citizen and civic groups' (youth, women, and neighbourhood committees) participation in local decision-making processes.

The targeted municipalities took specific measures for the inclusive participation of women, youth and vulnerable groups that addressed their priorities and concerns, and there were many noticeable results in this regard:

- A relationship of trust between citizens in the local community and the municipality was successfully built.
- The state of awareness and knowledge among citizens was increased, which pushes the community to participate in the local committees, in communicating with their local councils, and in submitting complaints and other levels of community participation.

> One of the interviewed beneficiaries from Absan area said: ""We feel we are more aware about the significance of our contribution to the overall developmental efforts that happens in our area by participating in the different activities and projects that aim at bringing about positive change to our families and the whole community".

- Increasing citizens' awareness of community participation and social accountability.
- Encouraging citizens to claim their rights within peaceful and legal procedures.
- Encouraging associations to cooperate with each other in order to encourage community participation through workshops, training sessions and focus meetings.

Outcome 3: Enhancing Policy Dialogue on vulnerability Issues in the LG sector.

In this component, the MDLF developed policy suggestions and recommendations on vulnerability in the Local Government sector in the Gaza Strip, which resulted in heightening systematic institutionalization of support for the targeted vulnerable communities, and also improved qualitative standards of SDIP processes to some extent.

Based on the conducted interviews with key stakeholders, it was confirmed that the overall objectives of the GVCD programme and its main activities and outcomes were implemented and developed. Besides, the MDLF community participation and social accountability strategy was reviewed, components 1 & 2 were enhanced, and gaps in the LG policy regarding the inclusion of vulnerable groups were defined too.

However, it was also confirmed by the MDLF that the third component was not fully achieved as it should be for many reasons. First, the MDLF does not have sufficient experience to accomplish this component. Thus, there is a need to hire a policy expert to work on the policy level in the MDLF, the targeted municipalities, and the LG sector, knowing that the expert should take into account developing clear articulated policy plans regarding women's participation in municipalities.

Second, the MDLF did not make any monitoring or evaluation on the policy level. Therefore, monitoring and evaluation must be conducted about the implementation of policy plans in order to check the extent of achieving the desired results of the policy dialogue/plans.

Furthermore, there is also a need to develop tools and conduct capacity building trainings for municipalities on how to develop their own policy plans that ensure equitable participation of women.

Results based on the interviews conducted with beneficiaries from the targeted vulnerable communities

The interviewed beneficiaries expressed their happiness and satisfaction about the effectiveness of the programme and the extent of its contribution to alleviating the fragility and vulnerability of their communities. The most prominent results they talked about were as follows:

- Most supermarkets, institutions, and schools located in the targeted areas used to close during winter to avoid dealing with any complications caused by the unavailability of adequate services in the region; however, this situation has changed because of the improvements that the programme has made.
- The new paved roads improved farmers' access to their lands and trucks are now able to reach those lands to help in collecting the crops for delivery to the local markets.
- The programme raised people's awareness about the financial burdens that municipalities have, and the implications on the municipalities' capabilities in conducting certain projects in the area.
- The installation of light poles has increased people's sense of safety when going through those areas, and has increased people's participation and engagement in social activities and occasions.
- The water desalination plants have increased people's access to water.
- The availability of waste containers in each neighbourhood has helped in reducing the existence of random landfills in the area.
- People's level of trust in the development and community accountability committees has improved so people's willingness to demand changes in the town and contribute to the developmental efforts have been enhanced.
- The availability of transportation services in those areas has facilitated and increased children's access to educational institutions.

- The new paved roads in the area have facilitated the movement of PwDs inside and outside the town.
- The construction of roads in areas that were previously marginalized has led to an increase in people's willingness to construct houses, start their own businesses, and move to live in those areas, which, in return, has motivated donors to fund additional projects in those areas, including the construction of water and drainage systems, improving electricity services, and increasing the availability of trash services.

The main risks/challenges in the programme implementation, and how these challenges were mitigated

The GVCD programme faced several challenges and constraints during the implementation process. The following section represent the main encountered challenges and the mitigation measures that were taken to overcome these challenges and obstacles.

The main challenges and obstacles	Mitigation Strategies Used and Actions Taken
In the community mobilization process for capacity-building activities, there was a clear reluctance among citizens in the most vulnerable communities to attend the workshops and the training sessions and to commit to them. Many citizens doubted that there will be a response to their demands, and they were unaware of the importance of participation and accountability in reality. Some citizens also believed that the expected results of the project would take 5-10 years or more to be implemented. In fact, these doubts and reluctance were due to different reasons such as a) the prevailing frustration among the Gazan people that results from the deteriorating political and economic conditions, and b) due to the suffering of the targeted vulnerable communities particularly from the lack of basic services in their surrounding environment and the weak infrastructure as well, which in turn led to a clear weakness in their relationship with their municipalities.	• 10 sessions were conducted with the citizens of the targeted vulnerable communities in order to clarify the importance of the GVCD programme in developing their communities, and the importance of the role of citizens in community participation, social accountability and decision-making processes. • Citizens were also provided with real examples that prove the importance of responding, participation, and accountability from the Gaza Strip. • Citizen participation was linked with real development by cooperating with citizens to defining the needs and priorities of their communities, which improved the citizen's sense of the achieved results on the ground. • Many mechanisms to attract and reach participants were used such as an online application which was made and published on the pages of municipalities, and the interested candidates could apply on it easily. Other candidates were reached through associations and community activists.

The main challenges and obstacles	Mitigation Strategies Used and Actions Taken
The COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures during the declared state of emergency.	The project team adhered to safety standards such as social distancing, wearing masks, and using sterilizers in their training sessions and workshops.
Citizens' frustration with their municipalities and a history of a lack of adequate provision of services as well as a lack of response previously to citizens' complaints and demands.	Many workshops and training sessions were conducted in which the new policies of the municipalities that promote community participation & social accountability were explained. Citizens were also provided with examples on the ground of how the municipalities are becoming more cooperative since the beginning of the project implementation and provided information about the response process for complaints.
Citizens' fear of participation and claiming their rights due to political and partisan reasons.	Awareness-raising workshops were conducted including examples of social accountability and talked about the tools that can be used to work within a legal framework and peaceful means.
Some municipalities' officials were reluctant about cooperating with the centre and have refused to do so in many cases. This is due to the disagreement between the 2 parties about the areas that should be targeted and the types of projects that should be conducted in those areas.	Meetings with those officials were carried out to reach a kind of an agreement with them, and to convince them about the importance of conducting these projects in the targeted areas.

Case Study

AL-Burayj Municipality

Al-Burayj is a marginalized village in the Gaza Strip that suffers from a division between the municipality and the community, as no measures had previously been taken to meet the needs of the community and individuals. Through the implementation of the intervention, the community's trust significantly increased in their local government bodies. But perhaps the most significant improvement achieved through MDLF interventions is the improvement in the level of participation of women in the development of their community.

Before the implementation of the trainings and workshops conducted by The Palestinian Center for Peace and Democracy aimed at fully integrating women into all aspects of development and society in Al-Burayj, the women of the village struggled with barriers that prevented them from participating in the processes of local decision-making and public life. These barriers are the product of prevailing cultural traditions in peripheral areas, which have long restricted women's rights to equal participation and opportunities. Therefore, these training courses aimed to make women active members of their society.

One of the most prominent figures who managed to break out of the mold that was imposed on women in Al-Burayj village is Maha Saleem. The Palestinian Center for Peace and Democracy offered Maha a training course on community responsibility and participation, which enabled her to actively contribute to the development of her village. She showed great determination and dedication by attending various community meetings. She further showed enthusiasm and willingness to participate in more workshops and community activities. Despite her efforts to become a member of the municipality's accountability committee, the mayor of Al-Burayj faced her with rejection.

Yet despite all the pushback she received from the mayor, Maha received tremendous support from the MDLF when they heard about her story and the difficulties she faced. In response, the MDLF sent the mayor a notice stating that funding will cease if he continues to prevent women from participating in project activities. After the intervention, several women were able to join community accountability committees, including Maha Saleem. These women were taught how to hold the municipality accountable and how to force them to be more transparent. Subsequently, female community members participated in the needs assessment process by raising awareness of their rights, holding committees accountable, and effectively addressing their concerns through workshops and training for people in peripheral areas.

By incorporating women into all elements of community life and decision-making in addition to promoting women's efforts to improve their living conditions, women were able to build a collective voice aimed at ensuring equality and empowerment of marginalized females in Al-Burayj. Therefore, similar training sessions should take place in the future as this experience prepares women in marginalized areas to serve their community and encourages them to share their opinions, and participation by both men and women accustoms them to working together to solve problems effectively and efficiently.

Efficiency

The extent to which the work modalities succeeded in creating an enabling environment for beneficiary communities

Representatives from the targeted municipalities stated that the GVCD programme succeeded to a great extent in achieving its main objectives and in creating an enabling environment for beneficiary communities. Additionally, the local communities confirmed that they are satisfied with the quality of the programme's outcomes and activities in its three main components.

This is because the GVCD programme adopted an innovative work modality by cooperating with a local NGO (PCDCR) as an implementing partner. The PCDCR encouraged the participation of vulnerable groups in the targeted communities (women, youth, the elderly, and PwDs) through community mobilization, and attracted them to participate in the activities of the GVCD programme in a way that achieves justice and equality for all groups. Thus, all the GVCD activities were designed and implemented in a participatory and empowering manner for the beneficiary communities, which contributed to the efficient management of the activities of the GVCD programme, and as a result, contributed positively to the quality of GVCD programme implementation.

