



A Paper on the Situation of Education in Palestine under the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Table of Abbreviations

#	Full Name	Acronym
1	Coronavirus Disease 2019	Covid-19
2	Ministry of Education	MoE
3	Civil Society Organisations	CSOs
4	National Response Plan	NRP
5	World Health Organization	WHO
6	International Monetary Fund	IMF
7	Palestinian National Authority	PNA
8	International NGOs	INGOs
9	Teacher Creativity Center	TCC
10	Partners in Sustainable Development	PSD
11	Palestinian Vision Association	PalVision
12	Mothers' School Society	MSS
13	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene	WASH

Executive Summary



The coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) first arrived in Palestine in March 2020, leading to the declaration of a state of emergency and a comprehensive government response that led to the disruption of Palestinian daily life and impacted access to basic rights and fundamental freedoms. This came with the view of avoiding a public health emergency that the government knew that the health system in Palestine could not endure following the experiences of advanced countries, such as Italy and Spain. This paper seeks to explore the situation of education under the Covid-19 state of emergency through the perspectives of the Ministry of Education (MoE), civil society organisations (CSOs) and donors.

The paper covers three main areas; the overall impact of Covid-19 on situation of education in Palestine, an assessment of government and MoE response and the way forward. The first area covers both the MoE, wider government and CSOs. In terms of the MoE, the changes in the priorities of the Ministry were explored and highlighted through comparing priorities of the Ministry before and during the first and second waves of the pandemic, as well as their relationship with their primary donors. The changes in the priorities of the government focused on financial expenditure on education before and during the crisis, and demonstrated that developmental expenditure decreased by 43% during January-May 2020 compared to the January-May average of 2019, and by 27% compared to the January-May average of 2018. With respect to CSOs, the arrival of the pandemic forced them to reconfigure their projects and activities and move to more virtual implementation. Additionally, several CSOs experienced funding restrictions in terms of payment of salaries of supporting cadre and in terms of securing funding to continue to implement their programmes.

With respect to the assessment of government and MoE response, this section covered the achievements of the MoE and development of the NRP and its main strengths and gaps. The achievements of the MoE should not be negated as the Ministry led the completion of the end-of-year examinations and responded responsibly to the outbreak of the virus in certain areas during the examinations and thereafter in the resumption of the academic year for senior students. Another major achievement is the quick finalisation and release of the National Response Plan (NRP) and successful engagement with the donors, such that funds reallocation and commitment of new funds went smoothly and efficiently.

With respect to the development of the NRP, the process was not inclusive nor participatory and was undertaken jointly between the MoE and donors. This meant the exclusion of CSOs, schools and parents and led to a lack of complementarity in implementation and provision of support in the vast majority of cases. This reflects a centralised mode of decision-making and lack of participatory approach on the side of the MoE. Nonetheless, the strengths of the NRP include that it is comprehensive and seeks to integrate creative aspects. Notwithstanding, major gaps require consideration and addressing to mitigate impact of the crisis on education. The major gaps and weaknesses include the financing of the plan, the lack of vision on distance learning and its restriction to electronic learning, the neglect of gender and disability needs as well as the early childhood sector and the absence of a crisis management protocol.

Accordingly, short-term immediate priorities should include the adoption of a participatory and inclusive approach in planning and implementation, addressing the neglect of early childhood sector and vulnerable social groups and primarily disability and gender needs, the bridging of the knowledge gap, the development of a distance learning vision and decentralisation of decision-making. Long-term priorities sought to consider the type of educational system in Palestine and public expenditure priorities, focusing on opportunities provided by concurrent and non-concurrent distance learning and the reform of the taxation system and social spending policies, envisaging the roles of the different actors and primarily CSOs.

Introduction



Covid-19 first appeared in December 2019,¹ and was declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO) a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020² and a pandemic on March 11, 2020.³ Until August 22, 2020 the total number of confirmed Covid-19 cases reached 22,812,491 cases in 216 countries, areas or territories, and the number of deaths reached 795,132.⁴

The uncontrolled spread of the pandemic led to the collapse of solid national healthcare systems in “developed countries”, such that, as of August 22, 2020, the mortality rate in Italy, UK and Belgium stood at 13.8%, 12.8% and 12.4% compared to the global average of 3.5%.⁵ The rapid spread of the virus and high mortality rates led national governments at the global stage to adopt, to varying degrees, preventative policies that restricted freedom of movement. This included the closure of schools and academic institutions, which naturally impacted the right to education. During the peak of the pandemic, and specifically on April 25, 2020, the total number of affected learners reached 1,568,452,265 learners, which amounts to 89.6% of total enrolled learners in 185 country-wide closures. As of August 2, 2020, with many countries witnessing a containment of the virus, the total number of affected learners dropped to 1,058,824,335, which amounts to 60.5% of all enrolled learners in 106 country-wide closures.⁶

With Covid-19's arrival in Palestine, the Government adopted a comprehensive response including strict preventative measures. On March 5, 2020 President Abbas declared a state of emergency and the PNA established Governorate level emergency management teams led by the Ministry of Health and comprising the Interior, National Economy, Social Development and Education Ministries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was coordinating with the central team to bring back Palestinians from abroad. This enabled a holistic response that minimised the impact of restrictions on Palestinian daily life. Among the preventative measures taken included the placement of Bethlehem and some other villages and towns under lockdown and the closure of all schools and educational institutions. In total, this refers to the closure of 3,037 schools⁷ and the suspension of regular academic study for 1,282,054 students.⁸

The aforementioned indicators at the global and national levels reveal the fragility of the social protection systems worldwide in terms of provision of quality healthcare, education and social security systems to all. This is primarily due to the neoliberal policies that emerged in the 1970s and their subsequent world-wide domination and associated free market economics since the fall of the Soviet Union, manifesting in the severe under investment in social policy, primarily education and healthcare.

