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until
00:00 GMT June
8, 2011

The Challenges of Delivering Assistance in the Occupied Palestinian Territory

Summary of Research Report

June 2011



Women walking next to a military barrier in the West Bank. Photo by Y. Lein

Israeli-imposed movement and access restrictions increase poverty in many areas and fragment the occupied Palestinian territory¹ (oPt).

Movement and access in the oPt is restricted by, in the West Bank, checkpoints, roadblocks, a permit system and the 'Wall' and its 'seam zone' (area between the Wall and the 'green line'²). In the Gaza Strip, a blockade and related permit system is augmented by control over a 'buffer zone' (or the perimeter between Gaza and Israel), and a sea blockade.

What has not previously been studied is the impact of these restrictions on the humanitarian and development programming meant to ease conditions for Palestinians. The restrictions mean that aid workers and related goods cannot move freely to and between the communities they serve.

Following are the main findings of a survey of the work of the Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA), representing over 80 international development agencies with headquarters in 15 different countries.

→ AIDA member organizations face severe restrictions on the movement of staff. These restrictions:

→ increase the costs of delivering assistance by an estimated US\$4.5 million a year;

→ decrease the effectiveness and sustainability of AIDA aid operations; and

→ deny the most vulnerable populations from vital services.

WHO WE ARE

AIDA is an umbrella association of over 80 international development agencies operating in the oPt with headquarters in 15 different countries, predominantly the USA and EU member states. Sixty-seven percent of AIDA members have annual budgets of over US\$1 million, and 10% over US\$10 million.

AIDA members employ around 310 international staff and over 2,200 national staff. Its core functions are networking for the relief and development assistance community, facilitating information-sharing, and promoting advocacy, security, and training.

This survey was carried out in January and February 2011 through phone interviews, online surveys and follow-up emails.

The full research report can be viewed at www.aidajerusalem.org.

International staff

In order to deliver much-needed humanitarian aid, AIDA international staff members rely on Israeli-issued visas to enter and stay in Israel, and on Israeli-issued permits to move within the occupied Palestinian territory.

- 21% of AIDA organizations have had international staff refused entry into the country in the last three years, although all paperwork was in order.
- 27% of AIDA organizations have experienced problems in the last 12 months obtaining Israeli Ministry of Interior-issued work visas. These include delays, refusals, or referral to committee.

Getting into or out of Gaza remains the greatest challenge. International staff members must coordinate travel there with Israeli authorities, a process that is inconsistent and fraught with delays.

MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS ON AIDA MEMBERS AND THEIR STAFF

- 73.5% of AIDA members report problems getting coordination to enter Gaza for international staff, with 24.5% saying that permits are often denied or put on hold.
- In January 2011, 25 permits were granted; however, at the end of the month 36 permit applications were still waiting for a response. Because the purpose for the request has often passed by the time a permit is issued, delaying permit applications effectively becomes a denial.

National staff

Movement restrictions on AIDA members' national staff are more complicated, with permits required to access Israel, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and some areas of



the West Bank. Sometimes, permission is granted, only to have the staff member turned back at the crossing itself. And again, delays in granting a permit are often effectively a denial, with the reason for the request having passed.

→ **From Gaza to the West Bank or East Jerusalem:** 88% of AIDA members who need permits for Gaza staff to enter the West Bank or East Jerusalem say that they are often denied or put on hold.

→ **From the West Bank to Gaza:** 92% of AIDA members who need permits for West Bank staff to enter Gaza say that they are often denied or put on hold.

→ **From the West Bank to East Jerusalem:** 89% of AIDA members who need permits for West Bank staff to enter East Jerusalem say that they are often denied or put on hold.

→ Over 30% of all permit applications in January 2011 were rejected or given no response.

Movement of goods & services

Movement of goods and services remains a major challenge, with most significant problems recorded for moving items into and out of Gaza. Of those organizations who answered the language as applicable, 90% said they faced difficulties moving goods and services into Gaza.

What Does International Law Say?

The Occupying Power is obligated to meet the basic needs of the occupied population (Article 55, Fourth Geneva Convention).