The programme has faced some challenges such as a) the lack of some project materials in the local market, b) repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic and c) different budget allocations for some of the community initiatives. However, the clarity of roles and responsibilities for the implementing partners helped to deliver the programme results and outcomes in a timely and effective manner.

The extent to which the internal financial, management and administrative systems of the MDLF were supportive and transparent

The GVCD programme had a budget of 3 million CHF and was implemented over a period of 34months from April, 2018 to April 2021. By reviewing the financial reports, it has been noted that the programme was implemented properly within the costs estimated, and an immense effort was made to complete the work plan and achieve the programme's objectives on time.

Based on the conducted interviews, the GVCD programme followed proper financial management procedures, and the expenditures of the programme were incurred in accordance with the MDLF's policies, regulations, and rules in order to complete the implementation process within the timeframe that was previously proposed and planned. Furthermore, by analysing the documents of the programme, the evaluation team noticed that the programme is adequately efficient in its structure and approach of implementation; this is because the MDLF depended on a number of local technical consultants who helped to keep the programme's costs at the minimum.

Moreover, the MDLF managed the available financial, human, material and information resources efficiently. In fact, the programme used the projects' inputs in the best way to achieve the desired results in a cost-effective manner. For example, as for the contractors' prices, they were appropriate for implementing most of the programme's activities and initiatives. In addition, the MDLF was responsible for conducting surveys and issuing reports with the purpose of detecting the effectiveness of the projects that were implemented. It also conducted assessments of the projects it implemented every 2 years which gives the municipalities in the marginalized areas the chance to update and edit their strategic plans.

Another example is that the infrastructure projects were implemented without considerable delay and the progress of implementation by the contractors was sufficient. Additionally, the MDLF contracted with local technical consultants to provide consultancy services for the infrastructure projects and community initiatives for the targeted 7 municipalities which contributed to complete the selected projects (Component 1) in a transparent way and in the required quality.

Thus, it can be concluded that the results of the GVCD programme were achieved in an economical manner and in the most cost-effective way possible.

Impact
The operational and contextual factors (strengths/weaknesses/risks/challenges) that impacted the progress of the programme

One of the major strengths of the programme is the way partnerships between the MDLF, MoLG, and NGOs were organized so that each partner's strengths were used to add value, while each partner also had the opportunity to learn from others.

For example, the MDLF signed a contract with the PCDCR, a Palestinian NGO, in order to help in achieving the second component, which is "to promote community participation and social accountability among citizens". The PCDCR has been involved based on the recommendations that urge the involvement of more civil society organizations in MDLF projects, which contributes to establishing a real partnership between civil society organizations and the LG sector.

In fact, the PCDCR had an added value to the project because of their experience in mobilizing citizens, attracting, reaching, and organizing meetings with them, and the role they played shows the importance of the participation of civil society organizations in the projects and programmes implemented by the MDLF and the municipalities. Besides, the PCDCR has the ability to overcome many obstacles and challenges faced by citizens and municipalities in the various stages of project implementation, and it has contributed to enhancing community participation among citizens and promoting principles of social accountability.

Furthermore, the PCDCR contributed to developing and strengthening the relationship between citizens and the municipalities because in the past, the role of the municipality was limited to providing services and the role of the citizens was limited to receiving these services, but this

relationship developed and became participatory between citizens and municipalities at many levels.

Another important aspect that the PCDCR helped with is forming community accountability committees which have helped in distributing surveys, conducting trainings, and holding meetings and visits that aim at raising people's awareness about the concepts of community participation and social accountability. They have also educated people about the implemented projects and their objectives. Additionally, they have held panel discussions with the targeted municipalities. The members of these committees have also helped in handling the obstacles that might have hindered the effective implementation of the programme.

Another point of strength worth highlighting is the methodology that was used to identify the most vulnerable municipalities, the most vulnerable communities, and the needs and priorities of these communities. In Gaza, there are 25 municipalities. All of them suffer from poor infrastructure services. However, the amount of funding was not enough to cover all the needs of these municipalities. Therefore, the MDLF cooperated with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) to conduct a needs assessment to identify the most vulnerable municipalities and communities based on credible and transparent indicators, and they chose 7 municipalities and 24 vulnerable communities out of 40 to work with.

In addition, the PCDCR conducted a participatory workshop for each of the targeted municipalities in which they carried out meetings with the community representatives (women, youth, and PwDs), divided the participants into small workgroups to identify the needs and priorities of the vulnerable communities in several sectors.

This proves how the work methodology was extremely coherent with the project's main objectives and was adapted to each of the three components and expected outcomes, especially in relation to improving accountable service delivery for vulnerable communities by building citizen's capacities and raising their awareness, and in relation to strengthening accountability of the targeted municipalities toward citizens and civic groups participation in local decision-making processes.

On the other hand, it has been noted that the programme does not have a risk assessment and management plan, which originally should be developed and put in place at the design stage. The programme does not also have an emergency plan to deal with urgent situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic even though they were able to adhere to the preventative measures during the programme's implementation period.

The extent to which the logical framework was structured in terms of measuring results

The GVCD programme is aimed at achieving two key long-term development objectives to strengthen municipalities and the vulnerable communities in Gaza. The evaluation team reviewed the GVCD logical framework and found that it is designed in an evaluable manner because its objectives are clearly stated, and indicators of success at each level of the project hierarchy are well established. Most importantly, the key indicators in the log frame express what

the stakeholders are willing to define as success. Besides, the means of verification have been explicitly stated. It has also been noted that some of the indicators, whether those are quantitative or qualitative, are disaggregated by gender/sub-social groups, which is considered a strength of the log frame. Besides, a baseline survey was conducted before the initiation of the programme. Thus, the evaluation team can conclude that the log frame is results-oriented and well established in this regard.

The effect of the programme on the beneficiary communities, especially in terms of enhanced social participation and engagement, in addition to motivation to lead social change

According to the KIIs, FGDs, and desk review, the GVCD programme has had a positive impact on the beneficiary communities, especially in terms of enhanced community participation and social accountability, in addition to motivation to lead social change.

First of all, during the past 3 years, the GVCD programme was able to raise awareness and build the capacity of vulnerable communities in the 7 targeted municipalities with regard to community participation and social accountability by implementing many workshops, training sessions, public hearings, civic consultations, focus group discussions, and other tools.

One of the interviewed beneficiaries from Al-Burayj area said "the community accountability committees have drastically changed our perception and awareness about the concepts of community participation and social accountability. They have helped in increasing our willingness to contribute to the developmental efforts and have educated us about the purpose and objectives of the projects that are implemented in the area".

Second, the GVCD programme increased citizens' awareness and enhanced their capacity to assist in the maintenance and monitoring of infrastructure projects which were selected for implementation under the first component. Thus, the citizens became more informed and engaged in the social accountability process towards their municipalities, and they became more aware of their rights and duties, and how to claim their rights.

One of the interviewed beneficiaries indicated: "We are now more open about discussing our needs and concerns with the municipality, and about filing complaints to the municipality as well".

Not only this, but the programme has also empowered citizens (women, youth, PWDs) and enabled them to participate in the joint decision-making processes at the targeted municipalities, which contributed to the generalization and strengthening of the concepts of community participation & social accountability in municipal procedures.

For example, one of the citizens in Absan area said: "We feel our voices started to reach the municipalities, and the municipalities started to work on our demands".

Therefore, the targeted municipalities have become more accepting of community participation and social accountability because they realized the positive impacts on the municipality and society.

Most importantly, the programme has a very positive impact in relation to building and restoring trust between the citizens and the municipalities because it contributed to improving the language of dialogue and understanding to solve any problems between them and, as a result, reducing the number of complaints in the targeted municipalities. This means that the existing communication gaps between the two parties have minimized, and people have started to show a sense of respect and appreciation to the municipalities' efforts.

Some of the interviewed beneficiaries indicated: We are now more aware of the economic and social burden that our municipality have to handle.

Thus, people started to show a higher enthusiasm to contribute to the municipalities' developmental efforts and became encouraged to take active roles in project interventions.

Furthermore, one of the interviewees from the MDLF staff indicated that the GVCD programme succeeded in motivating citizens to lead social change.

The interviewee from the MDLF said: "people in the vulnerable communities started donating their own money to the municipality in order to improve the infrastructure in their communities. However, in the past, people did not have any kind of motivation to do such thing, and they believed that improving the infrastructure is only the job of the municipality, but now they are aware that they can be partners with the municipality to bring about positive change to their communities".

Another example of how the programme motivated citizens to lead social change is that at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many local committees have taken the responsibility to spread awareness about the preventive measures among citizens, and to sterilize public places. This proves how community members become partners with the municipality on many levels, and it also proves the great extent to which the programme has been able to achieve in terms of promoting community participation and social accountability among citizens of the targeted vulnerable communities.

The empowering effect of the programme on women, youth and vulnerable groups in the communities

Based on the desk review and the conducted interviews, the GVCD programme implemented many interventions and activities which aim at raising the awareness and building the capacities of the vulnerable groups, including women, youth and PwDs. In addition, many of the GVCD interventions aim at enhancing women and youth participation in decision making processes.

The participation of women and youth in the awareness raising workshops, the training sessions and the local committees is clear and visible. Their participation proves their enthusiasm to be active members and leaders of positive change in their communities. Besides, many women and youth from the targeted communities were highly active in developing plans, assessing the society's needs and priorities, and providing their recommendations and suggestions during the

implementation process of the programme, and many of them volunteered and contributed to the efforts directed towards increasing the effectiveness of the programme at many levels.

