

## Conflict Sensitivity Assessment

# International Assistance in Gaza: Aiding Fragmentation or Unity?

## A view from inside Gaza

Roland Dittli, Center for Peacebuilding KOFF / swisspeace

April 2011

An assessment mandated by

cfed – the feminist Peace Organisation,  
HEKS – Swiss Interchurch Aid,  
and the Center for Peacebuilding KOFF at swisspeace

in cooperation with PalThink for Strategic Studies, Gaza

cfed HEKS

  
PalThink  
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES  
بالثينك للدراسات الاستراتيجية  
GAZA BASED THINK AND DO TANK  
مؤسسة حوار وتفكير فلسطينية

swiss  
peace

## TABLE OF CONTENT

Executive Summary .....	1
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	4
Chapter 2: Faultline Assessment.....	6
2.1. Shrinking “neutral” middle-ground: Factional split taking further root .....	6
2.2. Dividing and weakening effects from the physical blockade.....	8
2.3. Increasing differences between Gaza and the West Bank.....	9
2.4. Alienation between institutions, factions and the general population.....	11
2.5. “Traditional” social and cultural cleavages .....	12
Chapter 3: Connectors.....	13
Chapter 4: Interactions of international assistance and Gaza faultlines .....	14
Chapter 5: Options and Recommendations.....	18
Chapter 6: Conflict sensitivity checklist: key questions for operating in Gaza .....	21
Annex .....	22
A. Findings and comments with regard to human rights and gender issues .....	22
B. Working through WB organizations as a strategy? .....	23

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this report is to contribute to a better understanding of the characteristics and dynamics of Gaza's internal lines of tensions, as well as the patterns of interactions between international assistance and the conflict context on the ground. The bulk of information gathered for this report was collected through personal interviews and focus group discussions in Gaza, including experts in the fields of international cooperation, conflict resolution and political science.

In assessing the lines of tension (faultlines) in present-day Gaza one should take into consideration the overarching elements and trends that were – and remain – instrumental in shaping social, political and economic realities of Palestinians today. As for Gazans, the dominating overarching trend is one of ever increasing fragmentation, both in political as well as physical terms.

Within this overarching trend of fragmentation four interrelated and mutually reinforcing lines of tension were analyzed in this report: the factional split between Hamas and Fatah, the dividing and weakening effects from the physical blockade, the increasing differences in many spheres between Gaza and the West Bank, and the general population's alienation from their leadership and institutions.

The cumulative effects of these factors on Gazans consist of a shrinking "neutral" middle-ground, increasing distress and pressure on the social fabric, depoliticization and at the same time an increased dependence on inside and outside power holders, and considerably weakened governmental institutions. All of this is taking a heavy toll on the physical and psychological well-being of the male and female residents of Gaza.

At the same time there are still many connecting issues and actors: Gazan society still has an immense capability of integrating different groups. There are no sharp vertical splits in this society and all interview partners stressed in their analysis that the political splits and differences are not irreversible. Due to shared values and cultural base along with a joint history and experiences of occupation and na-

tional liberation struggles, common ties are still strong. Furthermore, some civil society organizations have been instrumental in working against an increasing divide. They have pushed for joint agendas and facilitated the creation of joint committees, which have earned them to some extent the credibility of being steadfastly non-partisan.

This report finds numerous interactions between international assistance and the Gaza conflict context. Some of these interactions follow patterns well-known from other conflict contexts. International programs are, for example, felt to further weaken the social fabric by circumventing existing civil society organizations, by not involving the people enough in their programming and thus, increasing dependency on external aid. In addition to this, aid is also seen as fueling imbalances in Gaza, i.e. when salary levels are so different that jealousy is created between governmental and NGO staff.

But some patterns of interaction – arguably even more serious than the ones just described – are Gaza-specific. They are attributable to the specific context in Gaza (factional split, blockade, siege mentality, etc.) and the special approach of many international actors to it:

Following the official policy from major international actors like the US and the EU to boycott the Hamas movement, it comes as no surprise that international involvement is directly, significantly and purposely feeding into the factional split. This is, together with the physical blockade and its devastating effects, identified as the most harmful factors in the lives of Gazan men and women today. On a policy level of analysis, international involvement is also feeding into reduced accountability, corruption and militarization – factors that have been cited by analysts as considerably weakening Palestinian society from within.

Closer to the implementation level of international assistance – the actual focus of this assessment – this general policy is no less harmful. A central finding of this report is that international assistance and the way it is implemented in Gaza is often instrumental in further increasing fragmentation. The

“no-contact policy” of many actors and the vetting of partners and/or beneficiaries epitomize the dividing instead of unifying effects of international programs. From a conflict sensitivity perspective such blacklisting on political grounds is hugely harmful. These policies also reduce the effectiveness of international assistance and have led to a situation where many national strategies are actually “Gaza blind”.

International organizations are not seen to be sufficiently challenging the political framework in which they deliver their support, i.e. in challenging the Israeli system of control and fragmentation, and as such lacking too often as a political dimension. Given the evidence and feedback from practitioners and experts inside Gaza, it is clear that some of the key building blocks of current international policy and strategy towards Gaza are in stark discord with good-practice principles promoted by the OECD/DAC regarding good international involvement and statebuilding in situations of conflict and fragility.

The general main recommendation from a conflict sensitivity perspective is for every organization and intervention to check thoroughly its interaction with the main faultlines of the existing context. In present-day Gaza, these main faultlines are the Fatah-Hamas factional split, the Gaza blockade, the increasing differences between Gaza and the West Bank/East-Jerusalem, and the accountability/legitimacy crisis of the existing leadership and institutions. In other words, each intervention should check the potential of working for national unity and overcoming the factional split and its potential of reversing the trend of ever increasing fragmentation of Palestinian society. This general recommendation echoes some of the key principles for good international engagement in fragile contexts, i.e. to take the context as the starting point, and to ensure all activities do no harm.

On the level of organizations’ internal policies, organizations should clearly abolish a general no-contact policy towards the de-facto government. It should be replaced by a transparent set of criteria for engagement with both authorities, based on the

acceptance of international human rights standards and fine-tuned in a broad consultation process with local stakeholders. The practice of excluding partners and/or beneficiaries in Gaza on grounds of their political affiliation should urgently be abolished.

On the level of programming, organizations should check the size of their programs with a view of getting to a balanced resource allocation between the West Bank and Gaza. They should treat Gaza as an integral part of their strategic and programmatic planning and not as a separate entity. As such they should contribute to reducing fragmentation tendencies by establishing a strong link between their respective partners in Gaza and the West Bank in their operations. Issues of conflict sensitivity should receive a higher priority than they do now in the planning and monitoring of program interventions. This could be done by integrating the key questions of conflict sensitivity provided in section 6 of this report into their operations.

More attention and resources should be directed towards changing the key issues analyzed in this fault-line assessment which in its consequence means:

- to avoid working towards stabilizing the political status-quo in Palestine;
- not to base an intervention in Gaza on humanitarian motives alone or to implement it in a “relief mode”;
- for peacebuilding actors to take into greater consideration the political nature of the key driving issues by increasing the activities to change the above mentioned key issues;
- for development actors to take into greater consideration the political nature of the key driving issues by making better use of their existing potential and capacities to address the key issues in the sectors of their respective development work, and to proactively work towards a coordinated, complementary and coherent approach with those actors who directly aim to change the key issues that were identified to divide and weaken Palestinian society today;

- to work increasingly on issues of institutional strengthening, human rights protection, participation and accountability;
- to focus on strengthening neutral middle-ground, and on strengthening the role of civil society in bridging the factional split as well as in being a bridge between the West Bank and Gaza.