In all cases where an occupied territory is inadequately supplied, the Occupying Power is bound to agree to relief schemes for the population and must facilitate them by all the means at its disposal (Article 59 and 61, Fourth Geneva Convention).



The Abu Said children in the Gaza 'buffer zone'. Photo: Save the Children

CASE STUDY

Gaza 'Buffer Zone'

Israel maintains a military no-go zone (a 'buffer zone') along the entire northern and eastern perimeter of the Gaza Strip, reaching from 300 meters to 2 kms inside Palestinian territory. Anyone who enters this area risks being shot at, injured, or killed⁹.

For Palestinian families who live in or near the 'buffer zone', life has become untenable. Over 30% of Gaza's agricultural land is located in the 'buffer zone', but farmers are unable to plant there. Eighty percent of Gaza's residents rely on humanitarian aid, but in the 'buffer zone' conditions are even more dire.

AIDA members say that they consistently face difficulty getting staff members and aid materials such as books, toys, mobile water pumps and other goods into the Gaza Strip.

Many have stopped working in this area at all. Forty-two percent of AIDA members who answered this question as applicable have opted not to work in the Gaza 'buffer zone' due to access restrictions and security issues.

Juhor al-Deik is a community of 5,000 located inside the buffer zone. Faced with repeated Israeli military incursions and no way to make a living, many of the residents have relocated elsewhere.

The nine members of the Nasser Abu Said family still live 300 meters from the border with Israel. In 2010, Nasser's wife Nema was killed by one of three missiles that hit the family's home. He and his five children watched her bleed to death as ambulances were prevented from entering the area.

Now he stays at home, too fearful to leave his children alone. Without income, the family eats food from cans, rarely buying meat or fresh vegetables. The children wet their beds frequently, are doing poorly at school and suffer other effects of experienced trauma. The family has moved out of the house that they associate with their loss, living instead in a nearby tent.

But most profound is their sense of abandonment.

"One organization gave my children some psychosocial support," Nasser said in an interview, although he added that he often felt that no one helped them. He said that he has received mattresses and the tent they live in from several organizations, but with his children's constant bedwetting, the mattresses have become nearly unusable.

An increase in costs

AIDA conservatively estimates that movement restrictions on national and international staff cost it an additional US\$4.5 million annually.

This estimate only includes directly measurable costs for AIDA members. It does not include indirect costs related to the need for prolonged warehousing of goods, or costs incurred by partner organizations.

IMPACT ON AIDA OPERATIONS

There are numerous reasons behind these increased costs:

- Duplicate organizational structures mostly between the West Bank and Gaza are created to manage and implement programs, at an estimated annual cost of US\$2,605,560.
- Unnecessary travel and accommodation costs and wasted consultancy fees and salaries (estimated at US\$344,000 annually) result from extended waits at checkpoints and crossings, and failure to receive permits/coordination.
- Additional staff positions like security officers and other administrative personnel have been added, at a total annual cost of US\$620,000, to manage the bureaucracy of moving people and goods around the oPt.
- International staff members have been hired at greater expense (a total annual cost of US\$900,000) because they have relatively greater access.
- Video-conferencing facilities, at a total cost of US\$397,852, have been purchased to bring together staff for meetings.



The Wall near Bethlehem. Photo by Y. Lein

CASE STUDY

Jerusalem

The eastern part of Jerusalem was occupied and annexed by Israel in 1967. Since the early 1990s, non-Jerusalemite Palestinians have required a permit issued by the Israeli military to enter the city. The number of permits issued is limited, and holders must use one of four checkpoints.

These checkpoints have been incorporated into the 'Wall', a series of fences, cement walls, patrol roads and guard towers that Israel began constructing in the West Bank in 2002. The International Court of Justice at The Hague ruled in a 2004 advisory opinion that the Wall was illegal and should be dismantled.

The Wall in East Jerusalem winds through Palestinian neighborhoods, separating neighbor from neighbor, and cutting large communities off from the city's essential services, including

schools and hospitals. Some 55,000 Jerusalem residents are now separated from the city by the Wall, reports the UN. In West Bank suburbs of Jerusalem, businesses have closed and residents have left, moving inside the Wall.