In general, the GVCD programme contributed to:

a) building the capacities of women and youth at many levels,
b) raising their awareness about the concepts of community participation and social accountability,
c) encouraging women and youth to participate in the decision-making processes at their municipalities, and
d) Most importantly, the programme has a very good impact on women, in particular, by developing plans and tools which aim at empowering women, and promote gender mainstreaming and gender-sensitivity throughout municipality work, which leads to consolidate the concept of gender equality in community participation and decision making.

In regards to women's participation in the programme in particular, the PCDCR contributed to increasing the participation of all groups of society, especially women, in all phases of the project. They were always keen to invite women in vulnerable communities to attend meetings, workshops and training sessions, and "the percentage of women in some of these workshops and sessions exceeded the percentage of men or was about fifty-fifty," as one of the interviewed MDLF staff stated.

For example, in the municipality of Qarara, almost all people were not aware of the concepts of community participation or social accountability; the mayor, too, was not interested in developing the municipality in these aspects at first. Some women held positions in the municipality of Qarara, but the mayor decided to keep them away from the high administrative positions because he was not convinced of the necessity of women's participation and access to decision-making positions. However, due to the efforts made by the PCDCR with the municipalities and with the citizens, this situation has completely changed. During the implementation process of the programme, the most active community committee in the municipality of Qarara was headed by a woman and she performed her duties to the fullest. Although in the beginning, she did not have any experience about the nature of the work that she had to do, because of the workshops, trainings and meetings she attended with the municipalities and in cooperation with the PCDCR, her awareness increased and she is more able to take responsibilities in relation to the committee's work with the municipalities, and she is more encouraged to communicate with men, citizens and other mayors as well.

Additionally, one of the interviewed women who was a participant in the development and community committees said:

"Being the deputy in the communal committee in my area has given me the chance to increase other women's involvement and contribution to the developmental efforts. Besides, my position as a decision maker has improved my leadership skills to a great extent".

Another interviewed woman added:

> *"Being part of this project has increased our consciousness about our rights to demand municipalities to show a higher response to our needs and concerns."*

It is important to note that women participants faced some challenges during the implementation of the programme due to the dominant culture and social restrictions in the targeted vulnerable areas, which have long limited women's participation and engagement in the social life. In some cases, for example, the male members in some of the targeted municipalities haven't been very cooperative with the female participants. They have, on multiple occasions, avoided informing female members in advance about the adjustments and changes they were planning to make, and have neglected the need for taking women's suggestions or recommendations into consideration. In another case, one of the municipalities refused to allow female committee members to visit the project's site and contribute to the effort made there. This is because of the cultural traditions that view women's engagement in the developmental efforts as unnecessary. However, the PCDCR made good contributions to the programme in order to change these widespread stereotypes about women participation by conducting many awareness raising workshops about the importance of women participation in decision making positions and in social life in general. They were able to change the traditional perceptions about women among mayors and the male members in the targeted municipalities.

The extent to which the programme succeeded in raising issues of vulnerability within the MDLF and other stakeholders

According to the interviews conducted with the MDLF staff and the key stakeholders, the evaluation team concluded that the GVCD programme succeeded to some extent in raising issues of vulnerability within the MDLF and other stakeholders.

Since the beginning of the implementation process, the MDLF has done its best to identify which of the Gazan municipalities and communities are most vulnerable, and what their needs and priorities are in order to help these communities alleviate the vulnerability and fragility they suffer from. Besides, as indicated by the conducted interviews, the SDC has expressed its willingness to direct its efforts towards enhancing the infrastructure in the vulnerable communities since the very beginning, and they have immediately started planning and working on the needed projects based on the MDLF's recommendations.

Additionally, the GIZ has also directed its efforts towards enhancing the services available for vulnerable citizens living in the marginalized areas. They have worked over the past two years on promoting the concept of social accountability, and constructing solar-powered light poles, desalination plants, and water wells in Gaza in cooperation with the MDLF.

The PCDCR has also contributed to those efforts by coordinating with any active members from the marginalized communities who have shown enough willingness and enthusiasm to participate in similar future activities/trainings.

This proves the extent to which the GVCD programme succeeded in leaving a positive impact about raising issues of vulnerability among the other stakeholders and NGOs, and how it succeeded in extending the concept of vulnerability and making it contextualized within the targeted LGUs as well. Additionally, the programme contributed to developing policy suggestions and recommendations for reducing vulnerability in the LG sector in the Gaza Strip, and making recommendations to MDLF, LGU and MoLG, civil society, and international development partners to be more effective in addressing the vulnerable groups' issues and establishing a good awareness on these issues.

However, the programme did not precisely define the concept of vulnerability, and the criteria of vulnerability were not defined from a national perspective as well, knowing that there is a lack of national definitions of vulnerability. For example, the programme was able to identify the vulnerable areas without referring to the types of vulnerabilities and their classifications. This means that the concepts of vulnerability, vulnerable areas, and vulnerable communities still depend on the orientations of the implementing body, and thus be different from a particular body to another.

Analysis of the achieved positive unintended results and impacts

It has been noted according to the interviews conducted with the stakeholders and the focus groups with some beneficiaries that the infrastructure projects and the small grants projects which contributed to improving general services in the 24 vulnerable communities had a clear positive unintended impact on the environmental level in the targeted communities. This is because the infrastructure projects and some of the small grants projects contributed to increasing the general cleanliness of the houses and roads there, and changed the lives of many beneficiaries, which ultimately resulted in improving the relationship between the vulnerable communities and targeted municipalities.

For example, the project which aimed at completing the stormwater drainage system of Road No. 5 in Abasan Al Jadedah contributed to stopping the flow of rain and its gathering in the streets and in front of citizens' homes, it also protected the residents' homes from flooding and getting polluted with rain which enhanced environmental health. Besides, the project reduced the economic costs resulting from floods in the streets or into residents' houses.

The solid waste small grant projects a) reduced the problem of waste accumulation in the streets and in front of residents' homes, b) reduced the spread of unpleasant smells by keeping the waste inside the containers until it is collected by the municipality, and c) reduced the spread of mosquitoes and flies in the streets. In general, the solid waste projects contributed to improving the environmental situation in the targeted areas, and to preserving the health of residents of these areas.

Furthermore, the desalination plant in Khirbet al-Adas- Rafah which was established to provide healthy drinking water for the residents improved the general health situation among them.

All these examples prove that the programme has a strong positive impact on the environmental level on one hand, which contributed to strengthening the relationship between the municipalities and the citizens of the targeted communities on the other hand.

Not only this, but the programme has also encouraged other CSOs and NGOs in Gaza to implement activities or to carry out programmes that help to enhance the living conditions of the citizens living in the marginalized areas. For example, some associations, including MAAN Development Centre and AISHA Association for Women and Child Protection, have contacted some municipalities and indicated their willingness to hold activities and training sessions in the targeted areas with the purpose of improving women's and youth's skills and capacities, increasing their sense of responsibility towards their community, educating them about the manner in which they can hold municipalities accountable, and increase municipalities' level of response to people's needs and problems.

Additionally, the Culture and Free Thought Association have asked one of the targeted municipalities to provide it with the names of 20-25 females living in the town with the purpose of providing them with workshops and trainings that educate them about the ways in which female violence victims can reach help and consultancy. The municipality indicated that about 40 women came forward and expressed their willingness to get involved in those trainings.

In addition, since the beginning of the road construction projects, a lot of institutions, including the Women's Health Association, the Environment Friends Society, and the Women's Programme Centre were encouraged to reach the marginalised areas to conduct some of their projects and hold training sessions there.

The extent to which the programme design allowed the programme to transcend the impact of hostilities on infrastructure and community cohesion

According to the United Nations, there has been more than $5 billion worth of damage over four wars to Gaza's homes, agriculture, industry, electricity, roads and water infrastructure. Thus, a closer look behind the staggering figure reveals the daunting challenges for any rebuilding or rehabilitation plan.

By the conducted desk review of the GVCD documents, it was obvious that the GVCD programme took into account implementing infrastructure projects and community initiatives that aim to transcend the impact of the continuous hostilities on infrastructure services. Not to mention that one of the main objectives of the programme is to improve the local services delivery and to enhance the access to infrastructure services by the vulnerable communities.

Therefore, the MDLF implemented 9 infrastructure projects, and most of them focused on constructing, rehabilitation and paving of roads/streets, and the other projects focused on reconstructing the sewage networks. For example, one of the infrastructure projects that was implemented in Khuzaa aimed to rehabilitate the destroyed infrastructure left by the 2014 war and to regulate the traffic movement of internal roads in the marginalized areas.

Sustainability

The extent to which the programmes' impacts and results were sustained? And the procedures that would ensure continuation of positive influence among beneficiary communities after the completion of the programme

For the GVCD programme, there is an indication that many of the GVCD outputs and benefits could continue after the end of the of the SDC funding. In the design as well as implementation modalities of the GVCD, the MDLF have been keen in incorporating local capacity development, national and local commitment, and the potential for replication and scaling up in many interventions.

Based on the interviews conducted with the KIIs, the targeted beneficiaries and the field visits, the evaluation team reached the following conclusions about the programme's sustainability:

In general, the GVCD programme was able to achieve sustainability on the social, economic, and environmental levels in order to meet the current needs of stakeholders. To start with the infrastructure projects, which come under Component 1 in the programme, most of the interviewed beneficiaries said that these projects are well established, and they achieved positive impacts and benefits as mentioned in the impact section. For example, the interviewed beneficiaries indicated that all projects implemented in the area will have a long lifespan, whether these are roads, drainage systems, light poles, or waste containers; they will serve the targeted vulnerable communities long-term. As one of the interviewed beneficiaries mentioned: "the road projects, in addition to the storm water drainage & sewerage network projects will have a lifespan of 30 to 50 years".