On the level of partner organizations, donors should make sure that their interventions are indeed strengthening local institutions in Gaza and do not further weaken the social fabric. They should exert caution when applying a “working through West Bank-based organizations” approach. As the context in Gaza is complex, not easy to be read for outsiders, and oftentimes not offering obvious solutions for overcoming the identified faultlines a thorough analysis and – even more importantly – dialogue with a variety of actors in Gaza is absolutely crucial. A real dialogue and partnership between donors and Gazans are necessary for international assistance to become a tool for unification, not separation.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The aim of this report is to look at the current situation in Gaza and the work of the international aid community through a conflict sensitivity lens. It should contribute to an updated understanding of the dynamics and characteristics of Gaza's internal conflict context and the patterns of interaction between international assistance and this conflict context. This report will describe the current situation in Gaza implicitly using the classic analytical categories of "dividers" and "connectors", developed by the well-established "Do No Harm" framework. It will then examine how the work of the international aid community interacts with these dividers – alternatively called "faultlines" or "lines of tensions" in this report – and connectors. Thirdly, the report will present options in the form of recommendations for ways of reducing dividing and strengthen connecting impacts of international assistance in present day Gaza.

In doing so, the report builds on the experiences and lessons learned from the international "Do No Harm" project. At least four findings from the Do No Harm project have direct relevance to donor assistance provided to the oPt:

1. "Even as international donors maintain political neutrality, aid given in conflict settings cannot and does not have a neutral impact on the conflicts where it is provided.
2. The resources provided by donors and the manner in which these resources are organized and delivered, play into and reinforce the relationships between contending groups in recipient societies.
3. In all societies, groups in contention are both 'divided' by some factors (such as contending interests, structures, histories or competition over limited resources) and 'connected' by other factors (shared interests, interdependent structures, some values, aspects of history, etc.)
4. The impacts of donor assistance on conflicts occur as the resources provided (and the systems of provision) *either* reinforce and exacerbate the dividers between groups (thus having a negative impact in that they worsen the con-

flict) *or* lessen dividers (positive impacts). Likewise, impacts are *either* negative if donors ignore, undermine and weaken the connectors *or* positive if they recognize, build on and reinforce the connectors. Experience shows that the impacts on dividers and connectors between groups in conflict are never neutral."<sup>1</sup>

The primary focus of this assessment shows the impact of international assistance on Palestinian society and the existing faultlines in Gaza. It therefore focuses on the intra-Palestinian level and takes an explicit Gaza-focus, without claiming to balance every statement and argument with "the view from the West Bank". Of course the intra-Palestinian level is only one level in a protracted and multifaceted conflict such as today's Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Reference can be made to other publications focusing more on the effects of international assistance on the conflict dynamics on the Israeli-Palestinian level.<sup>2</sup> Also, this report makes a conscious effort to quote from various interviews allowing room for opinions and experiences of those people who continue to do constructive work in the difficult and frequently frustrating environment of international cooperation in Gaza.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Mary B.: 'Do No Harm' – Reflections on the Impacts of International Assistance Provided to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, p. 2;

<http://www.miftah.org/Doc/Reports/2004/Mary%20B%20Anderson.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> cf. *ibid*; or: Le More, Anne: The international politics of aid in the occupied Palestinian territory;

<http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?id=2669>; Anne Le More, Michael Keating and Robert Lowe (2005), *Aid, Diplomacy, and Facts on the Ground: The Case of Palestine*.

This analysis is meant to inform an on-going discourse of Swiss non-governmental organizations on how to implement their activities in Gaza, and contribute to a coherent, constructive, and conflict sensitive engagement of Swiss organizations in Gaza.

The main information gathered for this report was collected in 25 personal interviews and focus group discussions in Gaza with experts in the fields of international cooperation, conflict resolution, and political science. The interviews were conducted in October 2010.

## CHAPTER 2: FAULT-LINE ASSESSMENT

"Why did you Palestinians get divided?" This was one of the questions the Elders<sup>3</sup> asked in a meeting with political analysts in Gaza. One analyst answered: "Because of our failure to achieve our national aspirations, our failure to develop, and our success in economic mismanagement." While it would be an interesting question to establish the role of international assistance and actors in all of these three issues, the focus of this chapter shall be closer to the actual context of present-day Gaza. This chapter will give an overview of the main lines of tension existing in Gaza and Palestinian society according to the experts' feedback.

In order to understand present day faultlines, it is important to acknowledge relevant historical developments and trends that were instrumental in shaping the reality of Palestinians in Gaza today. An assessment of this reality must take into consideration the dominating and continuing trend towards physical, political and societal fragmentation in the course of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. It can be argued that Palestinian political unity in recent history – at least concerning Palestinians in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza – was at its height during the first Intifada. Since then an overarching trend towards ever increasing fragmentation, both politically as well as physically, could be observed. Elements of this fragmentation process were among others: the introduction of ID cards and areas A/B/C, closing off Jerusalem for Palestinians residents from the West Bank and Gaza, settlements, checkpoints and bypass roads, the wall, etc. In Gaza, this trend included barring the workers from Israel, cancelling the planned safe-passage between Gaza and the West Bank, blocking and destroying the work implemented on the Gaza airport and sea port, and ultimately establishing a systematic blockade, which has left Gaza isolated from the rest of the world for more than three years.

Within this overarching and continuing trend of fragmentation this chapter will look at four interre-

lated and mutually reinforcing lines of tension which today divide and weaken the Palestinian society in Gaza and beyond. They are:

- the factional split between Hamas and Fatah, leading to a shrinking "neutral" middle-ground;
- the dividing and weakening effects from the physical blockade;
- increasing differences between Gaza and the West Bank;
- and the general population's alienation from their leadership and institutions.

### 2.1. Shrinking "neutral" middle-ground: Factional split taking further root

There was broad consensus among the persons interviewed in Gaza that the factional split between Fatah/PA and Hamas has become ever deeper. Several analysts stressed that the split is now often reaching down to the family level in Gaza. Together with the blockade of the Gaza strip this is seen as the most harmful divide in the current context. In other words, a Gaza without the blockade and without the factional split would be a distinctly different and much more hopeful place for its inhabitants.

As one youth representative said: "The Hamas-Fatah fight impacts more negatively on us than the Israeli occupation. It now affects even the children, so this *must* be reversed." Stories about how families inquire about the political affiliation of a potential bride/groom ahead of the engagement are well-known in Gaza. The more 'traditional faultlines' (see chapter 2.5) have been superseded by this new split tearing through Palestinian politics, institutions and society. One expert commented: "Arafat used to divide society into families. The Hamas rule now even divides the families."

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theelders.org/>

### Impact of the split on civil society and NGO legislation:

Civil Society organisations are among the victims of the factions' drive to consolidate their control over society, both in Gaza and the West Bank. The PA government "has stepped up activity, increasing surveillance in mosques and replacing entire boards of non-governmental associations with appointed committees"<sup>4</sup>. Besides replacing the board of the Zakat committees around the West Bank, the PA has also closed down some 250 institutions since June 2007.<sup>5</sup> After Abbas put forward a presidential decree regulating non-governmental organisations and charities, the interior ministry ordered the dissolution of some 150 organisations predominantly tied to Hamas, claiming they had not followed proper procedures.<sup>6</sup> The decree forced NGOs to re-register in the West Bank, and the accounts of 120 NGOs were blocked because they had board members with a suspected affiliation to Hamas.