Furthermore, the domination of neoliberal policies translated into a steep increase of gross public debt to local banks, international organisations, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), governments and local and international private investors. IMF data reveals that the percentage of gross public debt to the gross domestic product in Sudan reaches an unrivalled 295.3%. The percentages in “developed” countries are also astounding, with percentage of gross public debt to gross domestic product standing at 251.9% in Japan, 200.75% in Greece, 131.07% in the USA. The severity of the situation has led to a classification where only a percentage of gross public debt to gross domestic product that is higher than 75% is classified as dangerous, and the designation of a range of 50-75% as medium, 25-50% as low and below 25% as good.⁹

While communist/socialist policies had their gaps and disadvantages in terms of the fulfilment of civil, political and cultural rights, the capitalist/socialist polarisation that dominated the universe during the 45 years of the Cold War maintained a balance that was lost after the fall of the Soviet Union, leading to an exacerbation in

1 World Health Organization, Novel Coronavirus- China (WHO, 12 January 2020) <https://bit.ly/2IGLeOU>

2 World Health Organization, Statement on the Second Meeting of the International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the Outbreak of Novel Coronavirus (WHO, 30 January 2020) <https://bit.ly/2UtPBPG>

3 World Health Organization, WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19 (WHO, 11 March 2020) <https://bit.ly/2UkhTw0>

4 World Health Organization, Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic (WHO) <https://bit.ly/36ASWIN> accessed August 23, 2020.

5 World Health Organization, WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard (WHO) <https://covid19.who.int> accessed July 20, 2020.

6 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, COVID-19 Education: From Disruption to Recovery (UNESCO) <https://bit.ly/3ICTVbC> accessed August 23, 2020.

7 592 schools in Hebron, 320 schools in Nablus, 282 schools in Gaza, 277 schools in Jenin, 270 schools in Ramallah, 258 schools in Jerusalem, 178 schools in Bethlehem, 154 schools in Tulkarem, 152 schools in Khan Younis, 123 schools in North Gaza, 99 schools in Deir Al-Balah, 94 schools in Qalqiliya, 81 schools in Rafah, 74 schools in Salfeet, 49 schools in Tubas and 34 schools in Jericho and Jordan Valley <https://bit.ly/2UFnjIH>

8 204,664 students in Gaza, 200,641 students in Hebron, 102,354 students in Nablus, 110,929 students in Khan Younis, 96,704 students in North Gaza, 88,490 students in Ramallah, 79,100 students in Deir Al-Balah, 79,056 students in Jenin, 70,840 students in Jerusalem, 69,714 students in Rafah, 54,416 students in Bethlehem, 46,264 students in Tulkarem, 29,629 students in Qalqiliya, 20,054 students in Salfeet, 16,092 students in Tubas and 13,107 students in Jericho and Jordan Valley <https://bit.ly/3pvvejQ>

9 International Monetary Fund, IMF DataMapper (IMF, 2020) <https://bit.ly/3pjVnBN> accessed August 23, 2020.

neoliberal policies and weakening the entirety of the social protection system at the global level. Furthermore, the fall of the Soviet Union is associated with the severe weakening of unions, syndicates and social movements that called for a more equitable distribution of wealth and access to economic and social rights, including education, labour rights and healthcare.

Additionally, the rise of neoliberalism and its domination of global markets coincided with the proliferation of international development aid to “developing” countries. This development aid, nonetheless, did not lead to development, its effectiveness is highly questioned and its negative implications significant. In 2015, global military spending stood at about USD 1.6 trillion,¹⁰ and has been on the rise since 2014, and reached USD 1.882 trillion in 2018, which is 2.6% higher than in 2017 and 5.4% higher than in 2014.¹¹ Ironically, while the global order has failed to protect civilians (including students) and civilian objects (including schools) in times of armed conflict, international aid allocated to education is not nearly sufficient to repair the damage. For example, in 2015, development aid to education in the Middle East by OECD countries stood at USD 546.065 million.¹²

In Palestine, development aid to civil society organisations (CSOs) that has been increasingly coming in the form of restricted project funding instead of unrestricted core funding and has not yielded tangible results and significant advancements in the areas of human rights, gender equality and social protection. For example, international development aid to education in 2018 stood at USD 108.623 million, USD 56.882 million of which went to public budget support and developmental expenditure by the Ministry of Education (MoE), while only USD 22.094 million went in support to CSOs. Furthermore, only USD 5.294 million came in core funding, compared to USD 16.301 million in restricted project funding.¹³ On another level, the pandemic is expected to lead to a severe drop in funding to education with economists and experts expecting a global drop from USD 5 billion to USD 2.5 billion.¹⁴

The decreasing amounts of aid and its increasing restrictiveness have led to exacerbating negative competition among Palestinian CSOs for the scarce funding available, which in its turn led these organisations to follow funding streams without questioning whether they tackle issues of national priorities and whether the desired objectives and employed strategies are effective and fit the Palestinian context. This has reduced the Palestinian civil society, once the primary service provider before the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), to an employer that has lost track of its identity, purpose and mission. This, ultimately, is attributed to that funding streams and priorities are set externally in a limited participatory process with Palestinian CSOs, thereby decreasing the sense of ownership of the implementing organisations, in addition to the absence of mutual accountability between Palestinian CSOs on one hand and International NGOs (INGOs), UN Agencies and donors on another hand.

