

# Gaza Emergency Food Security Assessment

*Following the escalation of hostilities and  
unrest in the State of Palestine in May 2021*

WFP Palestine



June 2021



## Executive Summary

Between 10 and 21 May 2021, hostilities between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in Gaza escalated, with destructive strikes from air, land and sea targeting government buildings, houses, and public service facilities across Gaza. The humanitarian consequences of the conflict have been devastating, exacerbating the already-present impact of restricted movement of people, reduced access to resources and basic social services, and economic stagnation caused by the blockade. Poverty and unemployment—the key drivers of food insecurity in Palestine—are at their peak: in Gaza, nearly seven out of ten people are poor, half of the workforce is unemployed, and seven out of ten households are food insecure. Before the May crisis, more than 80 percent of wage employees in the private sector in Gaza earned less than minimum wage,<sup>1</sup> compared to 7 percent in West Bank<sup>2</sup>.

This assessment explores the impact of the escalation on food security across Gaza to inform and assist Food Security Sector partner planning. The assessment draws on primary and secondary data, available published reports, and results from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

The assessment results underline the critical economic situation in Gaza prior to the escalation of the conflict, with increasing poverty, unemployment and food insecurity levels. In early 2020, the Ministry of Social Development assisted some 80,000 families in Gaza through social protection programmes. During the pandemic, an additional 35,000 COVID-19 adversely affected families were identified for assistance in Gaza. During the 11 days of conflict in May 2021, the number rose again with 96,000 conflict-affected individuals receiving voucher food assistance from WFP. The assessment recommends continued support and implementation of the national cash transfer program and complementary social protection and food assistance programs to ensure vulnerable households can continue to meet their minimum food consumption requirements.

The study has identified several groups that became vulnerable and food insecure as a result of the recent conflict escalation, including 2000 internally displaced families, 20,000 laborers who lost their income, many owners of economic facilities, and farming communities. The impact of the conflict varies in type and intensity ranging from short-term to permanent economic consequences and limiting the ability to sustain livelihoods. The assessment recommends reinforcing and expanding assistance programmes supporting livelihoods, resilience-building and income-generating opportunities for poor and food insecure households. The assessment further recommends providing additional assistance to households who were affected by the May conflict, either through the aforementioned livelihood, resilience-building, income generating programs, or through an extension of short-term humanitarian assistance.

Though availability of food in local retail markets was relatively unaffected during the conflict, access to markets was a challenge and prices of agricultural products significantly decreased due to the restrictions on product exports. This resulted in significant losses for farmers. Availability and prices of agricultural products may be further negatively impacted by closures of the commercial crossing and importation bans on agricultural inputs. The study recommends further assessments of the agricultural sector, concerted advocacy for movement of goods, and supporting farming communities in rehabilitation of production assets which could help in sustaining food supplies in the local market while supporting the livelihoods of some 50,000 farming families.

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1 PCBS, Press Release on the Results of the Labour Force Survey First Quarter (January – March, 2021) Round. Source <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3987>

2 PCBS, Food Security Sector, Socio-Economic & Food Security Survey 2018. Source: <https://fscluster.org/state-of-palestine/document/socio-economic-food-security-survey-2018>



Table of Contents

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 2**

**I. INTRODUCTION ..... 4**

    1.1 BACKGROUND ..... 4

    1.2 OBJECTIVES ..... 4

    1.3 REPORT STRUCTURE ..... 5

**II. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK ..... 5**

    2.1 SECONDARY DATA ..... 5

    2.2 PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION ..... 5

    2.3 ASSESSMENT CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS ..... 5

**III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION ..... 6**

    3.1 FOOD SECURITY PRIOR TO THE CRISIS AND PROVIDED ASSISTANCE ..... 6

    3.2 EFFECTS OF THE CONFLICT ON FOOD SECURITY ..... 6

    3.3 RESILIENCE AND COPING MECHANISMS ..... 9

**IV. RECOMMENDED INTERVENTIONS ..... 9**

**ANNEX 1 - LIST OF INTERVIEWED STAKEHOLDERS ..... 11**

**ANNEX 2 - LIST OF ACRONYMS ..... 11**

**ABOUT US: WFP IN PALESTINE ..... 12**



## I. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Gaza already suffers from a prolonged economic deterioration caused by more than 15 years of siege and sustained undermining of potential economic rehabilitation. With 53 percent of individuals in the Gaza Strip found to be poor in 2017, the poverty rate for the Gaza Strip was four times higher than that of the West Bank rate of 13.9 percent. According to World Bank preliminary estimates, the percentage of poor households will increase to 64 percent in Gaza as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak<sup>3</sup>. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 253 Palestinians were killed between 10 and 21 May 2021, including 66 children and 38 women, of whom 129 were believed to be civilians. Almost 2,000 Palestinians were injured during the hostilities, including over 600 children and 400 women, of whom some 10 percent may suffer from a long-term disability requiring rehabilitation<sup>4</sup>.