In Gaza Hamas took similar steps to strive for more control over the big traditional NGOs. Several initiatives and attempted legislation give example of this trend:

- After the latest Gaza war Hamas and its fighting wing established a "national committee for relief" aiming at coordinating all relief efforts. When the main NGOs refused to join this committee Hamas reacted by obstructing in parts the work of NGOs. After some time a compromise was found and NGOs agreed to inform the de-facto government and to supply them with a list of beneficiaries of their projects after completion.
- Another measure to get control was a subsequent attempt to introduce a "unified financial system" for financial reporting by NGO's in Gaza; a move that could be stopped by a joint effort under the leadership of the Palestinian NGO Network (PNGO). In spite of this failed attempt, the Hamas authorities engaged in intensive auditing of some NGOs closing a number of them down on grounds of 'corruption', 'sexual abuse' or 'collaboration with Israel'.<sup>7</sup>
- The latest and most infringing legislation comes from the ministry of interior in Gaza prohibiting all people who still are on a PA Ramallah payroll to serve on an NGO board or to be a member of a NGO general assembly. Like the one in the West Bank, this move is a blatant breach of the existing NGO law, and it forces many NGOs to hold early elections.

Both factions are still competing to increase their control over as many areas of civilian, economic and political life as possible. These actions often take the form of tit-for-tat behavior with the strong view among many interviewees in Gaza that the "original sin" in this behavior is most often committed by the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah. These specific actions subsequently provoke a similar response from the de-facto government in Gaza. One example of this can be seen in the case of NGO legislation (see Box above).

As a result, moderate forces are under pressure in Gaza and the space for civil society organizations became considerably smaller. "Nowadays civil society organizations can come under pressure from the government for 'harming the social safety of society' in Gaza. Of course, 'social safety' is a term exclusively defined by Hamas along their own narrow social and political understanding."<sup>8</sup> Another expert mentioned that the "thinking in dichotomy" is

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group, Palestine Divided, December 2008, p. 12

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group, Ruling Palestine II: The West Bank Model?, p. 25

<sup>7</sup> Interview with a human rights worker in Gaza, October 2010

<sup>8</sup> Interview with civil society activist in Gaza City, October 2010.

taking root in many spheres of life in Gaza. “This is extremely unhealthy for the development of Palestinian society and shrinks the space for civil society.”

The forced closure of the Sharek Youth Forum on November 30, 2010, is a recent example of this trend. As documented by HRW<sup>9</sup> “ Hamas internal security services personnel have repeatedly summoned and questioned directors and staff members about why we allow boys and girls to play together, why some of our women employees and girl students don't wear the hijab, and sometimes asked insulting questions about whether we desire our colleagues. (...) Internal security officials told board members that four employees and directors, including the executive director, were suspected of possessing pornographic material and ‘cursing god’ but did not further identify the suspected employees or specify their alleged offences.”<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2. Dividing and weakening effects from the physical blockade

The second important divider – the blockade or siege – currently has the most destructive effects on all aspects of political, economic and social life in Gaza and constitutes a grave violation of Gazans’ individual and collective rights. No society can exist or develop in the long-term if the means for normal economic and social activity is forcefully withheld. The destructive effect this blockade has on the chances for peaceful coexistence and conflict transformation can hardly be overstated. The structural violence of the blockade has shaped an utterly unnatural situation to which Gazans are forced to adapt, with all the negative consequences regarding social, political, ecological and economic developments.

This report is not the place to comprehensively describe the negative effects of the blockade. The effects are known and have been analyzed by more specialized reports. For the purpose of this study –

<sup>9</sup> cf. <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/12/13/gaza-let-charity-aids-children-reopen-its-doors>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

to shed light on the effects of international assistance on Gazan society – it seems important to be reminded about some patterns of how Gazans were forced to adapt to the blockade:

De-politicization – Over-politicization: The forced de-development, high unemployment and absence of economic perspectives have forced most Gazans

**„Israel has managed to put our focus on trivial things.“**

to focus on meeting their daily needs. A youth representative said: “In 1994 our aspirations were on establishing a state,

building an airport etc. Now the focus of people’s thinking is on food. Israel has managed to put our focus on food, on immediate things, or – if you want – on trivial things.” People are focusing on feeding their families and not on the political struggle for national liberation, or on perfecting their professional skills. This has very negative long-term effects. “Unemployment and impoverishment have led to so many more problems inside the family, between husband and wife etc. Inter-marriage has increased because it is cheaper to marry inside the family. More children are being born but the family income to support them has dramatically decreased. Pupils leave schools early to find jobs. But there are no jobs. And thousands of students leave universities with skills they can apply nowhere in Gaza.”<sup>11</sup>

The principle of “every man/woman is the architect of his/her own fortune” clearly does not apply in the current status quo in Gaza. The unnatural situation created by the physical blockade makes normal economic activity largely impossible and therefore limits the ability of the Palestinian individual to provide for himself/herself and the immediate surroundings. The forced de-development takes a heavy toll on family structures and has led to an increasingly fragile social fabric. This situation has in turn led to an increased dependence on inside and outside power holders which again feeds into the factional split: “The factional split takes root. At the

<sup>11</sup> Focus group discussion with youth organizations in Gaza City, October 2010

community level people do start to become more extreme and fundamentalist. But often this is not the choice of the people, but they are pushed by the hardship. They need to join a party to survive”, commented one observer from an international organization.

Perversely, the blockade has also reduced the political will to solve the factional split of the

**„People are pushed by the hardship. They need to join a party to survive.“**

two factions themselves. Hamas was able to gain control over most of the economy in Gaza, something it never had before the blockade. It expanded and diversified its sources of income. Considerable sums are, for example, being collected by taxing fuel and cigarettes coming into Gaza through the tunnels. Because of the widespread smoking habit in Gaza, Hamas is collecting a sizeable amount by levying only three shekels tax per pack of cigarettes is sizeable. Other incomes stem from Hamas-affiliated charities that entered fruit production and chicken raising businesses or from collecting regular taxes. In addition to this, Hamas makes an income from the mortgages on the considerable number of property (both land and buildings) it owns. Furthermore, Hamas was able to find alternative funding for its societies and received donations from friendly governments like Qatar or Iran. Consequently, Hamas “is not in any need of funds” according to one of their representatives. The authority in Ramallah has its own sources of income, with large-scale contributions from foreign governments and international organizations. Many stories are circulating in Gaza on how PA members use the blockade for cheap political games or personal enrichment, saying that “reconstruction in Gaza will only happen if the PA is in power again”. All this contributes to a situation where many observers are of the opinion that the factions are in no rush to find a political solution to the split. As one expert said: “Our leaders don’t search hard for a solution. In their situation, they don’t have to.”

The physical blockade has deformed the economic system in such a way that it rewards those forces, which work against compromise and cooperation –

both internally and regarding Israel. The former businessmen class had an interest in good neighborly relations with Israel. But they have mostly left Gaza now to conduct business elsewhere. The “tunnel people” and their networks don’t have this interest anymore. On the contrary, their business model depends on continued tensions.

There is also a risk that new cleavages are being created by the current situation. One example is the deteriorating quality of the educational system in Gaza where the scores in UNRWA-managed schools are around 20% higher than in governmental schools today. Another example is the tunnel economy. One of the negative effects of the tunnel economy could be that its operators with their newly-gained wealth will be able to “buy their way” into the political system and consolidate their influence. One expert on economic issues said: “In 15 years these tunnel operators will become our leaders. But what leaders will these people be? What values are transported with their rise and ascent to power?”