AIDA members and their local partners must pass through checkpoints resulting in lengthy delays, added expense and reduced services for communities in and around Jerusalem. In addition, many AIDA members report difficulties in getting the necessary permits for national staff to enter Jerusalem.

In the West Bank town of Eizarya, a teacher says that the Wall passes just next to the Namzajyya school. "Before the wall was built, kids could go picnic on the Mt. of Olives; now that's impossible. Many people used to come from Jerusalem for shopping and many from here used to go for work in Jerusalem. Today there are many shops that cannot do business anymore. The economic situation is just getting worse."

In East Jerusalem, 67% of Palestinians live in poverty, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. Two hundred thousand Israeli settlers live among 270,000 Palestinians, with visible disparities in infrastructure and municipal services. East Jerusalem residents are in need of aid and development support.

CASE STUDY

The Wall and its Enclaves

The village of Barta'a in the West Bank is located in an 'enclave', where the Wall closes it off from the rest of the West Bank. Residents' access to services has been severely curtailed as a result.

Barta'a is only 15 kilometers from the town of Jenin. Traversing the Barta'a crossing between them, however, can take hours due to extensive checking procedures. The 5,400 residents of the Barta'a enclave are required to hold a special military permit to pass, and an additional permit to pass in a vehicle.

Cars entering the enclave are searched from bumper to hood, and taxis have stopped using the crossing, saying the checks are too long.

At night, the gates at the checkpoint close. Pregnant women often go to live outside the enclave in the weeks before their due date rather than risk going into labour at night.

Three AIDA organizations report being denied access to Barta'a by the Israeli military. Two were refused the required permits. The third AIDA member waited for six weeks for a permit to carry out a two-hour assessment in this location, eventually moving their focus to other areas.



Palestinians wait at a gate in the Wall. Photo by Y. Lien

→ Transport and storage costs increase as AIDA members incur long, unpredictable delays in reaching communities. For example, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency reports that its costs for aid delivery have risen 20% as a result of access restrictions to Gaza.

Reduced quality and effectiveness

Seventy-one percent of AIDA members say that the quality of their programming has been affected by restrictions on movement and access.

- A staff member's residency permit becomes a very important criterion of selection, disqualifying good candidates from positions.
- When staff cannot attend meetings or workshops for lack of a permit, it affects the impact, efficiency and sustainability of aid projects.
- The inability to move goods means that some AIDA members have had to change or redesign activities because of the lack of materials of acceptable quality.

In areas where access restrictions are most pronounced, such as the Gaza Strip or rural areas (Area C) in the West Bank, agencies report that they are shifting from needs-responsive to access-responsive programming, which might be less effective or sustainable.

- 88% of AIDA members who operate in Gaza have modified their optimal response due to access restrictions.
- 87% of AIDA members who operate in Area C have modified their optimal response due to access restrictions.



Shepherds at Baqaa gate in the Wall. Photo by Y. Lein

Missing the most vulnerable

Those communities most in need of humanitarian aid are also those most affected by restrictions on movement and access, making it very difficult to effectively deliver the required relief.

As such, some of the most vulnerable communities are not being reached by humanitarian assistance.

- ➔ 40% of AIDA members have tried to implement programs that were either severely delayed or abandoned due to access restrictions.
- ➔ 42% of AIDA members who answered the question as applicable have opted not to work in the Gaza 'buffer zone'.

¹ OCHA, *West Bank Movement and Access Report*, June 2010.

² Armistice line agreed on in 1949.

³ OCHA/WFP, *Between the Fence and a Hard Place*, 19 August, 2010.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

In light of the increasingly difficult humanitarian conditions in the oPt, particularly in those areas most affected by restrictions on movement and access, as well as the requirements of international law, AIDA makes the following recommendations:

- ➔ The civilian population must be allowed to enjoy basic rights guaranteed in international law, including the right to freedom of movement and choice of residence, as well as the right to an adequate standard of living, adequate housing, and access to education and healthcare.
- ➔ AIDA members' staff must have impartial, rapid and unimpeded access within and between all areas of operation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza.
- ➔ The international community should urge the Government of Israel to ensure impartial, rapid and unimpeded access of humanitarian and development agencies to all areas of operations in the oPt.