All aspects of life were severely affected during the recent escalation of conflict. More than 2000 housing units were totally destroyed, and more than 15,000 units suffered moderate and minor damages. Damaged infrastructure includes public and social services facilities<sup>5</sup>, 58 education facilities and 19 primary healthcare centres. Electricity supply was reduced to 5-6 hours a day and water supply was negatively affected. During the 11 days, people fled their homes and while the majority have since returned, the families who lost their houses continue to be hosted by relatives or are temporarily housed in rented spaces<sup>6</sup>.

The economy of the Gaza Strip was already struggling before the further destruction of factories, shops, companies, agricultural input suppliers, and farming assets. Additionally, the complete restriction of goods in and out of Gaza during and after the conflict has led to direct losses of productive and economic assets and indirect losses minimizing the economic return of all economic sectors.

The conflict led to a significant increase in vulnerability and food insecurity among the people in Gaza. This rapid assessment, conducted by WFP, aims to identify and understand those most affected people. The rapid assessment intends to assist WFP and Food Security Sector partners in planning and design of assistance to Gazans affected by the crisis.

### 1.2 Objectives

This is a qualitative assessment of the impact of the escalation on food security of different vulnerable groups in Gaza. The study attempts to define the most affected groups, describe how they were affected and guide intervention design in the short term (six months) to respond to the urgent needs of vulnerable groups. The specific objectives of the study were:

- Define the most affected people who face acute food insecurity and need urgent support and assess how the crisis affected food security of households considering access to food, food consumption pattern, ability to purchase food, food production, and supply in the local market.
- Assess resilience capacities of the most affected people, determine their applied coping mechanisms, and understand how they responded to their changed food security status.
- Assess the impact of the crisis on food availability and prices and explore any changes in the local market.
- In qualitative terms, assess the effectiveness of the support provided to the people most affected during the crisis.
- Define the urgent needs of the most vulnerable groups and type of support they require which could be used by Food Security Sector partners in their planning and response to the conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> WFP, WFP quarterly report, first quarterly 2021.

<sup>4</sup> OCHA, Escalation of Hostilities and Unrest in the oPt - Flash Appeal, 27 May 2021

<sup>5</sup> MoSD, Statistics of Damages resulted from the Aggression on Gaza Strip, June, 2021

<sup>6</sup> OCHA, Response to the escalation in the oPt Situation Report No. 1: 21-27 May 2021.



### 1.3 Report structure

The first section of the report describes the Gaza context before the conflict and the direct impact of the crisis on the humanitarian and economic conditions. The second part of the study outlines secondary and primary data collection utilized in the study and the study's challenges and limitations. The third part of the study presents the main results including food security context, effects of the conflict on food security, and coping strategies applied by the most affected people. The fourth part of the report presents its recommendation.

## II. Methodological framework

The study utilized both secondary and primary data collection over the period 27 May to 10 June 2021 to reflect the impact of the conflict on food security in quantitative and qualitative terms.

### 2.1 Secondary data

Several assessments, involving multiple institutions, were performed during and after the conflict to quantitatively assess the damages including direct and indirect losses. National authorities such as Ministry of Public Works and Housing (MoPWH), Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), Ministry of Labour, and Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) started the assessment of losses during the escalation of conflict and finalized their processes after the ceasefire. Reports on the numbers and types of damages were issued in the two weeks after the ceasefire. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) issued a flash appeal on 27 May 2021 outlining that US\$95 million are required to meet the urgent needs of 1.3 million persons in need of assistance across different sectors<sup>7</sup>.

### 2.2 Primary data collection

The assessment used primary data to define the most affected groups, describing how they were affected and what types of intervention are urgently needed. The assessment team has met stakeholders listed in annex 1. The study team designed data collection tools including focus group discussions guiding questions and semi-structured interviews.

### 2.3 Assessment challenges and limitations

The study started shortly after the ceasefire was announced, and as a result many institutions, including national authorities, were still in the process of assessing the direct impact of the crisis. Therefore, the quantitative assessment in this rapid assessment report is based on the latest reports issued during the data collection phase.

