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Palestinian adolescents find an outlet through UNICEF-supported community centres

On a daily basis, the rights of children and adolescents in the West Bank and Gaza – including their rights to education and to play – are compromised by the effects of border closure, disruption of schooling and deteriorating living standards in the context of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The ongoing border closure, coupled with increased poverty, continuously undermines the ability of teens to develop and get a good education. The chronic anxiety adolescents are facing on a daily basis weakens their self-esteem and increases their feelings of loss of control over their lives.

To help adolescents overcome stress and hopelessness, and to provide meaningful programmes throughout the year, UNICEF is currently supporting 40 adolescent-friendly learning centres in the West Bank and Gaza in cooperation with the Tamer Institute for Community Education and the Ma'an Development Centre. These centres provide young people with opportunities to acquire literacy and information technology skills, join extracurricular activities such as sports, music and drama, and receive life skills-based education. The 40 centres are funded by the Canadian International Development Agency and the Spanish Government.

Serving disadvantaged teenagers

In the midst of poor living conditions at the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza, the only available outlet for adolescents is the UNICEF-supported Jabalia Youth Community Centre, where teenagers can learn music, play sports and improve their literacy and information technology skills.

The Centre serves at least 17,000 of the most disadvantaged adolescents in Jabalia refugee camp, where the poverty rate exceeds 70 per cent in some areas. "This Centre is the only place that gives me the opportunity to learn and widen my knowledge," says 15-year-old Mohammed. "I built good friendships as well. I am now able to express myself better than before."

For many adolescents, a dream come true

Because most of the 300 youth clubs in the West Bank and Gaza are underfunded and ill-equipped, most Palestinian adolescents do not have access to safe recreational areas. At the Jabalia Youth Community Centre, however, they

are able to socialize with their peers and learn new things, including *dabkeh*, the traditional Palestinian folkloric dance.

“Because I am interested in learning *dabkeh*, my life is totally different now,” adds 16-year-old Hanin. “Before coming to the Centre, there were no places that could teach us.”

Training for local committees

The Jabalia Youth Community Centre, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, is open six days a week – three days for boys’ and three days for girls’ activities. Like the other centres for Palestinian adolescents, the Jabalia Centre is run with the help of local committees trained by UNICEF, and consists of at least four adolescents (both girls and boys) who oversee the planning and implementation of activities and programmes.

Committee members receive 30 hours of training on child rights, communication skills and project management. UNICEF also provides core supplies such as stationery, library furniture and books, as well as computer, sports and music equipment, to enhance the adolescent-friendly environment.