Poverty drives child labour in Gaza

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Ahmad carries stones to bring to the market and sell to firms that use them for construction materials. The work is extremely labour intensive.

By Abeer Shawish and Catherine Weibel

GAZA, State of Palestine, 20 July 2017 – When morning comes, 13-year-old Ahmad* does not go to school like other children his age. Instead, he goes to work.

“Every day I go and look for scrap metal and gravel in the rubble of the houses that were destroyed in past wars,” he says. “Every day I carry steel and stones, put them on the donkey and go to the market to sell them to firms which will use them to make gravel and construction materials. It is very hard work.”

Ahmad’s father is sick and cannot work. The family of 11 lives in a tin-roofed shelter in a poor area near Gaza City. In summer the metallic shelter becomes unbearably hot; in winter it neither protects the family from the cold, nor from floods.

They receive assistance from charitable organizations, but not enough to make ends meet.

“My brothers and I work so we can earn a few shekels. I never know how much money I will make, it depends on how much steel and gravel I can find and how many hours I can work before the donkey and I become tired. I always return home exhausted,” Ahmad says.

One of Ahmad’s brothers, 10-year-old Ibrahim*, joins him to work when he has finished the school day.

“My dream is that my family and I will move to a clean, big house, and that I will have nice clothes,” Ibrahim says.



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Ahmad scavenges for contstruction materials in the rubble of homes that have been destroyed in conflict. He does not attend school.

Worsening economic conditions

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, child labour has risen significantly in the past five years as economic conditions have deteriorated in the Gaza Strip. This increase goes against trends: in 2013, the International Labour Organization said that the worldwide number of child labourers had fallen by a third since 2000. Nearly 40 per cent of Palestinian families in the Gaza Strip live under the poverty line, and 70 per cent rely on some form of external aid.

Thirteen-year-old Omar* is another child who must work. His father does hold a job, but even with the addition of aid subsidies, the family can barely afford food and safe drinking water.

“Every day after school, I go to Gaza’s seaport to sell biscuits and candies. Sometimes I skip school entirely. My family is poor, I have to work so we can eat,” he says.

Omar was not the first child to work in his family. His two older brothers dropped out of school to work, after which Omar started working after school. He gradually started skipping some classes; sometimes he misses entire school days to help his family. He says he needs the money to help cover the household's expenses, including medicine for his other two brothers and a sister, who all suffer from zinc deficiency.

Omar does not like his job, because it makes him feel unsafe.

"I am always afraid when I work at the harbour. I have never felt protected there. I feel shy, having to sell biscuits to people, and some people do not treat me well. Sometimes I see children my age playing and laughing with their parents while I am selling biscuits. It makes me feel jealous," he says.



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Ahmad was forced to start working for their family to make ends meet. His father is sick and cannot work, and the family of 11 lives in a tin-roofed shelter in a poor area near Gaza City.

Building brighter futures

UNICEF is working to identify and reach vulnerable children, including those involved in child labour like Ahmad and Omar, through child protection counsellors and case managers working in 20 UNICEF-supported family centres across the Gaza Strip.

Once a child has been identified, the case manager tries to connect him/her back to the education system, sometimes offering vocational training. The counsellors offer educational and psychosocial support to the child, while helping families contact the Ministry of Social Development to request financial support, access short-term job opportunities or small businesses schemes.

A counsellor who heard about Omar's cases approached his father and convinced him to attend awareness-raising sessions on child protection at the family centre next to his home. Realizing that support was also available for his son, the father agreed to let the case manager visit them at home and talk to Omar.

The case manager determined that Omar suffered from psychosocial distress. He referred him to the counsellor of the center, who provided him with individual counselling sessions. Omar attended life skills sessions to help boost his confidence and ease his fears. He was also given the opportunity to safely play in the centre, and ended up going back to school.

So far, Omar has not gone back to the harbour.

**the names of these children have been changed*