This paper seeks to present the situation of education in Palestine under the Covid-19 pandemic state of emergency. In order to fulfil this, a desk review of the main documents, including but not limited to the emergency response plan developed by the MoE and plans of the different taskforces established under the plan, were reviewed. A total of eight interviews, covering government (MoE), Palestinian civil society (Teacher Creativity Center (TCC), Partners in Sustainable Development (PSD), Palestinian Vision Association (PaVision), Mothers’ School Society (MSS) and Palestine Educational Coalition) and donors (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Save the Children) were organised and conducted.

Following the introduction, the paper will seek to analyse and assess the overall effect of the spread of the pandemic on the education sector in terms of the changes in the priorities of the MoE and those of the government, as well as the effect of the pandemic on CSOs, including relationships and dynamics among the various stakeholders and identified mitigation strategies and contingency plans. The second chapter will provide an assessment of the government’s response and particularly the MoE, highlighting the achievements and accomplishments of the MoE, whether the development of the Education National Response Plan (NRP) was inclusive and participatory and the strengths and gaps of the NRP. The last chapter will cover and present the current and future priorities to protect education under the Covid-19 state of emergency and the main challenges that are likely to face the MoE.

10 Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Cheat Sheet: Guide to Spreading the #MoveTheMoney Message on Social Media <https://bit.ly/2lvRM31>

11 Nan Tian, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Pieter D. Wezeman and Siemon T Wezeman, Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2018 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2019) <https://bit.ly/32B8vsG>

12 OECD-DAC Creditor Reporting System <https://bit.ly/2UhaHRc>

13 Interview with Duaa’ Qurie, Executive Director of PNGO.

14 Interview with Refaat Sabbah, President of Palestine Educational Coalition (Via Skype, August 4, 2020)

1. Overall Impact of the Spread of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Education Sector in Palestine

1.1 Changes in MoE priorities

In times of stability, the MoE is the largest recipient of the developmental budget allocated to all PNA responsibility centres. While developmental budget allocations stood at 53.1%¹⁵ and 51.8%¹⁶ of the available developmental budget in 2017 and 2018, respectively, the actual expenditure by the MoE stood at 21.3% of the total expenditure in 2017¹⁷ and 23.5% of the total expenditure in 2018.¹⁸ Nonetheless, this remained the highest developmental expenditure by any responsibility centre of the PNA. The developmental priorities of the MoE during 2017 and 2018 focused on the following:¹⁹

1. Construction and maintenance of schools, colleges and universities (2017).
2. Support schools in Jerusalem and Area "C" (2017).
3. Production and provision of tools and programmes to support digitisation (2017).
4. Capacity building of teachers in digitisation (2017).
5. Therapeutic and remedial education for primary education students (2017).
6. E-learning, digitisation, smart learning and administrative computing (2018).
7. Curriculum development and improvement (2018).
8. Installation of solar panels inside schools (2018).

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the priorities of the MoE shifted to focus on dealing with the pandemic. The Ministry primarily focused on the development and publication of the Education NRP as fast as possible.²⁰ The plan consisted of four main pillars and associated taskforces that included the Ministry, donors and CSOs: 1) Hygiene, 2) Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), 3) distance learning and 4) psychosocial support. Namely, the plan sought to achieve four main objectives, as follows:²¹

1. School children and their families in the West Bank and Gaza have the adequate information on the pandemic and hygiene preventative measures.
2. Improve all schools WASH facilities including latrines, water points and availability of clean water and distribution of cleaning and hygiene kits to schools and public kindergartens in the West Bank and Gaza as a mean of controlling the spread of the pandemic.
3. School children and their parents have access to free online platforms for age appropriate materials, worksheets and lessons to ensure the continuation of knowledge sharing to school children.
4. Support the psychosocial wellbeing of both students, their parents and educators in the West Bank and Gaza.

Following the release of the NRP, the MoE's focus turned to completing the end of school examinations. The Ministry, focused during this period on, 1) provision of psychosocial support to senior students before and during the examinations, 2) provision of educational support to students through the development of learning classes and their upload on YouTube and the Ministry's end-of-year examinations website and 3) following-up with teachers and students.²²

The next and last stage focuses on returning to schools. It was intended that the Ministry will commence on July 1, 2020 at the latest in implementing the following measures: 1) bridging the knowledge gap among students by extending the educational year by one month through development of educational material and preparing schools and teachers, 2) implementing a health protocol that focuses on education procedures to return to schools among

15 Ministry of Education and MIFTAH- Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, Citizen Budget 2017 (MoE, August 2017) <https://bit.ly/3ng8sdE>.