From a long-term perspective, some analysts said that the main factors dividing and weakening Palestinian society have been corruption and militarization: “The two elements that weaken Palestinian society from the inside since the 1990’s are corruption and militarization. Also religion is always being used in a divisive way. Any intervention by internationals here in Gaza should take this into consideration but they don’t. I mean, this is why people got divided: the failure to achieve our national aspiration and to develop our economy, but instead we got corruption and factionalism.”<sup>12</sup>

### 2.3. Increasing differences between Gaza and the West Bank

The factional split and the Gaza blockade are key drivers behind a trend towards increasing differences between Gaza and the West Bank. The following factors continue to feed into such differences:

<sup>12</sup> Interview with political analysts in Gaza City, October 2010.

Loss of a national political agenda on key issues for the future of Palestine: Two years ago the international Crisis Group wrote in one of their assessments that “the goals currently pursued by the two movements are domestic and regional legitimacy, together with consolidation of territorial control – not national unity.”<sup>13</sup> Since the end of 2010, little seems to have changed in that regard. “We have lost the joint ‘political religion’ that was national independence,” a political analyst in Gaza said, “and in the absence of this unified and unifying agenda, differences continue to grow between us here and them in the West Bank.” Indeed today the differences encompass a broad range of examples, regarding institutions, economic and societal trends or different experiences and developmental trajectories.

Different institutions and societal trends: “Today we have two different

**„We have lost the joint ‘political religion’ that was national independence. “**

governments applying two different processes, hiring strategies, priorities, etc. and aiming at different goals. This has further increased fragmentation of Palestinian society,” an analyst in Gaza said. If one were to compare the current institutional set-up with the one of the “Unified National Leadership of the Uprising” during the first intifadah the ineptness of the current setting to re-establish a national political agenda becomes quite obvious.

Beyond the institutional level, people in Gaza are subjected to different societal trends, enforced by the Hamas movement: “Hamas creates a different society in Gaza. If this is not counterbalanced, then the differences between Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem will become huge, which is extremely unhealthy for Palestinian unity.”<sup>14</sup> Gazan society is traditionally more conservative than the

West Bank, but it seems that the Hamas take-over, the second intifada as well as the closure further increase a societal trend different from the West Bank. A number of specific examples underline this: “Last summer, (...) police began to patrol the beaches to ensure that men and women are dressed ‘appropriately’ – there is no written rule but a woman was punished for swimming in a T-shirt and jeans – and that unrelated men and women are not mingling. They make sure clothing stores display only modestly dressed female mannequins in their windows and (...) have enforced bans on (...) male hairdressers working in women’s hair salons. Couples walking down the street are routinely stopped, separated and questioned by plainclothes officers asking whether they’re married.”<sup>15</sup>

In personal interviews some Hamas representatives said that “now is the time for national liberation, not for Islamization” but nonetheless there exists a tendency to promote and display Islamic culture and ideology as the only real Palestinian identity.

Different experiences: While the experience of the Israeli occupation has always served as a connector in Palestinian society from a Gazan perspective, this has changed with the experience of the last war in December 2008/January 2009. There were numerous

**„The Gaza war should have brought us together as Palestinians. But this did not happen. “**

international protests and large demonstrations in solidarity with the people in Gaza.

But acts and signs of solidarity from the West Bank were weak or – in the perception of many Gazans – utterly absent. This served to increase the separation and the feeling of bitterness of many in Gaza towards the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. “The Gaza war should have brought us together as Palestinians. But this did not happen, as the two governments reacted totally different,” a political analyst said.

<sup>13</sup> International Crisis Group, Palestine Divided, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/israel-palestine/B025-palestine-divided.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a human rights activist in Gaza City, October 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch, The Danger of an Islamized Gaza, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/06/27/danger-islamized-gaza>

Today the struggle against Israeli occupation looks different in the three Palestinian areas (Gaza, West Bank and East-Jerusalem); leading again to different experiences. While Palestinians in the West Bank struggle against the wall, the settlement expansions, land grabbing and checkpoints, the focus in Jerusalem lies with fighting house demolitions and an ongoing "Judaization" of East-Jerusalem. Gazans for their part have mainly to deal with the effects of the war and the complete closure of recent years.

Different developmental trajectories: While international aid is fueling an unsustainable mini-boom in Ramallah and parts of the West Bank are experiencing some modest growth due to some easing of Israeli travel restrictions, the situation in Gaza remains extremely dire due to the physical blockade. This adds to ever growing differences between the geographic areas and further impedes the emergence of a joint political agenda. One analyst said: "Sometimes I have the impression that there is too much poverty in Gaza for a political dimension to emerge, while there is too much money in Ramallah for a political dimension to emerge".

#### 2.4. Alienation between institutions, factions and the general population

The existing governmental institutions in Gaza are considered by many to be irrelevant for solving their problems. "As Palestinians we have two Ministries of Labor but no work, we have two Ministries of Finance and no money, we have two Ministries of Education but our students are more and more non-achievers," a youth representative described his frustration. Another said: "If you have a complaint, you go to al-Mezan, not to your Legislative Council member. To tell you the truth, I don't even know where the ministry of social affairs is. What is worse, I don't have the feeling that I need to know." The existing governmental institutions have therefore been considerably weakened. As a consequence they enjoy low levels of credibility and have generally not been perceived as being accountable to the general population. One interviewee went a step further by saying that people don't feel they live in an organized state anymore. "Today we don't live in an institutional system, but

only in a community. Hamas is administrating Gaza like a group, not like a government. They tax us but don't deliver services."<sup>16</sup>

The weakness of the existing institutions is not the by-product of a general trend but was brought

**„I don't even know where the ministry of social affairs is. What is worse, I don't have the feeling that I need to know“**

about by a series of targeted steps. Authority over governmental institutions has been one central battleground in the friction

between Fatah and Hamas. One analyst said "The 'original sin' of weakening the existing institutions was committed by the Ramallah PA and with full support from the international community." They effectively paralyzed the existing institutions and forced the workforce to boycott the institutions under the new Hamas rulers. "Imagine, Ramallah paid teachers in Gaza to *stop* teaching children in Gaza, and it continues up to this very day."<sup>17</sup> Indeed the PA in Ramallah continues to pay the salary of thousands of former PA employees simply for *not* working under a Hamas-led government. At the same time people are very aware of the ongoing vetting in the West Bank of civil service employees by security organs. "The PA fired some 400 teachers considered sympathetic to Hamas (in November 2008). Moreover, promotions and judicial appointments reportedly require a positive 'security recommendation', as does, in some cases, obtaining government contracts. While those whose political loyalty is deemed suspect are refused employment, those already in the civil service can be marginalized from positions of authority."<sup>18</sup> A human rights attorney concluded that: "The (PA) government is pursuing a policy of political cleansing. If you do

<sup>16</sup> Interview with journalist in Gaza City, October 2010

<sup>17</sup> Interview with youth representative in Gaza City, October 2010

<sup>18</sup> International Crisis Group, Palestine Divided, December 2008, p. 12;

[http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/b25\\_palestine\\_divided.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/b25_palestine_divided.ashx)

not support the government politically, there is no place for you in government service.”<sup>19</sup>

One result from these developments is that “youths turn away from politics, because the parties do not fulfill their aspirations anymore.”<sup>20</sup> This disappointment with institutions and factions also applies to Hamas, which has been able to impose its authority but unable to establish itself as a true government. “Hamas did not succeed in establishing itself as the government of all Gazans. The support from outside is used by Hamas for their supporters only.”<sup>21</sup> The feeling among many Gazans was expressed by a car seller in Gaza City: “The situation today is better because we have security. But both factions are bad. None is better than the other.”

