

Let's Talk About Gaza

Interview about the agricultural sector in the Gaza Strip

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Key Facts

- Food insecurity is primarily a political and economic issue. According to World Food Program (WFP), 95% of vegetables and 100% of white meat and eggs needed are produced in Gaza.
- Overall, food insecurity affects 60.5% of households in the Gaza Strip while an additional 16.2% are considered vulnerable to food insecurity. Only 23% of total households in the Gaza Strip are considered marginally secure and/or food secure.
- There is an Israeli enforced buffer zone, which stretches across the whole border of the Gaza Strip which ranges between 300 to 1,000 meters. Access to this buffer zone is risky at best, and prohibited at worst. Over 30% of Gaza's agricultural lands lie in this area.

Tayseer Muhaisen is the director of the Palestinian Agriculture Relief Committee in the Gaza Strip (PARC). Questions were asked by Bessan Shehada, Project Coordinator of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine (RLS) in the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian Agriculture Relief Committee (PARC) is a Palestinian development organization that strives to develop the agricultural sector in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It aims to strengthen the resilience of farmers, reach out to the poor and marginalized groups and their community-based organizations (CBO), and mobilize and develop capabilities of rural people to enable them to control their resources through the work of distinguished professional teams and loyal volunteers.

<http://www.parc.ps/>

What is the current situation of the agricultural sector in the Gaza strip?

The agricultural sector in the Gaza strip is exposed to huge destruction as a result of the blockade and wars, which has caused this current state of deficit within the sector. Now we need a lot of effort and long time to reconstruct this sector due to the destruction that has been caused. This deficit has affected the entire agricultural sector. The plant and animal production, farmlands, and water sources (the wells and irrigation systems) have all been negatively impacted.

What are the key challenges that undermine the agricultural sector from contributing to the national economy?

There are 4 main factors: The first and most important is the occupation and its practices against the Palestinians, including the blockade. The blockade is all encompassing and affects Palestinian usage and access of Gazan land, sea, and air since 2007. This has reduced the GDP by 50%. The nonstop wars perpetuated against the Palestinians of Gaza have caused great destruction to Palestinian land in Gaza. The second is the Palestinian Authority neglecting policies towards the agricultural sector and not allocating any budget for it. The third is international aid, which is not used for the development of the agricultural sector. Last is the scarcity of natural resources, the abundance of salinated water, climate change, and urban sprawl.

How many km² of the Gaza strip are used as agricultural lands?

The Gaza Strip is 360 km², 180 km² of it is supposed to be agricultural lands, but the buffer zone, which is along the northern and eastern borders with Israel, contains nearly a third (29%) of the Gaza Strip's arable land. It is inaccessible to farmers and herders, so we have only 130 km² for planting.

What do farmers plant in the buffer zone?

If the farmers are lucky and the Israeli soldiers do not shoot them, they plant rain-fed crops including wheat, barley, and beans, any plants which are not tall, so the Israeli soldiers can see through. This measure has prevented farmers from continuing to plant citrus trees

which Gaza used to be famous for. Additionally, most of the Gaza Strip's animal production is concentrated in the buffer zone because it has to be far away from the localities for health reasons. Here, it must be mentioned that many families who were living from farming in the buffer zone, before it became the buffer zone, are now suffering from poverty as they are unable to generate any revenues from their lands because they can't reach or plant it.

How many people have been killed in the buffer zone?

According to the al-Mezan Center for Human Rights (<http://www.mezan.org/en/>), there have been at least 503 killed and 1,884 injured since 2006 till today, and they are not only farmers, they are farmers and people who are living near the buffer zone.

What are the impacts of the wars on the agricultural lands?

In the latest Israeli aggression against Gaza Strip in 2014, almost 25,000 acres were fully destroyed by Israeli rockets which of course contain toxic substances. Unfortunately, we don't have specialized labs to check the soil validity for planting, but we level it again and wait for the rain to clean the soil, then we plant it again.

What does Gaza import and export?

Gaza is considered as a food basket, it is producing 90% of the vegetables that Gazans need and consume, such as onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, parsley, peppers, and potatoes.

Unfortunately, we are importing all of our fruits from Israel, because fruits need large swaths of land and fresh water. After 1967, Gazans were planting 130,000 acres of citrus, and it was exported to Europe and Iran, they called it the "yellow gold from Gaza," but now we only plant 13,000 acres, which is 10%. This is because the citrus were planted in eastern and northern Gaza which is now the buffer zone. This also happened because citrus needs good water and now Gaza is suffering from an abundance of salinated water. Gaza is also famous for its strawberries, which are planted in the town of Beit Lahia in the north of Gaza Strip. Before the blockade, strawberries were exported every year and it was making a good revenue for the farmers. After the blockade, the acres of strawberry fields decreased from 2,000 acres to 600, because the crossings with Israel are closed and the Israelis don't allow the farmers to export their goods. Also, if they allow them through, the crossing is not equipped to keep the products in good condition before they are exported.

For more details on the topic, please see the following link:

http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_gaza_blockade_factsheet_july_2015_english.pdf
