Civil society launches an urgent appeal to provide relief to small farmers and poor consumers in Gaza



Gaza – The Coalition for Accountability and Integrity (AMAN) held a hearing and accountability session for the Gaza-based Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). The session addressed the MoA plan in support of farmers and consumer protection in the Gaza Strip, which the Ministry launched in early 2019 under the theme *Farmer Support and Consumer Protection*. Participants stressed that the MoA should adopt and disseminate an integrated plan, together with approved clear policies, to strike a balance between the satisfaction of local farmers and consumer protection. The MoA should also seek to create and activate funds in support of farmers and poultry farmers. Stressing the need for compliance with Palestinian consumer protection measures and criteria, participants called for supporting safe agriculture to ensuring food security free of chemical residues. In addition, an effective and efficient complaints unit should be established to follow up on farmer and consumer cases.

Striking a balance between support of Gaza farmers and consumer protection is a pressing need

Citizens showed a great interest in the session. In addition to small farmers, the session brought together media representatives, economic researchers, development experts, members of the Civil Society Team for Enhancing Public Budget Transparency, and representatives of the Agricultural Development Association (PARC), civil society

organisations, and community associations. The MoA had launched a campaign in support of local farmers, who serve as the safety valve and promote the perseverance of Palestinians on their land. Protection of Gaza farmers, agricultural products, and consumers is a pressing need. No part of this equilibrium can outweigh the other. Government and civil society should join forces to promote means to bring this balance into reality.

Grow What You Eat, Eat What You Grow

In their opening statements, participants asked for a description of the MoA role in promoting the effectiveness of protection and monitoring policies, alignment of local needs, and export and import policy. Participants also inquired how the Ministry would alleviate the competing requirements of farmers and consumers by achieving equivalence to support farmers, promote the perseverance of farmers, protect consumers, and achieve food security.

The session included a presentation of key figures and facts collected by AMAN on the current context of the agriculture sector in Gaza, which is under occupation and siege for 12 years in a row. The presentation showed the volume of various exports of the agriculture sector (strawberries, tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, cabbage, cauliflower, potatoes, and other vegetables) to markets of the West Bank, Palestinian territory occupied in 1948, Jordan, and some Arab and European countries. Worth US$ 34 million in 2017, agricultural exports were as much as 34,000 tons. In 2018, a total of 40,000 tons of agricultural products were exported, with an estimated value of US$ 40 million.

The MoA explained the mechanism it used to monitor the export policy, ensuring a balance between the consumer purchasing power and farmers' right to make a satisfactory profit margin. The Ministry's representative made clear that overall prices of crops drop at production peak times but rise at times of scarcity. The MoA intervenes with the prices of four main crops, namely, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, and potatoes.

Multiple plans, but a MoA emergency plan is lacking

In his opening remarks, the MoA representative stated that the Ministry had multiple plans for the agriculture sector. However, there is no integrated plan that is adopted by all relevant stakeholders. The MoA operates in line with multifaceted plans, including the National Agriculture Sector Strategy "Resilience and Development" 2014-16 of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, Investment Plan, and National Development Plan. The majority of representatives of formal and informal agriculture sector participated

in the development of these plans. Another plan, *Sustainable Development Brings about Human Security*, is implemented jointly by the MoA and MA'AN Development Centre.

The MoA representative asserted that the Ministry's approach was consistent with all these plans. The MoA procedures and activities generally contribute to supporting farmers and protecting consumers. However, there is no separate emergency plan on the ground. Of the major challenges in place, the Palestinian Authority does not cover operating expenditures of the MoA, with the exception of the Green Palestine project. In addition to a mediocre budget available to the agriculture sector, funding has sharply declined. More funding is channelled to current relief and awareness raising programmes than to development initiatives. According to the MoA representative, the Ministry operates with minimum resources and capacities. The MoA works tirelessly towards recruiting more funding. Having signed a memorandum of understanding with the investment board, the Ministry is in the process of providing a finance production to small poultry farmers.

Demanding a clearly defined, integrated and applicable agricultural plan

Discussants focused on a key question: To what extent does the MoA play an effective role in overcoming challenges and operate in line with available capacities in order to promote the perseverance of local farmers? Although the MoA is primarily responsible for publicly available information, the Ministry's website is not updated. The MoA does not adhere to publishing its reports, plans and decisions on a timely basis. In this context, AMAN stressed that the MoA should adopt a clearly defined, integrated and applicable plan in light of economic collapse, declining living standards, and weak purchasing power of citizens. This situation has broadened the gap between farmer support requirements and consumer protection procedures. Consumers have been affected by the high prices of key commodities.

The PARC representative confirmed that living conditions in the Gaza Strip required a sustainable effort to promote the perseverance of Gazans. According to the PARC representative, the Association is committed to multi-level partnerships. Discussants also indicated that the MoA lacked a clear media discourse. They recommended that the Ministry exert effort in coordination with the Ministry of Finance to allocate agricultural import revenues to supporting agriculture sector development programmes. Participants also stressed the importance of rejuvenating the MoA operations by analysing the value of agricultural products.

Members of the Civil Society Team for Enhancing Public Budget Transparency commented that government bodies have creatively drafted plans, which cannot be implemented on the ground. The MoA does not exercise an oversight role with a view to providing minimum support to farmers or protection to consumers. In particular, the MoA

floats the price of some products, resulting in greater control of major large-scale commercial farmers at the expense of small farmers. As a result, the latter have been forced to sell their shares to large-scale merchants. The Team members also highlighted that a level of food security free of chemical residues should be maintained, recommending that the MoA review scientific research findings on the impact of safe organic pesticides on crops and consumers.

A participatory approach is required, and an effective complaint handling system should be developed

Discussants reviewed the most important requirements for supporting farmers, including provision of agricultural insurance and compensation for natural disasters. In the Palestinian territory, farmers continue to suffer from the lack of a system for insurance of agricultural production and compensation for natural disasters. Consequently, the economic situation of many farmers has deteriorated, creating a major disincentive to work in the agriculture sector. Additionally, participants called for increasing allocations of the agriculture sector to 15 percent in the government budget. A mechanism for communication between farmers and the MoA should be actively in place. To this avail, periodic meetings will be held to review the problems affecting farmers as well as all relevant developments. Accordingly, the MoA will devise needed solutions and develop agricultural policies based on a participatory approach, which involves both civil society and farmers. The latter will be engaged in planning, policy making, and design of strategic plans, budgets and projects. In line with the plan developed in the aftermath of the war on Gaza, influence will be exerted on donor policies with a view to recruiting more funding to the agriculture sector. Farmers will be compensated for damages by activating the Palestinian Disaster Risk Reduction and Insurance Fund and implementing long- and mid-term agriculture sector development programmes.

AMAN stressed the need for a complaint handling system within the MoA organisational structure, departments, and operational policies. The system will provide the right channel and space for citizens and farmers to report, submit inquiries, and file complaints in relation to their cases.