### 2.5. “Traditional” social and cultural cleavages

Sociologists most often cite three group identities which have a historical relevance in Gaza: 1. The city dwellers, people who live since Ottoman times in the cities in the Gaza area. 2. Bedouins living outside of the cities, coming from the Sinai region. 3. Refugees from 1948 coming from present-day Israel forming with around 70% the biggest group in Gaza. Under Arafat a new category emerged with the returnees from Tunis and other places. These historic group identities are still valid today, too, but virtually everybody interviewed agreed that in the current context these differences have become less important than 10 years ago. “When under pressure people take refuge in old systems and institutions for protection. Today’s pressure has decreased the options available for people, so these things can emerge again. But generally it is really a less important issue nowadays.”<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> i.e. the «Gaza Youth Breaks Out» initiative on facebook made it into international headlines, <http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/ausland/naher-osten-und-afrika/Gazas-Jugend-schreit-ihren-Frust-in-die-Welt-/story/18408804>

<sup>21</sup> Interview with journalist in Gaza City, October 2010

<sup>22</sup> Interview with sociologist in Gaza City, October 2010

According to most interviewees, all these negative developments are today still reversible but they caution: “People are now conservative but generally peaceful. Will their children still resemble them? Probably not.”<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Interview with development expert, Gaza City October 2010

## CHAPTER 3: CONNECTORS

Despite the lines of tension mentioned in the previous chapter, Gazan society still has a considerable ability to integrate different groups. No sharp vertical splits exist in society. The workers employed in Israel, for example, came from all societal groups and cultural backgrounds. The experience of occupation is still a strong connector among different groups. "The social groups existing in Gaza differed only in cultural aspects, and until today there are much more commonalities than differences."<sup>24</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, the historic divides and cleavages have become less important today. Where the PA under Arafat made active use of refugee and non-refugee group identities and the clan system, these elements today are not prevailing issues anymore from a conflict sensitivity perspective. They seem to have largely become superseded by the factional split.

All interview partners stressed in their analysis that the political splits and differences are not irreversible. Joint values and cultural base are still strong, as well as the joint history of occupation and the struggle for national liberation. A Hamas representative said: "The current split can be treated quite quickly". Another one said: "We are in general a very homogenous society. The split is reaching the families but is reversible. Ultimately it is still on the surface. And unity can be found."

Civil society organizations have been mentioned as a connecting factor, when they work to keep up frequent exchange and interactions between Gaza and the West Bank. Some of the civil society organizations are pushing for joint agendas (like the protection of human rights) and have earned the credibility of being steadfastly non-partisan in their approach towards the two governments, i.e. being equally critical of the PA Ramallah take-over of NGOs with Hamas affiliation as they advocate against restrictions imposed by the de-facto government in Gaza on NGO's with a Fatah affiliation.

The experience of setting up joint committees – often facilitated by civil society organizations – to overcome the factional divide and re-establishing cooperative patterns was mentioned as very positive. The example of the patient referral system can serve as an example of how civil society has served as connector:

"After the takeover by Hamas in Gaza the PA stopped issuing permits for allowing patients from Gaza to get treatment outside Gaza. 'No money for the killers' was cited as an argument. Hamas for its part closed the referral branch in Gaza (citing 'corruption' as reason for that). As a result, several patients died. We then started a mediation process, got the relevant people together and helped solving the issue. Today a committee accepted by both the Ramallah and Gaza authorities is operating and dealing with the cases smoothly."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Interview with sociologist in Gaza City, October 2010

<sup>25</sup> Interview with a civil society representative in Gaza City, October 2010

## CHAPTER 4: INTERACTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE AND GAZA FAULTLINES

There is an important international – or macro – level, which had a big and destructive influence on creating, shaping and sustaining today's factional split. It was official policy from major international actors like the US and the EU to boycott Hamas, which was placed on their list of terrorist organizations, in an attempt to weaken the organization and to force it to accept the preconditions set by the Quartet and Israel. Up until this very day large international organizations are exclusively working through the Ramallah government, which officially lost the general elections in 2006 not least due to the persisting corruption charges. Similarly, a disproportionately large amount of international assistance is going towards bolstering the PA's police and security/military capacities. International involvement is therefore directly, significantly and purposely feeding into the factional split as well as corruption and militarization – factors that have been cited as weakening Palestinian society from within.

The focus of this assessment report, however, lies closer to the implementation level of international assistance. The following patterns of how international assistance is being planned and/or delivered in Gaza have been cited by interview partners as being harmful:

The no-contact policy: In the wake of the violent takeover of power by Hamas in Gaza several international organi-

**„If the international community had a more convincing approach, this mess would not have happened “**

zations such as the UN system and USAID have adopted a “no-contact” policy towards Hamas. They are officially not allowed to cooperate with higher-level cadres at the ministries in Gaza. Only contacts on subordinate levels are allowed, resulting in a lack of institutional contact on strategic and policy levels. This policy is being heavily criticized by analysts and practitioners across the

board: “The no-contact policy was a really stupid thing to do. If the international community had a more convincing approach, this mess would not have happened.”<sup>26</sup> Besides deepening and sustaining the factional split, “this policy is doing harm as it distances the people involved in activities of such organizations from the reality in Gaza. Hamas is a reality; it has roots and a history here. It is not going away.”<sup>27</sup> Another development practitioner added: “Hamas is still around. People predicted that they would lose out in the elections. They didn't. Then they tried to make them disappear by

**„Hamas is a reality; it has roots and history here. It is not going away “**

launching a war, by paralyzing all government structures, and then by the physical

blockade. But Hamas is still here. What on earth is the international community waiting for?”

The no-contact policy also negatively impacts the effectiveness of international development interventions: “We are deceiving ourselves if we believe we can do our work here without the ministries. The no-contact policy hinders our work tremendously. It has led to a situation where all national strategies are ‘Gaza blind’. If you want to implement a national policy how do you imagine this can be done without working with the de-facto government?” “ said one employee of an international organization.

Organizations, which decided to avoid the “contact topic” altogether and feel they do not need a policy or opinion about this issue, were also criticized. “The position of many internationals on Hamas is not clear. This itself is doing harm. It is a big issue: how do you best engage with Hamas? It is a thin and slippery line. How do you do it and avoid strengthening Hamas' hold on power in Gaza?”

As a result of the no-contact policy or other political limitations some international actors engage in vet-

<sup>26</sup> Interview with civil society representative in Gaza, October 2010

<sup>27</sup> Interview with political analyst in Gaza City; October 2010

ting of partners or beneficiaries, i.e. selecting or excluding partners and beneficiaries based on their party affiliation. This was strongly criticized during interviews. Vetting can take different levels: Organizations like USAID are prevented from working with Hamas-affiliated organizations and also the beneficiaries of their programs are not allowed to have such affiliations. Other organizations (like the EU) are permitted to work with partners who have links to Islamic/Islamist groups, but on the level of beneficiaries there are no distinctions made. "Many international organizations refuse to make donations to organizations because of their affiliation. They don't give support to the entire population. They don't look at the vision or the aims of the organization. It is sometimes enough to have 'islamiya' in the name to be deleted from the USAID list."<sup>28</sup> This vetting epitomizes the dividing instead of unifying effects of international programs. From a conflict sensitivity perspective vetting in this form is hugely harmful.

