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UNICEF EDUCATION

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Case Study

STATE OF PALESTINE

Providing psychosocial support and promoting learning readiness during compounding crises for adolescents in Gaza

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Many Palestinian children and adolescents are living in an environment where they are repeatedly exposed to life-threatening and extreme violence. This environment significantly impacts their learning, development, and mental health as well as psychosocial well-being. While the protracted conflict in Palestine continues to have negative consequences for children and adolescents, the 11 days of escalated hostilities during 10–21 May, 2021 have exacerbated the already fragile circumstances surrounding their learning and well-being. Of particular concern are the nearly 600,000 school-age children in Gaza whose education was disrupted during the hostilities, compounding the learning loss and increased exposure to mental health risks and violence experienced during COVID-19 induced school closures. These existing stresses were aggravated by conflict-related traumatic events with children suffering from increased fear, distress, and anxiety that now poses even greater risks to their mental health and psychosocial well-being. Recent estimates indicate that 250,000 children require mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services in Gaza, highlighting the urgent need for increased access to these programmes in the education sector.

To respond to the MHPSS needs of adolescents affected by escalating violence and school closures, UNICEF collaborated with the Ministry of Education and implementing partners, to offer summer activities to promote learning, preparedness to return to school and to protect children from the crisis's adverse effects. The summer activities were designed to provide stable routines where

children had access to remedial learning classes and structured activities designed to foster hope, reduce stress, provide safe spaces for play, sports and self-expression.

In the summer of 2021, two cohorts of adolescents (ages 10–14 years and 15–18 years) attended the two-week long summer activities administered across 175 centers. The programme utilized UNICEF's [Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation](#), a package of guidance, tools, activities, and supplies that support life skills development and community engagement while developing key competencies and skills that help adolescents cope with stressful circumstances in humanitarian and vulnerable development contexts. Additionally, a team of 10 psychologists was deployed in each centre to coordinate mental health promoting activities and to provide guidance to facilitators and volunteers in how to respond to participants' mental and psychosocial needs. These psychologists received training on child safety and how to provide immediate mental health and psychosocial support to adolescents and instigate referrals to specialized services.

RESULTS

- 35,080 adolescents (15,116 boys and 19,964 girls) participated in summer activities including access to learning, play-based activities, and mental health and psychosocial support.
- 142 psychologists participated in training to improve their capacities on MHPSS services for adolescents and their knowledge of child safety.
- 1,050 youth volunteers and facilitators were trained to support the summer activities, including an introduction on child safety.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Summer activities provide adolescents in Gaza with opportunities for constructive civic engagement.** The summer activities provided safe, structured spaces for adolescents to connect with peers and access MHPSS services while limiting the risk of exacerbating adverse effects of the conflict or COVID-19 on communities and adolescents.
- **Summer camp activities illustrate the link between risk-informed programming and effective responses that meet the MHPSS needs of adolescents at the onset of crises.** For example, having ready-to-deploy packages could have strengthened the quality and speed of the initial response. This would have also provided a link between humanitarian and development activities to address the ongoing MHPSS needs of adolescents as schools reopen and as well as an opportunity to further strengthen referral mechanisms.
- **Proactive and consistent community engagement provides an opportunity for capacity building and increased accountability to affected populations.** Identifying youth volunteers and facilitators within the community while providing continuous training and capacity building support can increase the quality and competencies of facilitators for future summer camp activities while also expanding opportunities for community engagement in non-emergency programming.

NEXT STEPS

UNICEF plans to increase investment in private sector engagement, monitoring and data collection, and continuous capacity development for youth volunteers and implementing partners to promote a more systematic approach to future summer activities. To encourage greater participation and to improve adolescents' experiences, summer activities will include new components, such as arts and sports, as well as opportunities to build on skills from the previous summer activities.

Cost effectiveness: UNICEF provided USD \$1,100,270 to support the summer activities and training of volunteers and facilitators. An additional \$140,430 in supplies was contributed, including the Adolescent and Recreational Kits. This programme utilized funding from: The Education Cannot Wait – First Emergency Response (ECW-FER); flexible funding provided by the Norwegian Government for Education in Emergencies, Emergency Programme Fund and the UNICEF Education Global Thematic funds allowing for an accelerated response to the crisis.

For more information, please contact:

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