Additionally, when taking Components 2 and 3 of the programmes into consideration, it has been found that the GVCD programme achieved multidimensional sustainability. For example, on the social level, many of the interviewed beneficiaries mentioned that the programme contributed to build the local communities' capacities, increase their awareness on issues regarding community participation and social accountability, and on issues regarding the preservation of the gains of GVCD projects as well. This shows that the programme achieved the dimension of social sustainability to a good extent.

On the institutional level, the programme was able to maintain a sustainable impact on the municipal officials by building their capacities on issues related to gender responsiveness, social accountability, and community participation. This is in addition to helping them in reviewing and developing the policies, legislation and any other procedures related to the concepts of social accountability and community participation.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that the GVCD programme achieved sustainability on other levels and dimensions such as: a) on the participation level by making the community members and especially the vulnerable groups participate in almost all the processes of the programme, b) on the accountability level by enhancing the vulnerable communities' accountability towards the local service delivery and by strengthening the local authorities'

accountability toward citizens in the targeted municipalities, and c) on the transparency level by providing information to stakeholders in an open and proactive manner.

As for the procedures that ensure the continuation of positive influence among beneficiary communities, the interviewed KIIs stated that the contractor who was responsible to implement the projects under the first component in the GVCD programme has an operation and maintenance contract for one year after implementation. In addition, it was stated through the conducted interviews that the Operation and Maintenance staff at the municipalities is qualified to do any maintenance that might be needed, especially for the roads' projects, which will help in maintaining the programme's sustainability in the long term.

It is also important to mention that due to the implemented awareness-raising workshops and the training sessions, the local community in the targeted municipalities started to have the culture of maintaining the local services and started to feel more responsible about them; these feelings stem from the fact that they know these projects meet their needs and priorities, and they themselves participated in carrying out these projects at all levels since the very beginning of the implementation process.

The extent to which the civic engagement structures are resilient enough to withstand flare-ups in hostilities

According to the conducted interviews with beneficiaries from the targeted municipalities, the beneficiaries indicated that the PCDCR made a great effort to ensure that the conducted interventions and activities will respond to the ever-increasing high demand for essential services among vulnerable communities due to the continuous hostilities on the Gaza Strip. These interventions contributed to improving the basic municipal services in the targeted geographic areas, where the concentration of vulnerable communities and the suffering of denied access to services is the highest.

On one hand, most of the beneficiaries indicated that the conducted activities such as the raising awareness workshops and the training sessions about the concepts of social accountability and community participation, in addition to the infrastructure projects made the civic engagement structures resilient enough to withstand flare-ups in hostilities.

This is because people's level of awareness about their rights to demand that the municipality to respond to their needs have improved significantly, and people's level of trust in the community accountability committees have improved as well, therefore, people's willingness to bring about positive changes to their communities and to contribute to the developmental efforts during and after the hostilities have enhanced notably. Not only this, but also the municipalities started to recognize the vital role that the citizens in the targeted communities can play in the developmental efforts of the town.

On the other hand, the interviewed beneficiaries talked about the sustainable impact that the community accountability committees left on them because these committees have proven themselves to be reliable and trustworthy, and citizens can seek help from them easily, which

has helped in minimizing the existing communication gap between the municipalities and the targeted communities, and has also increased the municipality's awareness about people's needs and concerns during and after any hostilities that have happened or might happen in the future.

This proves that the civic engagement structures in the targeted vulnerable communities, due to the PCDCR efforts and the community accountability committees' efforts, will be resilient to withstand flare-ups in hostilities to a very good extent.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The program was shown to be highly relevant to the needs and priorities of the target populations and was impactful in improving the social and economic conditions of the target areas and increasing participation in decision-making at the local level. The objectives of the program remain relevant and the needs and gaps in other similar communities are many. As such, it is recommended to continue the program into subsequent phases targeting other vulnerable areas in the Gaza Strip.

- It was noted that LGUs have relatively low capacity in relation to project planning and implementation, so it is recommended that future programmes should focus on building LGUs' capacity in regards to infrastructure planning, project identification, scoping, management, and local governance through workshops and trainings to be able to satisfy future infrastructure demands.

- Women in the Gaza Strip target communities faced considerable challenges to participation in decision-making at the LGU level. It is recommended to conduct a gender audit of participating LGUs and develop gender policies that should go beyond providing theoretical workshops and training sessions related to gender.

- It is advised to create key indicators and collect data from the target communities once the projects are completed for an effective assessment of the projects performance and an improved evaluation of their effects.

- The project lacked a clear framework of measurable expected outcomes and impact indicators upon which it could be assessed. The theory of change of the project should be clearly articulated and aligned with activities and expected outcomes. In addition, the project need a more specific evaluation framework and a monitoring and evaluation plan with accompanying tools should be developed to capture the successes and challenges of the project more effectively and track change and impact over time.

Annexes

1. Context Analysis

Area C

Area C constitutes over 60 percent of the West Bank territory, where Israel retains near exclusive control, including over law enforcement, access and movement, and planning and construction. In fact, most of Area C has been allocated for the benefit of Israeli settlements or the Israeli military, at the expense of Palestinian communities, which impedes the development of adequate housing, infrastructure and livelihoods in Palestinian communities, and has significant consequences for the entire West Bank population.

As for Palestinians who live there, an estimated 300,000 Palestinians live in 532 residential areas which are partially or fully located in Area C, alongside 400,000 Israeli settlers residing in approximately 230 settlements who established their outposts without the formal approval by the Israeli authorities, but with their support. On the other hand, less than 1% of Area C is covered by a planning scheme for Palestinian communities approved by the Israeli authorities, and the Palestinian entry to, or residence in, nearly 30% of Area C is prohibited on the grounds that the area is designated as a 'firing zone' for military training. Therefore, nearly 6,200 Palestinians living in 38 communities in these areas face the risk of forcible transfer according to the statistics issued by OCHA in 2017.

In Area C, Palestinian homes, animal shelters, water cisterns, and service infrastructure which are built without permits are routinely destroyed or seized, displacing already vulnerable families and disrupting their livelihoods. Besides, humanitarian assistance provided in Area C, some of it in response to demolitions/seizures, has been also increasingly targeted in recent years. In fact, demolitions and displacement have led to entrenched poverty and increased aid dependency among residents of the affected communities. Not only this, but also the psychosocial impact of demolitions and displacement on children is disproportionly high.[5]

1- The building restrictions imposed on Area C

The restrictive planning regime applied by Israel in Area C makes it virtually impossible for Palestinians to obtain building permits, impeding the development of adequate housing, infrastructure and livelihoods. Public land, which is also called state land, has been automatically allocated to Israeli settlements or for military training, while most private Palestinian land is zoned as agricultural land, where construction is severely restricted.

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[5] https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/area_c_key_humanitarian_concerns.pdf

Thus, the Israeli policy of severely limiting and outright refusing planning permission condemns Palestinian households to perpetual cycles of home demolitions, overcrowding, and lack of infrastructure, which in turn, has led to coerced transfer as residents are simply unable to remain any longer in their communities.[6]

According to previous studies, the annual average rate of approval of applications for building permits in Area C for Palestinians stood at less than 3% between 2009 and 2016, and Israel demolished over 4,000 Palestinian-owned structures on the grounds of lack of building permits, while over 12,500 demolition orders were outstanding. However, according to information provided by the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA), fewer than four per cent of Palestinian applications for building permits in Area C were approved between 2015 and 2019, and in 2020, Palestinians were allowed to build only in less than one per cent of Area C.

It is important to note that the Israeli settlement building on occupied lands is deemed illegal under International Laws, such as International Humanitarian Law and the Fourth Geneva Convention, which means that the dual reality in Area C (as well as in other spaces of the occupied West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem) violates key components of the International Humanitarian Law, such as the Right to Equality, and Right to Self-Determination. In addition, the building restrictions imposed on Palestinians living in Area C are in violation of the Right of Property which is enshrined in Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that every person has the right to own property; and it also prohibits the arbitrary deprivation of property.[7]

2- Demolitions and displacement

In April 2018, the Israeli authorities issued Military Order 1797 (hereafter: MO 1797), which allows for the demolition of unlicensed structures in Area C deemed as 'new', within 96 hours of a removal notice being delivered. According to the Order, 'new structures' are those which an ICA inspector determines were built in the previous six months, or inhabited for less than 30 days, prior to the issuance of a removal notice.