On a different level, international programs are believed to further weaken the social fabric, mainly by circumventing existing civil society organizations, not involving the people enough in their programming and thus increasing dependency on external aid. "INGOs seem to want to go to the end-customer, side-stepping the intermediaries of the Gazan civil society organizations. This is weakening the social structure further. And it has shown that such activities too often have no political dimension." The same expert on aid coordination added: "After

**„So many organizations flooded into Gaza in crisis intervention mode. Gaza is not Darfur, we have functioning societal structures.“**

the war so many organizations flooded into Gaza in crisis intervention mode, doing their work directly with the end beneficiaries. This was bad. Gaza is not Darfur, we have functioning societal structures." This point was heard from almost all interview partners and stressed many times over. "Too

many international NGOs come to Gaza with a 100% humanitarian agenda, while our NGOs are all developmental. They come here, have no idea about the local context, recruit our well-trained staff and work directly with the end beneficiaries. This is no partnership. It weakens our local NGO structures and treats us as sub-contractors." In addition to this, aid is also seen as fueling imbalances in Gaza: "Today aid often creates imbalances; the salary levels are so different that there is jealousy created between governmental and NGO staff. The

**„They come here, have no idea about the local context, recruit our well-trained staff and work directly with the end-beneficiaries.“**

lack of coordination leads to many duplications. The interventions are often short-term and not very

strategic. We are often not encouraged to be creative. Many organizations take a technocratic approach and involve huge cumbersome 'procedures'. All of this could be solved if there was solid debate and real participation, supported by research evidence."<sup>29</sup>

International assistance is too often seen as lacking a political dimension and having priorities not aligned with local priorities, thus creating further imbalances. "The internationals focus on little things, like getting things across the border crossings, and not on what they actually should focus on: Ending the occupation, lifting the siege and giving the dignity back to the Palestinian people." Another aid practitioner complained: "Donors still focus on hardware, the easy to touch or – on the other side – on sensitization and awareness workshops. We conducted so many sensitization workshops, skills trainings etc. But people cannot put the learned things into practice. The context does not allow for it. So it's all for nothing. We need most help from you in changing this context. But there is a feeling that we don't get that. Tony Blair is discussing a sewage project with the Israelis, and not the West Bank Gaza safe passage."

<sup>28</sup> Interview with ministry official in Gaza City, October 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with sociologist in Gaza City, October 2010

International organizations are not challenging the framework enough in which they deliver their support, i.e. in challenging the Israeli system of control and fragmentation. Despite the many international calls to lift the blockade, not enough is done in practice to challenge the blockade. The international community is indeed adhering to the blockade. It is accepted practice that everybody has to liaise, coordinate, seek permission, etc. of Israel or Egypt for everything and everybody seeking to enter Gaza. "The world is discussing the entry of single items. ECHO wants to bring a container of something into Gaza and this keeps everyone busy for a full week. This is bad and should stop."<sup>30</sup> There is a feeling that there is little coordinated action by bilateral or multilateral organizations, so most organizations seem to submit themselves grudgingly to the Israeli system of permits and coordination.

Local priorities in aid are not easy to assess. Different people/organizations have different opinions on that issue. However, it was striking how often interviewed persons questioned the focus of international assistance in Gaza. "Aid often does not fulfill the central need of the Palestinian people in Gaza," one expert said. A central demand voiced by many is that international actors should stop focusing on humanitarian issues. "It was Israel that adopted a humanitarian approach to Gaza, declaring it a hostile territory and saying 'but we will not let them starve'. And the international community followed, talking about daily calorie and dietary needs."<sup>31</sup>

It is beyond the scope of a "conflict sensitivity assessment" to produce a fact-based assessment of what the "real" priorities of Gaza are. Some suggestions that were mentioned by more than one in-

<sup>30</sup> Interview with development expert, Gaza City, October 2010

<sup>31</sup> Interview with development expert, Gaza City, October 2010

**„Aid often does not fulfill the central need of the Palestinian people in Gaza.“**

interviewee are listed in the next chapters. Needless to say, there was no disagreement that job creation, health, education, and human rights protection are a priority for Gazans. The opinions were more mixed about women's rights and psychosocial support, areas in which Swiss organizations are quite active. The same is true for democratization but this cannot come as a surprise after the way the international community dealt with the results of the democratic Palestinian general elections of 2006. The international community has for this obvious reason a big credibility problem, if it engages in "democratization" projects.

The lack of agreement on the issue of priorities is probably also a sign of insufficient coordination. With the de-facto government in Gaza being sidelined by major donors, the task of coordination is left for the donors themselves to be fulfilled. This arrangement does – not surprisingly – not seem to be working very well. As a result "people see it as very strange that sometimes support of international donors is going to organizations that are corrupt and have non-relevant topics."<sup>32</sup> A Hamas representative commented: "Internationals focus sometimes on marginal or theoretical issues. Democracy, culture and the like are important, but they are not the Nr.1 priority. So, internationals often have different priority areas."

If all these points are put together and cross checked with the standards set by the OECD/DAC,<sup>33</sup> quite fundamental weaknesses and gaps become apparent. Given the evidence and feedback from practitioners and experts inside Gaza, it is clear that some of the key building blocks of current interna-

<sup>32</sup> Interview with development expert, Gaza City, October 2010

<sup>33</sup> i.e. the OECD/DAC's "Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States" [http://www.oecd.org/document/46/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_336\\_93550\\_35233262\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/46/0,3343,en_2649_336_93550_35233262_1_1_1_1,00.html), or the recent DAC policy guidance on "Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility", [http://www.oecd.org/document/12/0,3746,en\\_2649\\_337\\_21\\_46623180\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/12/0,3746,en_2649_337_21_46623180_1_1_1_1,00.html)

tional policy and strategy towards Gaza are in stark discord with good-practice principles promoted by the OECD, i.e. to:

- Take context as the starting point;
- Ensure all activities do no harm;
- Focus on state-building as the central objective;
- Promote non-discrimination as a basis for inclusive and stable societies.

While the international community is clearly not engaged in statebuilding in Gaza, this issue remains a central focus of its support in the West Bank. Again comparing current involvement in Palestine with the accepted good-practice standards of statebuilding in situations of conflict and fragility yields similarly bleak results. It is hard to claim that the international community is in Gaza “looking for opportunities to promote inclusive political settlements and political processes that strengthen state-society interaction and accountability at all levels”<sup>34</sup> or that it is seriously “identifying the underlying causes of violent conflict and fragility, as well as factors that can build peace, and supporting local conflict management and resolution mechanisms.”<sup>35</sup>

And what about the Swiss? It should be mentioned here that the feedback regarding the role and reputation of Switzerland was generally positive. “Swiss organizations have a high credibility here in Gaza,” one human rights activist said. This was on the one hand attributed to the well-known fact that Switzerland and Swiss organizations are not involved in vetting, the no-contact policy or setting other undue political restrictions to their interventions. This fact was also positively acknowledged by the Ministry of Interior: “It is important to work with everybody. When coming to work in Gaza, this is hugely important. We need the Swiss to be different. To work with everybody and to know the priorities within each sector.” On the other hand this can

probably also be attributed to the constant and solid work of SDC and the more recent political engagement of PD IV. Swiss engagement is, therefore, considerably more in line with the OECD principles and policy guidance for good engagement in fragile contexts. The activities of Swiss NGOs in Gaza were largely unknown by the persons interviewed for this report. They have no or a very limited visibility beyond the group of actual partner organizations.