16 Ministry of Education and MIFTAH, Citizen Budget 2018 (MoE, July 2018) <https://bit.ly/3ng8sdE> 2.

17 Ministry of Finance, December 2017 Financial Report (MoF, January 24, 2018) <https://bit.ly/2lt7LOS> Table 5(2).

18 Ministry of Finance, December 2018 Financial Report (MoF, January 27, 2018) <https://bit.ly/36rruqH> Table 5(2).

19 MoE and MIFTAH Citizen Budgets (n 15 and 16).

20 Interview with Dr. Basri Saleh, Deputy Minister of Education (MoE, June 18, 2020).

21 Ministry of Education National Response Plan for Covid-19 (March 2020).

22 Interview with Dr. Basri Saleh (n 20).

students, teachers and administrators, 3) provision of distance learning through online distance learning as part of the health protocol in addition to rehabilitating teachers, administrators and partners to fulfil their different roles and 4) communicating and discussing with the civil society their different roles and responsibilities.²³ However, the outbreak of the second wave of Covid-19 impeded the implementation of the bridging the knowledge gap month due to the overall safety reasons and the government decided that the school year will commence on September 6, 2020.²⁴ The government adopted in its 64th Cabinet meeting on July 7, 2020 the plan proposed by the MoE to provide education through a mixed system of in-class presence and distance learning. Additionally, a Ministerial Committee was created to support the efforts of the MoE in returning back to schools in light of the Covid-19 crisis.²⁵ This system will include the utilisation of each school for six days/week for the benefit of two groups of students. Each group of students will receive three days/week of in-class education and two days/week in distance learning. The distance learning will include concurrent education through live lessons and non-concurrent education in the forms of videos and individual tasks/assignments. The MoE sent letters to the Educational Directorate directors at the governorate level to commence in the preparation of the schools and build the capacities of the educational cadre in distance learning.²⁶

With respect to the relationship between the MoE and donors, the donors were flexible in reprogramming the available resources as needed.²⁷ However, in light of the global nature of the pandemic and its dire economic impact, the amount of external support decreased a little bit. Nonetheless, the status of schools will be developed based on a comprehensive needs assessment.²⁸

1.2 Changes in Government Priorities and Expenditure on Education

The complete lockdown imposed by the government in response to the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak in Palestine led to severe economic repercussions, particularly among vulnerable and marginalised societal segments, including workers inside the green line, workers in general and families living under the poverty line.

The government expenditure during the period of the first wave of the pandemic, naturally, focused on provision of necessary healthcare and medical equipment and requirements, in addition to supporting societal groups from slipping into poverty. This was seen in increasing the number of families receiving assistance from the Ministry of Social Development from 106,000 families to 125,000 families, provision of food packages to 98,000 families and disbursement of financial support by Ministry of Labour to 40,500 workers whose work was affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. Furthermore, the Waqfet Izz fund, a fund established by the private sector to support the government response to Covid-19, the priority areas of expenditure were as follows:

1. Support 30,000 families affected by Covid-19 pandemic through a one-time disbursement.
2. Procurement of medication to the Ministry of Health.
3. Provide financial support to Palestinian refugees in 24 refugee camps in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria.

Given the limited public budget funds available, which were expected to decrease significantly in light of the shrinking economic cycle due to the Covid-19 associated lockdown, one would expect that this additional expenditure came at the expense of another responsibility centre. A general look at the expenditure of the MoE until May 2020 reveals a +1.4% increase compared with the January-May average of 2017, 2018 and 2019. However, a closer look reveals that there is a -1.62% in developmental expenditure between January and May 2020, compared to the 2017-2019 January-May average. Furthermore, developmental expenditure by May 2020 was 43% less than developmental expenditure by May 2019,²⁹ and 27% less than developmental expenditure by May 2018.³⁰ It is important to note that the 2020 figures include those of both the MoE and Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in order to provide comparable figures with 2019 and 2018, when education and higher education were both under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

23 Ibid.

24 2020 تموز 15 (وزارة التربية والتعليم، «التربية»: السادس من أيلول المقبل موعد العودة للمدارس بنظام التعليم المدمج (وزارة التربية والتعليم، 15 تموز 2020) <shorturl.at/hrORX>

25 State of Palestine- Council of Ministers, Cabinet Meeting 64 (CoM, July 7, 2020) <https://bit.ly/3kjokdv>

26 Interview with Hala Qubbaj, Director of Programmes at TCC (TCC, June 18, 2020).

27 Ibid; Interview with Abeer Abu Sneineh, Education Adviser in Save the Children (Via Skype, June 16, 2020).

28 Interview with Dr. Basri Saleh (n 20).

29 Ministry of Finance, May 2019 Financial Report (MoF, June 26, 2019) <https://bit.ly/3eRBHAK> Table 5(2).

30 Ministry of Finance, May 2018 Financial Report (MoF, June 28, 2018) <https://bit.ly/3tiLqSJ> Table 5(2).

These figures indicate that there are more urgent expenditure priorities for the Palestinian government, in keeping with the statements of the Minister of Finance at the time of the adoption of the emergency budget in April, when he clearly stated that developmental expenditure will be minimised and all funds reallocated to support the Covid-19 response.³¹ This could further exacerbate in light of the following factors:

1. The clearance revenue crisis: towards the end of the first wave of the pandemic and with the establishment of an Israeli government in May that had clear intentions of annexing up to 30% of the West Bank, the PNA authority decided to cut all forms of contact and coordination with the Israeli government. Within this framework, the Israeli government refused to transfer the clearance revenues at the end of May, without the holding of the monthly meeting between the respective Ministers of Finance, which the PNA insisted was a mere formality as it did not include any substantive audit or review. As such, the PNA has lost 65-70% of its monthly total tax revenues. To address this issue, the PNA asked the European Union and International Committee of the Red Cross to intervene and pressure Occupation's government to transfer the clearance revenues without the holding of the meeting. However, little progress has been made thus far.
2. The government could not impose a complete lockdown with the arrival of the second wave of the pandemic in light of the clearance revenue crisis and due to surmounting pressure by the Palestinian private sector.
3. The partial lockdown, coupled with the inability of the PNA to enforce the law in area "C" and lack of adherence of Palestinians to national health protocols of refraining from organising public gatherings, such as weddings and funeral houses, led to a soaring number of cases infected with Covid-19, which in its turn increases the burden on an already fragile health system.