Like the confiscation tools discussed above, MO 1797 also serves to circumvent the procedures established under the regular planning legislation, thus severely restricting the ability of Palestinians to be heard before a judicial body. According to the Order, the only means by which someone can stop a demolition is to prove that the structure has a valid building permit, or that it is not 'new'. While, in principle, affected people may challenge the demolition in an Israeli court, given the limited grounds for exceptions, as well as the narrow time frame, the likelihood of success is minimal.
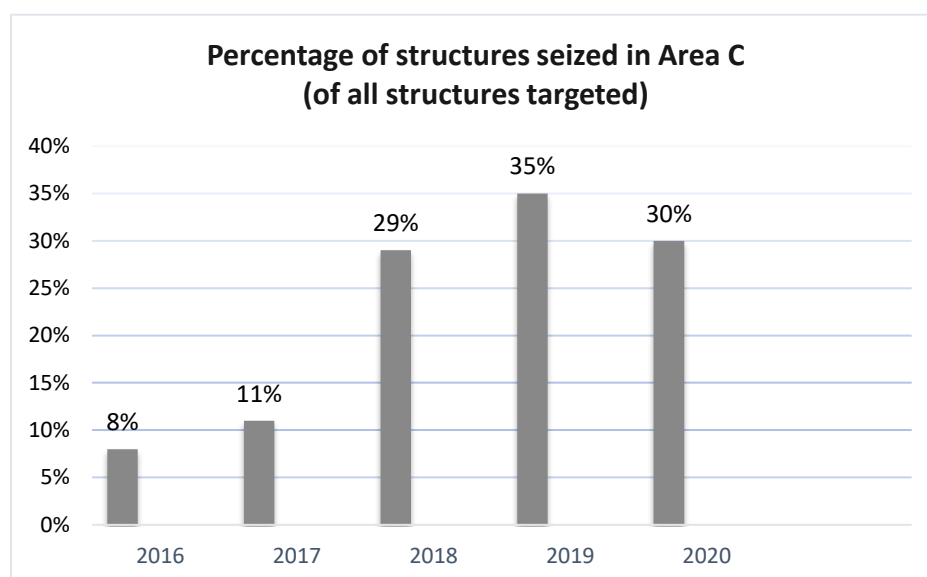
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[6]https://www.ochaopt.org/content/most-palestinian-plans-build-area-c-not-approved
[7]https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/ocha_opt_area_c_factsheet_August_2014_english.pdf

Crucially, it is not just housing/building structures which are demolished or destroyed by Occupation authorities. Other things which are demolished or destroyed include: trees, agriculture pools, irrigation networks, agriculture structures, agriculture trucks, plastic water containers, and livestock pens.

In 2020, the acceleration in demolitions and seizures took place amidst the increasing use of legislation that limits the ability of affected families and communities to challenge the targeting of their homes and sources of livelihood in Israeli courts. In addition, new military orders have enabled the Israeli authorities to circumvent the procedures enshrined in the planning legislation and execute the demolitions/seizures without, or with very short, prior notice to Palestinians in Area C.

During that year, a total of 668 structures were demolished in Area C, the highest annual number recorded with the exception of 2016, since OCHA began systematically documenting this practice in 2009. In 2021, the trend is seemingly continuing, with a total of 259 Palestinian-owned structures demolished or seized in Area C (as of 31 March), an increase of 216 per cent compared with the equivalent period in 2020. See the chart below:[8]

The destruction or confiscation of property commonly also results in the infringement of a range of human rights, including the right to an adequate standard of living, and the humanitarian impact of home demolitions has been exacerbated by the challenges posed on those trying to adhere to COVID-19 safely guidelines and for infected persons who need to isolate.

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[8] https://www.ochaopt.org/content/peak-demolitions-and-confiscations-amidst-increasing-denial-right-justice

3- Access restrictions

As for the access restrictions, such restrictions not only does prevent the movement of not only 300,000 Palestinians living in Area C into areas A and B of the West Bank, but also inside Area C itself, which is sliced up by illegal Israeli settlements and their individual security regimes. A report issued by OCHA in 2018 found that there are 705 permanent obstacles across the West Bank, many of them were placed to limit access of people and goods in and out of Area C, as well as to limit movement within Area C itself.

In addition, settlements and outposts regularly fence off large tracts of land to enable expansion, preventing herders and farmers from accessing their own lands. Herders and farmers also face access restrictions where their lands are located within "firing zones" and state-designated "Green Areas." Firing zones make up nearly 30% of Area C and are home to 6,200 Palestinians in small herding and Bedouin communities. The erection of fences around settlements, land confiscation, destruction of trees and other property, pollution hazards and violence, and other intimidation tactics by Israeli settlers/civilians prevent Palestinian access to their lands, often with the assistance of the Israeli military.

Furthermore, the influence of agriculture in the Palestinian economy has declined over time. According to Land Research Centre (LCR), the estimated share of Area C in the West Bank that is potentially cultivable is 48.8 percent. This indicated that there is a total of 394,320 acres of possibly cultivatable land in Area C. According to the report, using these dunums for agriculture aims would raise the production of Area C by USD 698 million. However, the lack of adequate water has been a long-lasting challenge for the Palestinian agriculture sector in Area C.
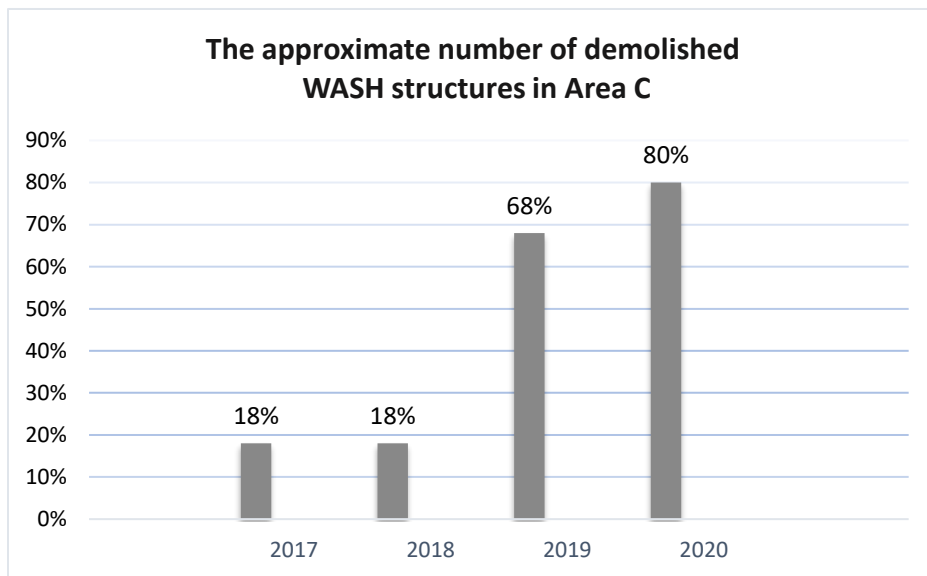
All such access restrictions imposed upon and encountered by Palestinian communities and individuals in Area C violate the Right to Freedom of Movement enshrined in International Humanitarian Law.[9]

4- Water scarcity

The problem of water scarcity is created and continued in Area C by the severe limits established by the ICA on the construction and rehabilitation of Palestinian infrastructure. These include: water cisterns, wells, sewage and water treatment/purification plants, waste disposal sites, electricity utilities and roads, public buildings such as schools and medical clinics as well as houses and agricultural structures. The chart below shows the approximate number of demolished WASH structures in Area C:[10]

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[9]https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Area%20C%20Complete%20Report%20web_FINAL.pdf
[10]https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/critical_access_to_water-the_case_of_masafer_yatta_.pdf

The approximate number of demolished WASH structures in Area C

Year	Percentage
2017	18%
2018	18%
2019	68%
2020	80%

Previous studies showed that more than 70% of the Palestinian communities located entirely or mostly in Area C are not connected to the water network and rely on tinkered water at a vastly increased cost. Water consumption in some Area C communities drops to 20% of the minimum recommended standard (20 out of 100 litres per day per capita).

As a result of lack of access to public water infrastructure, many Palestinians are forced to bring in water by truck, or to harvest rainwater. These alternative forms of supply are expensive and/or inefficient. For instance, the cost of water trucking can be six times higher than the national price of 5 NIS (1.5 USD)/m3 in Area C. According to an analysis undertaken by the WASH cluster, it is estimated that in some Palestinian communities in Area C, water represents 15 percent of household expenses.

The financial costs associated with accessing water are particularly devastating for those communities reliant upon livestock herding. For such herder communities, lack of access to water undermines their ability to maintain their livelihood, substantially increasing the risk of forcible transfer.

Lack of access to water- as well as all of the other restrictions and violations which rural vulnerable Palestinian communities in Area C face- prevents development from happening, or brings significant challenges, obstacles or insecurities to this. This is particularly the case for agriculture and herding which connect closely with both the environment and culture of Area C. On a community level, the scarcity of water further severely restricts small-scale I infrastructure projects in rural Area C communities, and upon the improvement of social and economic conditions of these marginalized Palestinian communities.[11]

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[11] https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Area%20C%20Complete%20Report%20web_FINAL.pdf

5-Settlers violence in Area C

Settler violence has long since become part of Palestinians' daily life under occupation, and especially in Area C. These violent actions range from blocking roads, throwing stones at cars and houses, raiding villages and farmland, torching fields and olive groves, and damaging crops and property to physical assault, sometimes to the point of hurling Molotov cocktails or using live fire. Further, settler violence is contributing to the lack of freedom of movement and freedom of transportation within Area C.

Israeli security forces enable these actions, which result in Palestinians casualties – injuries and fatalities – as well as damage to land and property. In some cases, Israeli settlers even serve as an armed escort to the Israeli soldiers and even join in the attacks. Investigations, if even opened, are usually closed with no action taken against perpetrators as part of an undeclared policy of leniency.

During 2018, a continuing rise in attacks by settlers against Palestinians in Area C was observed, with 265 incidents as recorded by OCHA in which Israeli settlers killed or injured Palestinians or damaged Palestinian property. This was a 69% increase from the year before. In addition, nearly 7,200 Palestinian-owned trees and more than 300 vehicles were damaged or destroyed in settler attacks at the end of 2018.

Previous studies proved that settler violence is systematic and aimed at taking over Palestinian land in order to extend the area covered by the settlements. Violence and harassment by settlers create an environment of constant fear and insecurity for Palestinian residents, especially for the children, because some of them have been attacked by settler dogs and harassed on their way to school, which led many families in Area C to leave their villages, making those who stay behind even more vulnerable.[12]

6- Access to Education

Over a third of the Palestinian communities in Area C (189 out of 532) lack a primary school and children are forced to walk or travel long distances, sometimes on foot, to reach the nearest school.