<sup>34</sup> DAC policy guidance on “Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility”, p.13.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

## CHAPTER 5: OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The general main recommendation from a conflict sensitivity perspective is for every organization and intervention to thoroughly check its interaction with the main faultlines of the existing context. In present-day Gaza, these faultlines are the Fatah-Hamas factional split, the Gaza blockade, the increasing differences between Gaza and the West Bank/East-Jerusalem, and the accountability/legitimacy crisis of the existing leadership and institutions. In other words, each intervention should assess its potential of working for national unity and overcoming the factional split, and its potential of reversing the trend of increasing fragmentation of the Palestinian society. The following recommendations spell out in more detail what international actors should take into consideration when planning and implementing interventions in Gaza in a conflict-sensitive way:

### On the level of organizations' internal policies:

1. Organizations should clearly abolish a general no-contact policy towards the de-facto government. It should be replaced by a transparent set of criteria for engagement with both authorities. These criteria should be based on the acceptance of international human rights standards and be fine-tuned in a broad consultation process with local stakeholders. Civil society actors should, therefore, be heavily involved in defining "principles and criteria of engagement with Palestinian authorities" for international actors.
2. The practice of excluding partners and/or beneficiaries in Gaza on grounds of their political affiliation should be abolished.

### On the level of programming:

3. On a general note international actors should take more into consideration the standards and policy guidance developed by the OECD/DAC for good international engagement in situations of conflict and fragility. If those standards were to be taken seriously, it would mean quite drastic changes in intervention design – or

even the complete shutdown of activities – of some important international actors.

4. Organizations should check the size of their programs with the goal of reaching a balanced resource allocation between the West Bank and Gaza. While the West Bank is bigger in terms of territory and population size, international actors should take into consideration that the need in Gaza in many sectors is bigger. Furthermore, the feeling of relative deprivation and marginalization, further enhanced by the blockade and the political boycott, is considerably higher in Gaza.
5. Organizations should ensure that Gaza is being treated as an integral part of their strategic and programmatic planning and not as a separate entity. As such, they should contribute to reducing fragmentation tendencies by establishing a strong link between their respective partners in Gaza and the West Bank in their operations.
6. International actors should give high priority to issues of conflict sensitivity in the planning and monitoring of their interventions. This does not yet seem to be sufficiently the case today in the highly polarized context of Gaza. Organizations should, therefore, mitigate the considerable risk of inadvertently feeding into existing faultlines by integrating into their operations the key questions of conflict sensitivity provided in the next section.
7. More attention and resources should be directed towards changing the key issues analyzed in this fault-line assessment, i.e. the factional split, the Gaza blockade, the increasing differences between Gaza and the West Bank, and the institutional/leadership crisis. This recommendation has implications on several levels and consequently means:
  - to avoid working towards stabilizing the political status-quo in Palestine, based on the understanding that the current situation is untenable and harmful to Palestinian society;
  - not to base an intervention in Gaza on humanitarian motives alone or to implement it in a "relief mode";

- for peacebuilding actors to take into greater consideration the political nature of the key driving issues by increasing the activities to change the above mentioned key issues. Organizations should check their strategies and funding allocation to ensure that these crucial elements receive the attention they require. First priority is ending the existing blockade. As one development expert said: "Well the strategy is pretty clear and straightforward: Give the people in Gaza space to breathe. They need some respite. But this is dependent on the Israeli blockade. If they open the door, we get this breath. If not, not";
  - for development actors to take into greater consideration the political nature of the key driving issues by making better use of their existing potential and capacities to address the key issues in the sectors of their respective development work. Furthermore, they should proactively work towards a coordinated, complementary and coherent approach with those actors who directly aim to change the key issues that were identified as dividing and weakening Palestinian society today.
  - to work increasingly on issues of institutional strengthening, human rights protection, participation and accountability.
8. From a conflict-sensitivity perspective, interventions should focus on strengthening the neutral middle-ground, and working against all sorts of political instrumentalization from the two factions. Neither the aims/focus of the intervention nor the way it is implemented should be seen as favoring one faction over the other. This recommendation is, of course, not Gaza-specific, but should – from a conflict sensitivity viewpoint – be applied to the overall strategy and involvement in all of Palestine.
  9. A stronger focus should be put on strengthening the role of civil society in bridging the factional split as well as in being a bridge between the West Bank and Gaza. The argument is that larger population segments/groups must be enabled to engage in the reconciliation and na-

tional unity debate. The population must be "brought back into the picture" to ensure that an eventual political agreement between Fatah and Hamas is followed by "real" reconciliation and that the factions can again be held accountable to the *national* – and not factional – interests of the Palestinian people.

#### On the level of partner organizations:

10. Donors should make sure that their interventions are indeed strengthening local institutions in Gaza and do not further weaken the social fabric. For this to happen, it is important to take a long-term approach and engage in a real partnership with existing organizations. Donors should not become direct implementers and not go directly to the end beneficiaries<sup>36</sup>.
11. Because the context in Gaza is fragile, not easy to be read for outsiders, and oftentimes not offering obvious solutions for overcoming the identified faultlines a thorough analysis and – even more importantly – dialogue with a variety of actors in Gaza is absolutely crucial. A real dialogue and partnership between donors and Gazans is necessary for international assistance to become a tool for unification, not separation.

In line with the focus of this assessment report, these formulated recommendations are mainly targeted towards international peacebuilding and development organizations active in Palestine. However, the identified key issues are difficult to be solved without the involvement of an active Palestinian civil society. Therefore the report concludes this chapter with a recommendation to civil society in Gaza:

---

<sup>36</sup> See PNGO statement 'Preserving the Palestinian social cohesion and insuring Sustainable development': "Palestinian NGOs while looking for strengthening partnerships with international agencies believe that the role of those agencies is to facilitate and support the local structures and not turn into direct implementers of projects", December 3, 2008;

<http://www.pngo.net/statements.asp?fi=44>

12. Civil society actors in Gaza should work together to create a platform, a common understanding and guidelines to be in a better position to:
- advise international actors on how to deal with the difficult issues of factionalism and conflict sensitive engagement;
  - to advise international actors on how to engage with the two factions;
  - limit the negative effects stemming from misguided international policies on their society;
  - credibly denounce factionalism and blacklisting in all forms and by all actors - international actors with a political agenda, de-facto government, Ramallah authority, etc.;
  - be bridge-builders in Gaza and beyond.

## CHAPTER 6: CONFLICT SENSITIVITY CHECKLIST: KEY QUESTIONS FOR OPERATING IN GAZA

The following list of questions can help organizations gauge their risk of inadvertently deepening existing divisions and their potential for strengthening connectors in the context of Gaza – in short: to work in a conflict-sensitive manner:

### On the level of organizations' internal policies:

1. Do we have policies or routines in place that question our credibility of being non-partisan vis-à-vis the internal factional split?
2. How do our vision, aims and value base position us in the local (conflict) context? What particular steps are needed in order to be transparent about our motives and to off-set potentially false perceptions by actors on the ground?
3. What is the analytical base of our intervention and project design? Did a large-enough spectrum of views/groups feed into this analysis? Does the analysis give clear enough guidance on local priorities? Does it contain a conflict and conflict-sensitivity analysis?