The third wave of the pandemic is expected in early winter, and the government has already commenced in its preparations, including the construction of a field hospital in Nueimeh village in the Jordan Valley. The persistence of the dire economic and fiscal situation and the expected increasing number of Covid-19 cases in the upcoming months does not signal promising signs to expenditure on education, particularly since 35-45% of the developmental expenditure on the MoE comes from the Ministry of Finance and not external sources.³²

1.3 Impact on Projects and Activities of CSOs and Mitigation Strategies

CSOs working in the field of education were impacted by the spread of Covid-19 pandemic at the project activities' implementation and financial levels, both positively and negatively. In the case of the organisation PSD, the positive impact of the spread of Covid-19 included expanding scope of work to the regional level; for example, this included the digitalisation of the curriculum of Oman Sultanate, and developing and implementing a virtual summer camp in Qatar. On the negative side, the crisis led to a delay in implementing some of the activities in light of the need for physical presence. Nonetheless, the different stakeholders demonstrated understanding and the implementation of some of the projects was moved to online platforms, and all requirements and needs of the target groups were met, including provision of laptops and 3G internet packages to the target groups.³³

In the case of the MSS, the organisation was negatively impacted as it has to close down and postpone the educational classes and the summer camps of the mothers, the organisation's main target group. The organisation also moved to the utilisation of social media networks, and particularly Facebook. Additionally, the organisation created online groups to deliver psychosocial counselling activities. One of the main obstacles in this regard was the access of mothers to electronic communication media. During the period between the first and second waves of Covid-19, MSS decided to reinstate the summer camps and postpone the educational classes to the beginning of the academic year as they were no longer a priority. It remains to be seen whether the organisation will be able to implement the summer camps following the coinciding of the summer period with the second wave of the pandemic.³⁴

31 12-4-2020 (الحياة الجديدة، بشارة: تراجع بنسبة 60-70% في الإيرادات العامة (الحياة الجديدة، 2020) <https://bit.ly/3kr0z17>

32 MIFTAH and MoE Citizen Budgets (n 15 and n 16)

33 Interview with Jawad Abu Oun, Executive Director of PSD (TCC, June 15, 2020).

34 Interview with Maha Ahmad, Education Programme Coordinator at MSS (Via Skype, June 15, 2020).

PalVision was negatively affected by the pandemic on the access and funding levels. The pandemic, however, pushed the organisation to think in new ways and methods that can be characterised as creative. For example, the implementation of the programmes was moved to online platforms, including the utilisation of “Boosaleh” platform for professional counselling and guidance, which was further developed. In another project, summer camps with overnight sleeping were supposed to be organised in demolished villages. PalVision adapted the activity and it was implemented through online educational games to learn about the villages that the target group was supposed to visit.³⁵

TCC faced similar obstacles but was also able to adapt. On the onset of the crisis, TCC developed an emergency plan that is based on the reprogramming of the activities and projects of the organisation to fulfil the basic goals while taking into consideration the requirements of the pandemic. For example, activities and meetings with teachers and students were redesigned to implement them using technology and online platforms. Also, with respect to face-to-face activities, such as the training of “Integrity Clubs” and the design of social audit initiatives, the intervention was reconfigured to conduct research in integrity and audit the work of the emergency committees in the governorates.³⁶

The pandemic served as an opportunity for the Palestinian civil society to engage on important issues without or with little funding, including the organisations of seminars, videos and consultative meetings, as it provided a democratic and unconditional space. The online deliberations and explorations among CSOs on a number of issues, such as rethinking the end-of-year examinations system, knowledge production and education strategies led to increased tensions between the MoE and Palestinian civil society (further explored below). This serves as an opportunity for the civil society to rethink and reconceptualise their role vis-à-vis their role in acting as a watchdog on government performance and influence policies within the framework of a complementary partnership.³⁷

The overall relationship of the CSOs with the donors seems to have remained stable, but with some negative implications. In the cases of all organisations, donors demonstrated flexibility in reprogramming activities and projects and moving them to online platforms. In one particularly positive case, some of the donors of PSD provided top-up funding to ensure the provision of the necessary means and guarantee the participation of all target groups. On the negative financial side, in the case of only one donor, there was a delay in commencing the implementation of the second stage, as the donor needed to re-evaluate its financial situation, which was affected by the pandemic.³⁸ With TCC, all donors demonstrated flexibility, except for one, whereby there was a global decision of freezing the implementation of all projects worldwide; this affected the situation of 104 teachers in the Gaza Strip.³⁹ Another negative financial implication was that many of the donors did not consider supporting staff, such as branch coordinators, field coordinators and administrative staff as necessary and refused to continue to cover their salaries, which pushed the organisations to consider adaptive methods to address this issue.⁴⁰

2. Assessment of Government and MoE Response

2.1 Notable Achievements and Accomplishments of MoE

The main achievements of the MoE during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic included the completion of the end-of-year examinations successfully, unlike many other neighbouring countries.⁴¹ This was corroborated by some of the interviewed CSOs, in addition to addressing unexpected developments during the examinations, such as the outbreak of the virus in Azoun village in Qalqiliya and Halhoul city in Hebron, which were swiftly placed under lockdown. The end-of-year examinations for students in these localities were completed later, when the spread of the virus was controlled. Another major achievement of the MoE was the quick finalisation and release of the NRP for the education sector, and the good, comprehensive and complementary marketing of the plan by all stakeholders.⁴² Within this framework, as of July 14, 2020 USD 806,000 were mobilised through the response plan, covering 67% of the total funds requested, in addition to USD 1,831,870 outside of the plan, bringing the total