Many of these children face additional challenges on their way to school, such as the need to cross a military checkpoint, being exposed to harassment by Israeli settlers on their way to school. Families often adopt negative coping mechanisms, including withdrawing children from school, a practice particularly affecting Palestinian girls.

To cope with this situation and to complete school, children are obliged to go to schools in other villages/ cities outside Area C, and they stay there during the week, while their parents remain in

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[12]https://www.btselem.org/topic/settler_violence

the community in Area C. As a result, there is often little supervision of the children or support available to help with homework. In general, children either do not succeed at school or get homesick and want to return.[13]

7- Women in Area C

In Area C, it is noticed according to previous studies that there are fewer female-headed households, higher incidence of female early marriage and increased incidence of polygamy in certain community types and regions of Area C which may be linked to greater levels of violence and insecurity for women.

Educational attainment levels in Area C households are significantly lower, therefore, these disadvantages have a relatively higher impact on female access to education in Area C. This means that females continue to face relatively greater educational disadvantage compared to male counterparts. More than a third (36%) of females in Area C have less than five years of education compared to 28% of males there, and this climbs to 53% among women in hamlets/encampments compared to 48% among males in these community types. Similarly, only 13% of females and 16% of males in Area C have attained higher education (compared to 22% of females and 20% of males in the wider West Bank); in hamlet/encampments, higher educational achievement drops dramatically to only 5% of females and 6% of males.

As a result, women and girls age 15 and above in Area C are more likely to be in the labor force than are their female counterparts across the West Bank. Knowing that the employment opportunities for women in Area C are characterized by unwaged/low-waged work (most likely in herding/agricultural activities, including in Israeli settlements), while employment opportunities for the highly educated are far more limited than is the case for women in areas A and B. Therefore, women in Area C have heavy productive work burdens along with the domestic ones, and as indicated by previous studies, many women said that they felt stressed from having too many daily duties, and higher levels of stress were expressed by women in encampments (58%) as well as among women whose households rely on herding (65%), agriculture (57%), and poultry farming (59%) for any portion of their income.14

The Gaza Strip
The Gazan vulnerable communities

In the Gaza Strip, people are suffering as a result of the long-lasting blockade with all its negative impacts on daily life, and from recent restriction measures and cuts by the Palestinian Authority.

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[13]https://www.ochaopt.org/content/access-education-area-c-west-bank
[14]http://healthclusteropt.org/admin/file_manager/uploads/files/1/5c91e3b44a3c7.pdf

The blockade in Gaza continues to be a form of collective punishment. Palestinians in Gaza are already living with limited access to electricity, drinking water and healthcare. Covid-19 restrictions have decreased access to clean water and sanitation for almost a million people. Twenty per cent of communities in Gaza are socioeconomically vulnerable, living in substandard or overcrowded housing and lacking access to acceptable public services. Previous assessments also showed that the unemployment rates range between 60-80 percent, while many have limited access, or no rights, to social safety nets. The massive psychological and material damage, due to the last hostilities on Gaza, will take many years to address. Overall, the total number of people in need across Palestine is expected to increase in 2021.[15]

In addition, the land, sea and air closure imposed by Israel since 2007 severely restricts the movement of people and goods into and out of the Strip, with all of the resulting effects of isolation on employment, education, healthcare, commerce and social ties. The on-going division between Fatah and Hamas also compounds the impact of the closure on Gaza's population.

Recently, Gaza has witnessed a dramatic process of de-development, due to recurring cycles of violence, demographic pressures, and the closure imposed by Israel. Physical destruction during successive rounds of hostilities has impacted all aspects of personal, public, social and economic life.[16]

The access restricted areas in Gaza (ARAs)

The Israeli forces enforce a buffer zone by land and sea, the "access restricted areas" (ARAs). The access-restricted areas are justified by citing security concerns. Practically, it means that Israeli soldiers are permanently posted along the fence or at sea and they can shoot in the ARA, where thousands of farmers and fishermen yet still need to go and work there since their livelihood and that of their families depend on it. Thus 178 000 Palestinians (9% of the Gaza population) are directly affected by ARA on land and at sea.

According to COGAT, up to 100 meters from the perimeter fence is a "no go" area, and up to 200 meters there is no access for heavy machinery. Humanitarian partners in the field have reported that in practice up to 300 meters from the perimeter fence is considered by most farmers as a

[15] https://www.nrc.no/countries/middle-east/palestine/
[16] https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/632FB8A0F3D2A1918525807B00758976

"no-go" area and up to 1,000 meters a "high risk" area. By sea, the restricted area is generally 6 nautical miles (Nm), less than a third of the 20 Nm agreed under the Oslo accords.

Israeli officials say farmers are permitted to advance to a distance of about 100 meters from the border, subject to prior coordination. However, conversations with people living and working in the area reveal that people experience a sense of uncertainty and insecurity about the potential for use of lethal force.17

Access to education in the ARAs

Thirteen schools are located in the so-called ARA in Gaza. In order to reach them, children have to walk through risky areas, especially in Khuza'a, in the Khan Younis governorate, whose school is located at around 600 meters away from the fence and opposite a gate, used by the Israeli military to enter this area and conduct land levelling and other military operations.

Besides, according to communities living in the ARA, regular incursions and shelling had led to the destruction of multiple schools in various villages, preventing their children to access education. Numerous schools were heavily damaged and have hardly been rehabilitated, due to the lack of construction materials.

In addition, schools in the ARA have been directly attacked on several occasions outside armed conflicts. Communities describe schools as overcrowded and insufficient to satisfy the needs of the community, partly due to the influx of pupils from destroyed areas. Additionally, unpaved streets, stray dogs and the cost of transportation to available facilities were reported as additional obstacles to the children's right to education.

Agriculture in the ARAs

Farmers whose lands are located in the access restricted areas suffer many challenges. Most of them are not able to cultivate their lands because of a lack of financial means and due to the risk of being shot.

In fact, since the blockade on Gaza, almost all farmers' revenue has been reduced by a great percentage, and their lands got damaged during the wars in 2009, 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2021; as a result, farmers losses and debts reach up to large amounts.

Furthermore, farmers used to export their products to Saudi Arabia and Europe. However, restrictions on movement of people and goods outside of Gaza prevent them from accessing these markets.

As for Small-case businessmen and women, they are currently not eligible for Israeli trader and exit permits. Many farmers are not able to recover from their debts because their income-generating activities are extremely limited by these restrictions.18

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[17] https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/2018/12/humanitarian_needs_overview_2019-%281%29.pdf

[18] https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=9e0c129785264c35a15a0d2aff631661

Refugee Camps as marginalizes areas in Gaza

Eight recognized Palestine refugee camps span the Gaza Strip and have some of the highest population densities in the world. These are 1) Beach camp, 2) Bureij camp, 3) Deir El-Balah Camp, 4) Jabalia Camp, 5) Khan Younis Camp, 6) Maghazi camp, 7) Nuseirat camp, and 8) Rafah camp. These 8 refugee camps are considered among the most marginalized areas in the Gaza Strip.

Of the total Gaza population, refugees represent 70 per cent. The 1.4 million Palestinian refugees in Gaza, as all people in Gaza, are currently experiencing a deep socio-economic crisis, in a situation of de-development caused by both economic as well as political events. The table below shows the number of refugees in each camp:

Name of camp	Beach	Bureij	Deir El-Balah	Jabalia	Khan Younis	Maghazi	Nuseirat	Rafah camp	Total
Number of Refugees	85,628	43,330	25,569	113,990	87,816	31,329	80,194	124,304	592,16019

With the continuing restrictions on the movement of people and goods, the widespread loss of livelihoods due to the 2014 conflict, and the recent crisis resulting from PA allowance cuts and electricity shortages, the number of refugees requiring food assistance has been continuously increasing, showing an increase in poverty levels.

The restrictions on the movement of people and goods, and the dire socio-economic situation, have had serious repercussions on the psychosocial well-being of Palestine refugees in Gaza. UNRWA's Community Mental Health Programme conducted a study in May 2017 assessing the psychosocial well-being of 2,262 adult refugees and 3,142 refugee students. The study found a high level of psychosocial stress among both refugee students and adults, with almost one half of adults (48.9 per cent) experiencing poor well-being, with 63 percent of these warranting further screening for depression, and almost 30 percent of children experiencing serious difficulties.[20]

Infrastructure in Gaza

Long before the implementation of the Disengagement Plan, Gaza suffered from dilapidated infrastructure that was not developed to meet civilian needs. Though it can still be considered the occupying power, Israel not only doesn't invest directly in infrastructure, it hinders the maintenance and development of infrastructure undertaken by Palestinians, often with international assistance, by obstructing the entrance of equipment, spare parts and sometimes

[19]https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/palestinian-refugees-in-the-gaza-strip
[20]https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/humanitarian_needs_overview_2019.pdf

fuel, as well as blocking travel of individuals. Many major military operations, as well as recurring rounds of violence, wreaked havoc on fragile electrical, water and sewage infrastructure.21

As for Gazans' access to water, the existing water and sanitation infrastructure in Gaza is unable to meet the needs of its two million people and is vulnerable to political contingencies. This is the result of longstanding factors, including recurrent cycles of hostilities; restrictions on the entry of materials in the context of the Israeli blockade; impediments stemming from the internal Palestinian divide; and a shortage of electricity. The most serious consequence is the depletion of Gaza's only coastal aquifer due to over-extraction, rendering the water distributed through the network unfit for human consumption. In addition, despite the recent improvement, current sewage discharge levels into the sea remain more than double that recommended by international environmental health-standards.22

During 2021 escalations, the WASH Cluster reports that 290 water, sanitation and hygiene facilities were damaged or destroyed, including water wells, water pumping stations, and distribution networks. Wastewater and storm-water infrastructure sites were also affected. A water desalination plant in the northern Gaza Strip ceased operation due to the lack of antiscalant materials required for the desalination process affecting access to drinking water for 200,000 people.23

As for the lack of electricity in Gaza, it has had a significant negative impact on the lives of citizens, which has contributed to the worsening of the difficult humanitarian situation and the deteriorating economic conditions caused by the blockade; Such as damage to electrical equipment, increased physical cost of life, poor health of some patients, and poor mental condition.