### On the level of programming:

4. To what extent does our intervention adhere to the principles for good international engagement in situations of conflict and fragility?
5. Do we support a disproportionately larger program in the West Bank than in Gaza or treat the two territories differently?
6. How will our intervention contribute to building bridges across the factional divide and between Gaza and the West Bank? How will it contribute to national unity?
7. How will our project be able to strengthen the middle-ground and create space for all elements of society to voice their opinions and needs in a non-confrontational way?
8. How do the intervention sectors and the specific areas of our support align with priorities set by the authorities and partners?
9. What are the risks that we are unintentionally contributing to further fragmentation?

10. How does our intervention link to and support activities to change the political aspects and key conflict/context issues like the blockade and the factional split? How coherent, coordinated, and complementary is our intervention with those activities?

### On the level of partner organizations:

11. How do the partner organizations of our program perceive their role and position vis-à-vis the two political factions or in addressing the key issues that weaken and divide Palestinians?
12. How are the partner organizations perceived by the factions?
13. In what ways will our partner organization be left strengthened at the end of our intervention?

## ANNEX

## A. Findings and comments with regard to human rights and gender issues

There was a special interest by Swiss non-governmental organizations to look in more detail into the specific risks and potentials of working on human rights and gender issues.

In regard to human rights the basic finding is that it is - almost indisputably – considered to be a good, relevant and needed area for supporting civil society organizations. The main criteria is that these organizations must be credible, also in the sense that they do not just criticize the Hamas government in Gaza for their abuses, but equally – and on the same level and issues – the Ramallah PA. If they are being perceived to be honest and non-partisan advocates for human rights, their role will be respected, also by moderate Hamas representatives: “Some civil society organizations did good work in HR protection and fostering a democratic culture. What they would need is more unity, for example in fighting political arrests in both areas”. From a conflict-sensitivity perspective this field has clear potential to work against the factional and geographic divide, strengthen the neutral middle-ground, support the increased involvement of civil society in a potential bridge-building function and to hold both factions/governments accountable to existing rules and legislation.

According to some interviewees the human rights situation has deteriorated to an unprecedented level, with the majority of abuses targeting Fatah affiliates. One human rights activist mentioned:

**„Public order has improved, but respect for human rights has decreased. This cannot work in the long run**

“Public order has improved, but respect for human rights has decreased. This cannot work in the long run”. Another expert described the situation like this: “In the early days of the Hamas take-over, you couldn’t talk. But now everybody talks. In general I would say that you are safe here in Gaza as long you are not active (in a political sense). If you be-

come active, you will soon feel the pressure and the risks”.

With regard to the empowerment of women and gender aspects, the results are more mixed. To some it may not come as a surprise that the de-facto Ministry of the Interior gives, for example, agriculture a higher priority than women’s empowerment. “Some organizations implement projects against our Islamic rules and traditions, like many so-called gender projects. Such projects seem to receive a huge amount of funds.” It can also be mentioned that not only interviewees with a Hamas affiliation were of the opinion, that gender projects received a disproportionate amount of attention by international donors. However, this view is not shared by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in Gaza and other more specialized organizations.

What is clear is that the situation for women has become more and more difficult in Gaza. The dominating trends and factors (de-development, unemployment, factional divide, etc.) “coalesce to put a lot of pressure on women.”<sup>37</sup> They are faced with increased responsibilities and violence inside the family. And outside of the family there is a lot of social pressure or even an atmosphere of fear to behave “in appropriate ways”. “Our society now behaves like a big family. Many men feel they have a right to tell me what I should do and how I should behave, that I should not sit next to the taxi driver, etc.”<sup>38</sup>

At the same time the assessment of what the challenges are in this particular field, were surprisingly similar. Representatives from the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and from international organizations both stressed that one of the biggest challenges is to *realize* women’s rights. “We are good in awareness-raising but we struggle with realizing the rights. But change should not stop at the aware-

<sup>37</sup> Interview with representative of an international organization, Gaza City, October 2010

<sup>38</sup> Interview with women activist, Gaza City, October 2010

ness level.”<sup>39</sup> “We are focusing on awareness raising and on pressure campaigns to realize the rights. We do this because we know that awareness-raising is not enough.”<sup>40</sup>

One result of the assessment is that interventions with a focus on women’s empowerment or gender bear a higher risk of unintentionally doing harm from a conflict sensitivity perspective if not implemented carefully. It is easy to see proponents as well as opponents of such projects through a simplifying lens of stereotypes about the other, which leads to thinking in terms of “us” and “them” and increasing dichotomies. One practitioner in the field of women’s empowerment said that: “On women’s issues we do really come from different planets. Working together with all in this one ministry (of Women Affairs) will really be difficult. When you don’t admit the gender bias in this society you don’t get anywhere. But we are really deluding ourselves if we think we can work without the ministries.”<sup>41</sup> This summarizes well the particular challenge in this field: to find a pragmatic middle-ground between actors with differences in important basic tenets, starting points and worldviews. But the ministry welcomes the work and the presence of international organizations in this area: “Women might distrust if a donor gives funds only to one organization. It is better to spread more widely. But basically this must be talked about between donors, the organizations and the beneficiaries. The ministry does not need to enter into that. If Swiss organizations want to work in this field in Gaza, they should make a good study first, an analysis of the needs of society. The government has a national strategic plan. If they fit into this plan, this would be even better.”

When working on gender-related issues in Gaza, it is particularly important to consult widely, to be

<sup>39</sup> Interview with representative of an international organization, Gaza City, October 2010

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Ministry of Women Affairs representatives, Gaza City, October 2010

<sup>41</sup> Interview with representative of an international organization, Gaza City, October 2010

transparent about aims and motives, to undertake an extra effort to find allies also from the other “planet”, and to implement the activities in a way that increases neutral middle-ground and decreases friction.

## B. Working through WB organizations as a strategy?

What are the potentials and risks for Swiss non-governmental organizations of working through West Bank-based Palestinian organizations or of focusing on strengthening ties between Gaza- and West Bank-based organizations?

The potentials lie quite obviously in the theme of increased Gaza-West Bank-East-Jerusalem cooperation. As mentioned in previous chapters of this report the bridges and links between these geographic areas should be strengthened in order to counter the overarching fragmentation trends. Non-governmental organizations can be one of these bridges, and indeed they should be further strengthened and enabled to play that role.

The risks concern mostly the “how” of such cooperation strategies. In other words, working more through West Bank-based organizations must be done in the right way. Donors should be aware that such a strategy of engagement bears the risk of feeding into already quite pronounced feelings of relative deprivation among Gazans. Even if working through organizations that have branches both in the West Bank and Gaza, people are well-aware of the oftentimes substantial differences in funding levels for the two branches. “Look at the buildings and the equipment. The Shareq headquarter in Ramallah is almost a palace. Look how their offices are here, or PNGO’s office, etc.” one civil society representative said. In that sense people stressed the importance that such a strategy would have to ensure that decision making is *not* channeled through the West Bank with the Gaza branch ending up as being a sort of junior partner in the project. Donors must be aware of the existing narrative in Gaza that the “West Bank is profiting from our suffering”. Donors should, therefore, be sensitive not to feed into this “dividing” narrative, i.e. by ensuring that both branches are on par and on the

same level in all aspects of decision making. Therefore, this report advises organizations to exert extreme caution when applying a “working through West Bank-based organizations” approach.

It is also likely that one could be perceived as favoring one faction over the other. One representative from a ministry said: “Be aware that if you work through West Bank organizations, they will be of one color only. Gaza organizations can’t leave and establish international relations. To me it seems important that donors expand their base here in Gaza itself.”