35 Interview with Basem Bani Shamseh, Education Programme Director at PalVision (TCC, June 15, 2020).

36 Interview with Hala Qubbaj (n 26).

37 Interview with Refaat Sabbah (n 14).

38 Interview with Jawad Abu Oun (n 33).

39 Interview with Hala Qubbaj (n 26).

40 Interview with Maha Ahmad (n 34) and interview with Basem Bani Shamseh (n 35).

41 Interview with Dr. Basri Saleh (n 20).

42 Interview with Hala Qubbaj (n 26).

of the funds mobilised to USD 2,637,870.⁴³

Additionally, the Palestinian government and MoE engaged constructively and successfully with its main donors. Donors can be divided into two main groups. The first group pledged new funds to education, such as the Education Cannot Wait Fund, whereby Palestine secured a USD 17 million three-year project to support education in area C and Gaza. Additionally, the European Commission topped up a new funding stream by USD 1.5 million to support response to Covid-19. The second group of donors demonstrated flexibility in the fungibility of funds and their reallocation to support the Covid-19 response. ECCO- the humanitarian branch of EU funding, the Joint Funding Agreement basket asked the MoE to review existing programmes and projects and re-programme them to support Covid-19 response.⁴⁴

2.2 Development of the NRP

All interviewed Palestinian CSOs shared that the development of the NRP did not take place through a participatory process. Furthermore, there was also an exclusion of CSOs, schools, supervisors and parents from supporting the development of the plan to returning to schools, demonstrating a lack of participatory approach in planning. The vast majority of the respondents clarified that there was an absence of any form of complementary support to the Ministry and attributed this to the centralised mode of decision-making. This reflects the status of the openness of the government towards the civil, educational and learning society.

PSD commented that there was slow planning for the second wave of the virus and that there was an absence of constructive communication and a delay in the implementation of activities, which were subjected to highly bureaucratic procedures in light of the centralised mode of decision-making in the Ministry. This led to an absence of any form of complementarity with the Ministry during the first wave of the virus. Additionally, while the relationship of PSD with the MoE can be characterised as a good relationship, the relationship was negatively impacted by the pandemic. This can be attributed to the presence of PSD in the distance learning taskforce within the education cluster, which –the taskforce- did not publish any outputs. This came within the framework of the weak response of the Ministry and its lack of acceptance and engagement with any propositions made by CSOs.⁴⁵

PalVision commented that the NRP is not flexible and does not allow room for development. PalVision added that while emergency plans require the integration of all sectors, the MoE primarily focused on donors and exercised exclusive centralisation in decision-making. This led to a lack of cooperation or complementary support to the Ministry. While PalVision enjoys a good relationship with the MoE, the Ministry was caught by surprise with the decision to close all schools, and in light of the absence of the necessary infrastructure for crisis management, including the presence of strategies and plans, led to increased centralisation in decision-making.⁴⁶

TCC provided a more holistic response and confirmed the exclusion of Palestinian CSOs from the development of the NRP, which was developed through joint efforts between funders the Ministry. TCC explained that the complete plan was developed by the Ministry and the UNICEF and was thereafter presented to CSOs in one meeting, soliciting feedback and comments. However, any comments that were not in line with the plan were not taken into consideration. Notwithstanding, following TCC's adaptation of its projects and activities, the Centre continued its cooperation with the Ministry in all areas except distance learning, which was under the responsibility of the General Directorate of Educational Supervision and Rehabilitation. The Ministry refused the principle of partnership with the Palestinian civil society and private sector with respect to distance learning, which played a central role in the centralised mode of decision-making within this taskforce. It is important to emphasise that not all CSOs enjoyed the same level of cooperation and complementarity that TCC did, which may be attributed to the long and strategic relationship between the Centre and the Ministry.⁴⁷

On the other side, Save the Children considered that participatory design and planning of the NRP was impossible during the first wave of the virus, due to the nature of the crisis and not as a matter of intention. Furthermore, while feedback on the plan was solicited in a presentation to the members of the education cluster, it was not

⁴³ UN OCHA, Occupied Palestinian Territory: COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report No. 13 (OCHA, July 15, 2020) <https://bit.ly/3ncFuv9> 6.

⁴⁴ Interview with Fadi Baidoun, Education Cluster Coordinator in UNICEF (Via Skype, June 16, 2020).

⁴⁵ Interview with Jawad Abu Oun (n 33).

⁴⁶ Interview with Basem Bani Shamsheh (n 35).

⁴⁷ Interview with Hala Qubbaj (n 26).

constructive and only highlighted the problems in the absence of proposition of solutions and provision of practical feedback. Additionally, the vision towards distance learning remains unclear within the MoE, and hence feedback provided by CSOs in this regard was not well received.⁴⁸

2.3 Main Strengths and Gaps of NRP

The main strengths of the NRP can be summarised in several dimensions. The first is that the plan sought to ensure the accessibility of the most marginalised students and teachers to education. Additionally, the plan proposed creative alternatives to interventions, such as the promotion of story-telling initiatives and the employment of technology in education. Furthermore, the plan contributed to the cooperation and consolidation of efforts between Palestinian CSOs and INGOs.