In fact, the lack of electricity has a major impact on the daily work of citizens, such as changing the daily routine of life, according to 37.9% of citizens, changing the working hours, as 35.9% of citizens have said, and losing the source of livelihood to rely on electricity, according to 15.9%. The reduction in working hours, therefore, is the decrease in workers' wages, as 10.3% of citizens said.24

Movement restrictions on the Gazan people

Currently, only two crossings are used for pedestrian travel into and out of Gaza – Rafah, into Egypt, and Erez, into Israel. When Rafah Crossing is closed, Erez Crossing, controlled by Israel, is Gaza's only gateway to the outside world. Even when Rafah is open, Erez is the only gateway from Gaza to Israel and the West Bank, entry into which is completely controlled by Israel.

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21 https://features.gisha.org/gaza-up-close/
22 https://www.ochaopt.org/content/increased-electricity-supply-improves-access-water-and-sanitation-gaza
23 https://www.ochaopt.org/content/response-escalation-opt-situation-report-no-7-2-7-july-2021
24 https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/impact-electricity-crisis-humanitarian-living-conditions-gaza

Passage through Erez Crossing is subject to Israeli security clearance and interpretation of a narrow and fluid list of criteria for travel. Sometimes, residents who have received permits and have ostensibly been cleared for travel are still denied passage upon arrival at Erez Crossing.

Beyond routine restrictions on travel, Israel uses its control over Erez Crossing as a lever of pressure on the civilian population, sometimes shutting down the crossing entirely. For instance, Israel shut down Erez Crossing in response to weekly demonstrations that were held between March 2018 and late 2019 near the Gaza perimeter fence. It has also closed the crossing in response to rocket fire towards Israel or during military operations.

As for the Gaza-Egypt border crossing point is Rafah Crossing. In March 2020, Egypt closed the crossing in response to the coronavirus pandemic, and has opened the crossing only on a few occasions since. In April and May 2020, the crossing shut down entirely; exits to Egypt dropped to zero, and only 2,804 entries into Gaza were recorded. Even when the crossing is open more regularly, only people who meet Egypt's criteria may travel through Rafah, subject to preregistration: Gaza residents with foreign residency or passports, patients with referrals for medical treatment in Egypt, and individuals with study, work or family visitation visas for third countries. Getting permission to cross can take time and transit through the Sinai desert is arduous, and often dangerous.

Israel's policy is to forbid return to Gaza via Erez to people who exited the Strip via Rafah. Importantly, Rafah Crossing does not provide a solution for Gaza residents who need to access the West Bank and Israel, including for medical care and to visit family members who live there. Israel does not allow Gaza residents to enter the West Bank without an Israeli-issued permit, whether they cross via Israeli territory or attempt to enter the West Bank from Jordan.25

Challenges face women in the marginalized Gazan areas

Women in Gaza are forced to live at the mercy of two oppressive powers. One is the occupier, and the other is the patriarchal society that enforces violence and gender-based discrimination. Gender stereotypes are implemented in the society and, consequently, lead to the imposition of certain traditional roles that limit women's social, economic and political participation, access to education, and sometimes lead to early marriages.

When talking about the damage the occupier cause to women's lives, it becomes evident that the continuous wars on Gaza have negatively affected women's physical and psychological health. It has also increased the rates of physical and sexual abuse that's committed by men against women. It's been reported that the rates of murder and abuse against women are on the rise, and this is mainly caused by the increased levels of poverty and ignorance due to the high rates of school dropouts during the war.26

The war has also caused the problem of overcrowded houses, and has, consequently, led women to struggle with the loss of privacy and domestic violence due to the increased tension caused by

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25 https://features.gisha.org/gaza-up-close/
26https://www.mundubat.org/women-under-blockeade-in-gaza-their-struggle-to-break-down-walls/?lang=en

the presence of a huge number of family members in a small space.   Besides, it has been noted that the arrest, death, and disability of a woman's husband due to the war has led extended family members to commit acts of violence against her and to impose social restrictions that limit her ability to move freely and engage in extra-domestic productive activities.

Furthermore, the war has left the private sector stagnated, and caused high unemployment rates among young educated women. Between the years of 2007 and 2018, women's unemployment rates have risen from (29.8%) to (78.3%), and the gap between female and male unemployment rates have risen from (0.7%) to (33.8%). This indicates that women are given limited and inequal opportunities and access to the labor market.

In addition, the continuous wars have increased women's burden and forced them to assume the role of the breadwinner in the household. In Gaza, female-headed houses make up about 9% of households, and poverty is a remarkable issue among those households. According to The World Food Programme, "the prevalence of food insecurity among households headed by women is 15% higher than that among households headed by men (36% versus 21%).27

When it comes to the challenges that society forces on women, the following has been noted. First, patriarchal violence is a widespread issue facing many women in Gaza. A survey that included 517 Gazan women indicated that 23% of married women have been subjected to different types of intimate partner's violence. Furthermore, the Basque foundation Mundubat stated that among the women who survived domestic abuse in Gaza, 40% of them had been exposed to psychological abuse, 25% were subjected to physical abuse, and 15% have been victims of sexual violence.28 However, two-thirds of the victims chose to stay silent about it and considered it as a private issue, and they didn't take any actions to protect themselves in the future. This is mainly because of the social and cultural constraints that look down upon divorced women and limit their access to social and economic opportunities in life. It's also believed that women's distrust of the medical staff and social workers has played a part in their secrecy about this issue. 29Furthermore, the lack of resources available for women to support themselves and their children after divorce has forced almost all of them to endure violence and abuse that's practiced against them in the family home.30

On the economic level, the good number of women-owned enterprises that are currently emerging in Gaza might trick us to believe that the society is heading towards an empowered social and economic participation of women. Unfortunately, this is not the case in reality. The motive that usually stands behind women starting their own businesses is the need for survival, and not for growth and personal development. Furthermore, women-owned enterprises are usually faced with negative criticism and obstacles that stand in their ability to grow and flourish because of the patriarchal ideologies surrounding the traditional gender roles in the Palestinian society that have long shaped women's socio-economic participation. Those ideologies paint

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27https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/social-economic-situation-palestinian-women-2016-2018-english.pdf
28https://www.mundubat.org/the-circle-of-violence-in-gaza-testimonies-by-survivors-of-abuse/?lang=en
29https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6881945/
30https://www.mundubat.org/the-circle-of-violence-in-gaza-testimonies-by-survivors-of-abuse/?lang=en

women as mere caregivers to their husbands and children, and place constraints on women's mobility and equal access to networks, markets, education, and technology and information. Furthermore, the society makes negative judgments about women starting their own businesses since it, according to their view, affects her traditional mothering role and leads her to abandon her responsibilities towards her husband and children.31

Challenges face youths in the marginalized Gazan areas

Young Palestinians are forced to deal with the oppressive practices of both the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian government. The fear of any type of violence that might be committed against them by those two parties has deprived young Palestinians of their right of living in a safe and stable environment that would enable them to direct their energies towards improving their capacities and building a bright future for themselves. The current situation in Gaza Strip has led to the prevalence of issues such as unemployment, poverty, and high crime rates among youths. The unavailability of protection services and a legal recourse to whom young people can turn to for help, makes the idea of reaching stability in the country seem like a far-fetched dream.32

When it comes to youths' political participation, the de facto government security forces in Gaza constantly choose to take negative intervention strategies that involve threatening young people who carry out political activities and initiatives. The government places restrictions on their freedom of belief and expression, and many youths have reported getting threats of harm after they have posted about a certain political issue on social media. Because no significant political change has occurred in Palestine in the last decade, young Gazans are starting to believe that their engagement in the formal political sphere is not worthwhile since their voices won't ever be heard. As a result, it's been reported that only 57% of youths in Gaza nowadays are interested in participating in any election events.33

Despite the obstacles that stand in youth's social participation, they still manage to show enthusiasm to take part in the process of societal development, and consider themselves competent enough to be able to do so. Hence, raising awareness about the significance of valuing young people's initiatives, projects, and ideas and giving them leading roles in the community is vital.34

However, youths' fear of the challenges that are waiting for them in the future have left some of them unmotivated to move forward in their lives. Their concerns about the persistence of issues such as electricity shortage, unemployment, mobility restrictions, and lack of essential services have created a hopeless and unambitious generation. In Gaza, unemployment rates have reached 65.5% among youths, and has led to a deterioration in their mental health.

