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Aid Hurting Palestinians

Jillian Kestler-D'Amours

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Article Author(s): Jillian Kestler-D'Amours

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Local food for local people. That's the idea behind Sharaka ('partnership', in Arabic), an entirely volunteer-run, Palestinian organisation that aims to bring locally grown products directly to Palestinian dinner tables.

"Our vision is a food sovereign Palestine where we're economically independent, we use our local resources and we support each other. That leads to human development. It's local economy. Through a local economy and a local food system, that's how you build community," said volunteer and Sharaka co-founder Aisha Mansour.

Mansour said that while it has often been a struggle to convince both Palestinian farmers and consumers to participate, Sharaka has organised several successful farmers' markets in Ramallah, and continues to raise awareness about the benefits of eating locally.

The group has also refused to take any international aid to support its work.

"It's a broken system. Everybody knows that," Mansour told IPS, about the international aid and development model currently in place. "Local people who know their community, who want to develop and support, they do things. That's how they develop. That's how development happens; it's not an externally imposed thing."

Palestinians are among the largest per capita recipients of international aid in the world. From 1994 – when the first international aid packages streamed into the occupied Palestinian territories – until the present day, billions of dollars have been spent.

The first donor conference to provide financial support to Palestinians was convened in October 1993 in Washington, shortly after the signing of the Oslo Accords peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO).

“The Oslo agreement between the PLO and Israel would not succeed, not work even, not last, without donor support,” said Dr. Samir Abdullah, director general of the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) in Ramallah.

Dr. Abdullah told IPS that restrictions placed on Palestinians under the Oslo agreement, including receiving only 80 percent of Palestinian tax revenues, and having access to only 40 percent of West Bank land, limited growth and development.

As a result, the Palestinian Authority (PA) – the Palestinian government created as a result of the Oslo Accords – was quickly forced to rely on international donors to fill gaps in its budget.

“Now, the PA has 3 billion dollars of debt,” Dr. Abdullah said. “If this continues, the Authority will collapse. If (donors) are not paying the burden, the debt will be unaffordable for the Authority.”

In its National Development Plan for 2011-2013, the PA stated: “Tax and clearance revenues, driven upwards by private sector-led economic growth and improved revenue administration, will progressively reduce our reliance on external aid.”

But efforts to wean the PA off its dependence on foreign aid have proven unsuccessful.

International donors pledged 1 billion dollars to the PA in both 2011 and 2012 to keep the organisation afloat. After this sum was never fully transferred, the PA faced the largest funding crisis in its history.

It is now regularly unable to pay the salaries of its public sector employees, and President Mahmoud Abbas often launches emergency appeals to Arab states to support his Ramallah-based government.

International aid to Palestinians is also very much dependent on the local political situation, and mainly, on so-called peace process negotiations with Israel.

After the PA secured the upgraded status of Palestine at the United Nations last November, Israel said it would withhold 100 million dollars in Palestinian tax revenues each month, and the United States froze 500 million dollars in aid as punishment.

Nora Lester Murad is a volunteer and co-founder of Dalia, a Palestinian organisation that advocates better use of local resources, and development that meets Palestinian goals. She said that while international aid has brought some positives to Palestinian society – including jobs and basic institution-building – it has largely been destructive.

“It has not helped in the claiming of rights. It has not helped in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and I’d go further and say that it has undermined rights and has delayed or prevented and made more difficult, the resolution of the conflict,” Lester Murad told IPS.

“But things are changing. There is a lot of discontent, and that’s the first step. There is also discussion, and that’s the second step.”

In 2012, the overall unemployment rate in the occupied Palestinian territories hovered just below 23 percent. In the West Bank, youth unemployment reached 30 percent in mid-2012, and 52 percent in the Gaza Strip.

Itiraf Remawi, acting director general of the Ramallah-based Bisan Centre for Research and Development, told IPS that Palestinians must return to the more sustainable system of development, similar to the one that characterised the First Intifada in the late 1980s.

“The development has to take an approach that facilitates and reinforces the Palestinian existence (and) the Palestinian resistance against the occupation,” Remawi said.

“The model (in the First Intifada) was much, much better. There was voluntary work, collective work. There was a very close relationship between the people. They struggled against the occupation without differentiating between this one or that one, between political factions or others. There was a common agenda.”

According to Aisha Mansour, that is exactly the type of community that Sharaka aims to build.

“How can you move into an independent country when people are at the level where they’re just struggling to put bread on the table?” she said. “That tipping point has to come for people to really say, ‘Ok. There’s no more money. We have to really think about a way to keep our community going, whether we’re under occupation or not, and develop.’”

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