Notwithstanding, several gaps in the NRP on the financial, thematic and coordination levels were emphasised by the interviewees and should be highlighted, as follows:

1. As of July 14, 2020, only 67% of the NRP is financed, and the plan only cover the needs captured with the first wave of the pandemic. Additionally, the plan does not take into consideration the need to improve the school infrastructure and provide millions of gloves and masks to teachers and students in their face-to-face encounters. Also, it remains unclear whether the plan is taking into consideration the need to hire new teachers to accommodate the approach of the double shifts in schools, or the need to increase the salaries of current teachers.
2. There is a lack of vision on the utilisation and employment of distance learning, which was restricted to electronic learning despite the absence of the necessary infrastructure, which hindered the accessibility of a significant number of students to education. Moreover, the plan and requested financial support did not take into consideration the necessary financial requirements to install the software and provide the hardware of the distance learning component.
3. The plan considered all students as a homogenous group and hence did not take into consideration specific gender and disability needs. Despite the later development of a plan for persons with disabilities, there was an absence of integration of persons with disabilities and particularly those with mental disabilities in the NRP. The developed plan was generic and included guidance videos, the presence of sign language that was sensitive to some disabilities but fell short of integrating persons with mental and compounded disabilities, and those needing occupational interventions. Also, the plan did not envisage and develop a role for the parents of persons with disabilities. Lastly, the plan is outside the NRP, and hence there is a greater risk that it remains unfinanced and unimplemented.
4. There was a complete disregard to the early childhood education sector in the plan.
5. On the coordination and management levels, there is a complete absence of a crisis management protocol and lack of service delivery and coordination of the response with the Gaza Strip. Additionally, there was an absence of communication with the necessary stakeholders on the vast majority of issues, leading to resistance and lack of acceptance to the approaches adopted by the Ministry. For example, the lack of cooperation with the civil society and communication with parents led to resistance in the acceptance of mixed education approach.

3. Way Forward

3.1 Current Priorities

Based on the above presentation and analysis, several current priorities were identified. First and foremost, there is a need for a higher degree of transparency to jointly identify the gaps and areas of support by CSOs to the MoE in a complementary way. This comes within the framework that the NRP should be considered a living document and should develop continuously, based on the adoption of multiple scenarios, including return to full closure. To increase effectiveness, this requires the adoption of a participatory approach with all stakeholders, and primarily CSOs, parents, schools and donors. Since education is a joint responsibility, this requires active participation of all sectors to delineate roles and responsibilities.

Additionally, there is a need to activate inclusive education tools to ensure the integration of persons with disabilities, gender needs and students in distant geographic locations. Again, the effectiveness of this will significantly increase in the adoption of a participatory approach with Palestinian CSOs and private sector. Also, there is a need to bridge the knowledge gap to underachieving students, as well as for children in kindergartens to ensure their normal entry into first grade.

With respect to mixed learning approach and particularly at the level of distance learning, there is a need to adopt a clear policy and refrain from restricting it to electronic learning. Furthermore, to bridge the availability of the hardware gap, there is a need to invest in the available technology through the redistribution of excessive hardware in one governorate to another governorate that has a shortage of hardware. This requires the conduction of a mapping of the available machinery. Additionally, there is a need to conduct a social survey of families and assess their purchasing capacities. Thereafter, there is a need for the adoption of a policy that able families will purchase the equipment necessary for distance learning, while less fortunate families will be supported in the purchase. This would enable the government to maximise the number of students who have the necessary means to access distance learning.

There is a need to decentralise decision-making in education to the governorate level to overcome the central bureaucracy. Local Education Committees, which are councils at the educational directorate level should be expanded and activated to play a central role, alongside municipalities and local councils. This requires the development of risk management protocols and collective decentralised decision-making mechanisms, instead of individual decision-making.

Lastly, there is a need to consolidate complementarity between the different governmental Ministries. The NRP for education is not fully financed, and particularly for the WASH component, and does not include the necessary financial support to distance learning. The gap in the WASH component should be covered by the other funds that came to WASH and distance learning should be supported by other governmental entities, such as Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technology.

3.2 Future Priorities

The aforementioned priorities do not negate the need for the formulation of future priorities as the crisis is far from over and is likely to reoccur in subsequent years.

The concurrent and non-concurrent distance learning approach (outlined in the first chapter) serves as an opportunity to integrate distance learning into the educational system. Namely, it serves as an opportunity to reconfigure the educational system from a system characterised as one based on indoctrination to a system that gradually but steadily prompts students to rely on themselves and fosters critical and creative thinking. The development of a vision on the employment of distance learning is all the more crucial given the expected decrease in global funding and support to education.

Additionally, there is a need to overcome individuality in working on distance learning and build the capacities of stakeholders in utilising distance learning means and tools in a participatory way that integrates government, civil society and private sector. This comes within the framework of the crucial need to overcome technological

illiteracy among parents, teachers, administrators and students.

On the strategic level, and in order to overcome the expected decrease in budget allocations and expenditure, there is a need to reach consensus among the various stakeholders involved with the education tax and systemise its collection. More importantly, there is a need to reform the taxation system to decrease reliance on clearance revenues, mainstream social justice and diversify sources of revenue to increase social spending. This should be through increasing progressivity in personal income tax, introduction of brackets within corporate income tax and adoption of legislation to promote corporate social responsibility.

Most importantly, there is a need to reconsider the civil and value system that the educational system is based on with the view of enhancing citizenship, integrity, responsibility and solidarity. This should firstly be supported through the adoption of policies and measures to ensure education for all, taking into consideration the special needs of persons with disabilities, girls and marginalised social groups. This, essentially, requires the provision of the necessary infrastructure.

3.3 Main Challenges

The main challenges facing the MoE in upholding their responsibilities are represented in the following: 1) lack of clarity on future scenarios with respect to the pandemic, 2) occupation's procedures with respect to annexation and Jerusalem, which severely impacts children and teachers, 3) lack of awareness among citizens, including parents, on dealing with the pandemic and 4) creation of a complementary partnership with partners, including CSOs.⁴⁹

Several other challenges were identified by CSOs, including bridging the widening gap between students and particularly among underachieving students. Additionally, the absence of a risk analysis and management methodology is only likely to increase the burden and difficulty on the MoE.