31https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Navigating-Gaza%E2%80%99s-conflict-through-women%E2%80%99s-Althalathini-Al-Dajani/c4eaebc01bedaea668abab24a15792408b93aa04
32https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018-IP-case-study-Palestine-v3.pdf
33https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018-IP-case-study-Palestine-v3.pdf
34https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Youth%20in%20Palestine%20-%20Oct%202017_0.pdf

The patriarchal society has forced specific gender roles that indicate that women's responsibility stands in taking care of children and household tasks, while men's responsibility lies in supporting their families financially. When men struggle with unemployment, they lose their supposed identity since they can't carry out their masculine role of providing for their families. This has a negative influence over their mental health, and cause them to have low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy and loss of masculinity, which in return influence their marital and familial relationships, increase the rates of intimate partner violence, and lead them to resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as drug abuse or unsafe sex.35

Furthermore, the continuous Israeli war and stressful conditions have led to the increased rates of physical, psychological, and sexual violence against youth and children inside homes, schools, and in the community in general. Youths have reported dealing with the following types of violence. First, economic violence that portrays itself in the form of the provision of low wages, unemployment, and deprivation of their economic rights. Next, school violence as students deal with the issues of name-calling and the lack of adequate attention provided by teachers. Studies have shown that over one-fifth of Gazan students aged 12-17 were exposed to psychological violence, and over 20% deal with physical violence. Thirdly, Family violence that includes mistreating children and allowing them to witness their parents' disputes. Finally, gender-based violence that includes early marriages, harassments, slander, and extortion. 36

The burden on youth with disabilities in this community is magnified, since their access to the labor force, education, and healthcare is very limited and rehabilitation services are almost non-existent. Furthermore, disabled youth are put face to face with the society that constantly stigmatizes and exploits them. It's also noted that girls with disabilities are highly vulnerable to violence and abuse from the family and community members. 37

Violations of the IHL in Gaza

In the Gaza Strip, the policies and practices of the Israeli occupation continues to show significant lack of respect for the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and International humanitarian law (IHL). This is because rockets are regularly fired, endangering Gazan civilians living in the area which results in serious violations of human rights law and IHL by all the parties, including arbitrary detention, discrimination, restrictions on freedom of expression and torture.

Besides, the Israeli occupation, including the blockade of Gaza, combined with the ongoing Palestinian division between Gaza and the West Bank, has led to the continuing erosion of respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law, as well as a perpetuation of the crisis in the Palestinian governance system.

In fact, the violations of the Israeli occupation of the rights of civilians in the Gaza Strip are represented in several manifestations, for example: the Israel's twelve-year closure of Gaza,

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[35] https://palestine.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Youth%20in%20Palestine%20-%20Oct%202017_0.pdf
[36] https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018-IP-case-study-Palestine-v3.pdf
[37] http://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018-IP-case-study-Palestine-v3.pdf

exacerbated by Egyptian restrictions on its border with Gaza, leads to limiting the access to educational, economic and other opportunities, medical care, clean water and electricity for the nearly 2 million Palestinians who live there, which made eighty percent of Gaza's population depend on humanitarian aid.

Not only this, but also the Israeli government continued to enforce severe and discriminatory restrictions on Gazans' human rights; impose sweeping restrictions on the movement of people and goods into and out of the Gaza Strip. In addition, a general travel ban excludes only what Israel calls "exceptional humanitarian cases," meaning mostly medical patients and their companions, as well as prominent businesspersons who can obtain permits, which is an illegal practice under international humanitarian law.

Another example is using live ammunition by the Israeli occupation against Gazans living near the buffer zone in situations where lesser measures could have been used, in contravention of the international human rights law standard for policing situations that lethal force be used only as a last resort to prevent an imminent threat to life.38

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[38] Based on the report issued by the "SWISS Cooperation Programme Near East 2021-2024"

2. Methodology

ABC Consulting had developed a methodology in order to comprehensively assess the programmes' objectives and impact. The methodology was sensitive to the needs and constraints of different stakeholders, protecting them from potential risk, encouraging truthful and transparent responses, and ensuring confidentiality. The methodology was gender sensitive. The evaluation team utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data ensuring in-depth analysis of status and validity of the programme's existing objectives. The research team practiced triangulation of data and document verification which ensured the quality of data collected. In order to achieve the intended objectives of this assignment, the consulting team conducted the data collection, data analysis and management using the following methodology:

1. **Team mobilization**

    The consulting team met the SDC to discuss and agree on the research methodology and action plan. The two programmes' stakeholders were mapped in this meeting.

2. **Literature and Desk Review:**
    - Primary data about the Palestinian context of in Area C and the Gaza Strip was collected through reviewing all possible references and studies.

    - Data was also collected from official websites of related ministries and NGOs, Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, previous studies and literature, Palestinian law, international agreements, and other relevant statistical data, books and publications.

    - The existing information related to the programmes was utilized to provide an in-depth analysis of status and asses the validity of the programmes' existing objectives. The MDLF documents and the programme's documents (programme's proposal, logical framework, work plans, annual budgets, and all relevant literature and references) was extensively reviewed. Furthermore, the programme's annual and semi-annual reports, sub-projects documentation, including selections criteria, bid processes, implementation plans, and any follow up actions, was also reviewed.

3. **Key Informant Interviews:**

    The evaluation team conducted interviews with SDC staff, MDLF staff, and beneficiary community members. Furthermore, local councils' staff members and representatives that have been previously engaged in the programmes' activities were also met. A number of interviews were conducted and they took round 30 minutes to 1 hour in length. During interviews, interviewees were asked open questions that promoted them to provide lengthy, detailed, and descriptive responses, and were asked to provide their perspective on a related topic.

Interviewed Individuals in the West Bank
➢ MDLF staff
➢ Local authorities (village councils / municipalities)
➢ Local committees
➢ Women in the target communities in Area C
➢ Youth in the target communities in Area C

Interviewed Individuals in the Gaza Strip
➢ MDLF staff (two people)
➢ Local authorities (4 municipalities):
➢ These are: Absan, Al-Burayj, Al-Naser & Al-Qarara
➢ NGOs: PCDCR staff (three people)
➢ Beneficiary community members
➢ Women in the target communities in Gaza

4. **Field visits** were organized by the evaluation team to a selection of targeted communities in Area C and Gaza. Those visits enabled the research team gain a direct understanding and appreciation of the two central components of the Evaluations: 1) Conditions in these vulnerable communities; 2) Projects developed by the Programmes (such as the nature, practical implementation, visible contributions and impacts).

The table below shows the distribution of field visits conducted:

Area C		
Project title	**Location**	**Sector**
Rehabilitation of Yanun Spring	Yanun	Water
Rehabilitation of Access Roads	Kirbit Um Dyouf & Jib El-Deeb	Roads
Lighting solar system	Sosya	Electricity
Kindergarten and VC yard rehabilitation works	Al-Aqaba	Public facilities
Rehabilitation of Internal Roads	Nabi Elias	Roads
Construction of Elementary School	Kisan	public facilities
Rehabilitation of Internal Roads	Shufa	Roads

Gaza		
Project title	**Location**	**Sector**
Completing the stormwater drainage system and paving of Road No. 5	Absan Al- Kabira	Roads
Construction of Al-Siraj and Wadi Al-Shuaibat Road	Al- Qarara	Roads
Paving the main road (entrance to Al-Tal Al-Akhdar) **Paving the cemetery road between the old cemetery and the Saida area**	Al-Burayj	Roads
Expansion, Levelling and Rehabilitation of Roads at Al Naser Municipality	Al- Naser	Roads

5. **Case studies**: 2 case studies were selected of two target areas that experienced positive change due to the programme. In-depth interviews were held with the beneficiaries in order to record their stories of change. These case studies have been added to the evaluation reports and presented creatively to increase the impact in the evaluation and enable voices and experiences of beneficiaries to be clearly communicated in an engaging manner.

6. **Data Analysis and Tools:**
   - The assessment used the direct open-ended research questions in the snowball approach which allows for digging in depth discussion and easy data flow and enables the researched partners and stakeholders to freely express their thoughts and viewpoints; such approach capacitates obtain the appropriate detailed feedback.
   - The collected data was analysed. Qualitative data from statistics and estimates of stakeholders were used to deepen the understanding of the impact of the implemented programmes on targeted communities. Data analysis was subjectively focused in order to provide a solid understanding of the situation and provide a solid foundation for recommendation for future planning.

3. Projects selection (Quick Engagement) with community participation

While engaging in a participatory planning process is essential to ensure relevance of the interventions, it is also critical that communities and individuals are able to view results on the grounds as soon as possible to guarantee their engagement and encourage more effective participation. The approach of quick engagement will enable community momentum in engagement, interest in the project, and build trust in the MDLF, and donor support more generally.

Gender relations and equality is a key concern in the target communities where women participation and representation in the decision-making process and the public sphere is limited. This fact impacts the relevance of decisions on local development to the needs and concerns of women in these communities. The technical assistance team shall address this issue by ensuring an active participation of women in the community planning committees both as representative from the local councils as well as on behalf of CBOs and other stakeholders in the locality.

Approach: The project shall be designed to provide a combination of different responses and "services" to answer community needs in Area C.

The Technical Assistance Team shall liaise with the focal point persons to invite the community representatives to focus groups' prioritization exercise. During the selection event, the team will explain and guide the participants through the process. During the session key information will be looked at and taken into consideration, based on needs and capacity, impact, environmental and social considerations and a cost-benefit review.

Local NGOs working with the marginalized section in the rural areas need to be included in the local development process through public opinion mobilization, design and planning process. This may gradually help to institutionalize the participatory practices in the development process. The mentioned NGOs may help in identifying the targeted participants to ensure inclusivity.

Composition of Community Planning Committees: The project shall form a planning committee and team with representation of village council members and staff, local CBO representatives of different sector experts and professional, youth, women, disabled and any active citizen interested in joining the team in each target community. The project shall develop Terms of reference for Community committees outlining scope of work and composition requirements, and to provide an orientation workshop to the formed committee. Assure that a representative cross section of the population will participate, including community leaders, women and youth representatives, and private sector representatives (taking into account the interests that landowners, tenant farmers and Bedouins may have). It's advised that a local organization take this role in engaging the local community in in the project activities.