Also, major financial difficulties are likely to face the MoE. This comes within the framework of several dimensions. Firstly, while the first wave of the pandemic did not lead to major shifts in funding of MoE, subsequent waves of the pandemic could lead to such a scenario, particularly in light of the increasing health and social protection needs and decreasing revenues that are mainly attributed to the withholding of clearance revenues by the Israeli occupation and the shrinking economic cycle incurred by the Covid-19 pandemic. These financial difficulties are likely to pose challenges to the MoE in rehabilitating and building the capacities of teachers and administrators in terms of knowledge, skills and tools in distance learning, ensuring availability and accessibility of education to distant geographic locations and installation of necessary infrastructure and adoption of policies to ensure the integration of disability and gender needs.

Conclusion



The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Palestine affected all stakeholders in the educational process. The MoE shifted its priorities from digitisation, construction and expansion of schools and development of curriculum to dealing with the pandemic. Its most pressing priorities included the completion of end-of-year examinations, ensure the continuity of education through distance learning and prepare for the return to schools. The pandemic also affected developmental expenditure on education, which dropped by 43% compared with the same period from 2019 and 27% from 2018. On another hand, Palestinian CSOs had to re-programme their projects and activities and move them primarily to online platform. A major challenge faced by CSOs was the refusal of some of the donors to continue to cover the salaries of field coordinators, administrators and branch coordinators, significantly jeopardising the social security of a number of individuals.

Nonetheless, and despite that the closure of schools caught the MoE by surprise, several achievements and accomplishments have been recorded. This includes the completion of end-of-year examinations successfully, unlike many of the other neighbouring countries, and dealing with the spread of the pandemic in specific localities responsibly and effectively, in addition to the quick release of the NRP.

However, the development of the NRP was not participatory and the MoE adopted a highly centralised approach to decision-making, which hindered any complementary work between CSOs and the Ministry, particularly within the distance learning taskforce. Exception to this was work with organisations that enjoyed a strategic and long-standing relationship with the Ministry. This suggests that it was the nature of the crisis and lack of vision on distance learning were the main obstacles to the realisation of participatory approach. This demonstrates Palestine's lack of experience and the absence of the necessary infrastructure for crisis management.

The strengths of the NRP include its consideration of maximising accessibility of students and teachers in highly marginalised areas, the proposition of creative alternatives such as storytelling and consolidation of efforts between CSOs and INGOs. On the other side, the gaps in the NRP include that 33% of the plan remains unfinanced, that it does not take into consideration the costs associated with the of hiring additional teachers or increasing the salaries of current teachers to cover the classroom double shifts, nor takes into consideration the infrastructural software and hardware cost of distance learning. Furthermore, the plan considers all students as a homogenous group and thus neglects gender and disability needs, as well as the early childhood sector and reduces distance learning to electronic learning, when it is clear that not all students and their families have the ability to access electronic learning.

To address these issues, the NRP should be considered a living document that continuously grows and develops as needed. Also, any effective response to the pandemic requires the bridging of the gap between the MoE and CSOs and between MoE and parents to mainstream a complementary partnership, particularly since education is not a current governmental expenditure priority. This should be further extended through the consolidation of a complementary relationship between different governmental Ministries, such as the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technology, which could support the work of the MoE on distance learning. Additionally, it is clear that there is a need for a risk management protocol to decentralise decision-making to a collective governorate level and to support mitigation and overcoming of damages that are associated with crisis management. Lastly, the most pressing issues that should be immediately addressed through the consolidated partnerships are 1) the bridging of the knowledge gap for underachieving students and kindergarten students to ensure their normal integration, 2) the neglect of the early childhood sector, 3) the overlooking of gender and disability needs and 4) the diversification of methods of distance learning beyond electronic learning.

Ultimately, education is a collective responsibility, and while in times of crisis the government has a responsibility to take the lead in response and intervention, the effectiveness and relevance of any response requires true and equal partnerships between all the stakeholders, including the government, civil society, donors, private sector, the community and parents.

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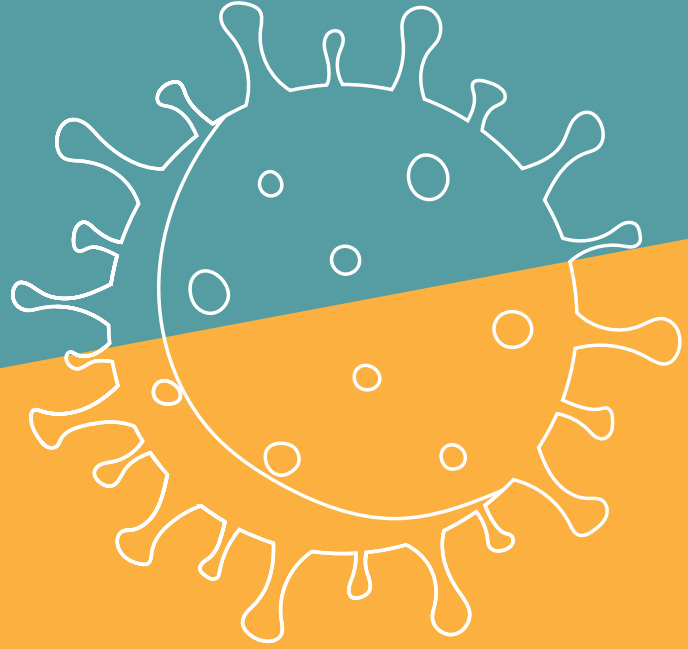
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