The study uses the quantitative results of assessments conducted by national authorities which include limited information on the households who were not directly targeted, damaged or destroyed during the conflict. The study tries to cover this gap with limited quantitative data through qualitative tools to define the most affected people and their profile. Further studies on these defined groups may be helpful.

The study team applied COVID-19 precautions and preventative measures while conducting primary data collection.

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<sup>7</sup> OCHA. Escalation of Hostilities and Unrest in the oPt. Flash Appeal. 27 May 2021. Source: [https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/flash\\_appeal\\_27\\_05\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/flash_appeal_27_05_2021.pdf)



### III. Results and discussion

The results are structured to answer the main assessment questions. The results include (1) food security status prior to the escalation and types of provided support; (2) main effects of the conflict on food security; and, (3) coping strategies applied by the most affected people and to which level they were helpful in overcoming negative impacts on their livelihoods.

#### 3.1 Food security prior to the crisis and provided assistance

According to MoSD, the national social protection cash transfer program in Gaza includes approximately 80,000 households (480,000 people), including 9,200 households (55,200 people) that joined the program during COVID-19. In 2021, before the May conflict, 4,000 additional households (24,000 people) registered for the national cash transfer programme. Due to funding constraints, the disbursements have not reached the full list of eligible families before the May 2021 conflict<sup>8</sup>.

The food security status in Gaza has been deteriorating due to the sustained blockade and increase in unemployment and poverty. Prior to the escalation in May 2021, the impact of COVID-19 saw an increase in food insecurity from 1.7 million in 2018 to 2 million people across Palestine in early 2021<sup>9</sup>.

#### 3.2 Effects of the conflict on food security

The United Nations flash appeal<sup>10</sup> includes food security projects supporting 650,000 for six months requiring US\$39 million. The assessment collected the following information on the effects of the escalation of hostilities on food security in Gaza:

**Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)** - The affected families registered with national authorities received emergency food assistance through several Food Security Sector partners including WFP's electronic voucher system and other sources of aid including the Government of Egypt, and Government of Jordan. Interviewed IDPs indicated receiving food items from multiple sources, which wasn't always well coordinated amongst community-based organizations, private sector, and aid agencies. All interviewed beneficiaries asked to be considered in future food assistance programming.

Loss of household assets, including refrigerators and cooking facilities, was a major determinant of food consumption patterns during the conflict and after the ceasefire. While some interviewed IDPs received cash to rent homes and to purchase appliances which allowed them to resume normal food consumption patterns, the majority of interviewed IDPs do not have food storage or food preparation equipment.

During the conflict most food assistance was ready-to-eat canned food items (it was reported that not all foods were well accepted) and electronic food vouchers, which IDPs appreciated for the flexibility to purchase food items that suited their families' consumption patterns.

**Families with lost income** - At the time of this assessment's data collection, most focus was on IDPs, and limited attention was given to people who had lost their income during and after the conflict, such as deceased breadwinners and those who lost means of production or jobs. According to the initial assessment conducted by

<sup>8</sup> Interview with MoSD, May2021.

<sup>9</sup> WFP, "Thousands of Palestinians face food insecurity amid escalating conflict", June 2021. Source: <https://fscluster.org/state-of-palestine/document/thousands-palestinians-face-food>

<sup>10</sup> OCHA. Escalation of Hostilities and Unrest in the oPt. Flash Appeal. 27 May 2021. Source: [https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/flash\\_appeal\\_27\\_05\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/flash_appeal_27_05_2021.pdf)



the Ministry of Labor<sup>11</sup>, it was estimated that 19,766 workers were affected by the direct damages to the active facilities in Gaza Strip, 55 percent of them in Gaza Governorate. Those workers can be classified into three groups: 5,013 completely lost their sources of income, 6,585 had their source of income severely impacted, and 8,168 were partially affected. Additionally, impacted facilities numbered 7,320, 38 percent of them located in Gaza and 26 percent located in the Northern Governorate. These facilities could be classified as follows: 2,342 facilities were completely damaged, 2,416 facilities severely damaged and 2,562 partially damaged. In total, around 20,000 families (120,000 people) lost their income<sup>12</sup>.

Other groups have suffered a temporary loss of income during the conflict, such as casual workers, fishermen and farmers. Fishing was totally banned during the conflict and limited fishing (6 nautical miles) was allowed one week after the end of the war. Many farmers were not able to reach their farms during the conflict and were not able to sell their products in the local market. Casual and seasonal labors were not able to work during the escalation and left without income to meet their essential needs including food. The *Eid* season which came during the escalation is usually considered a good season for casual workers to find small jobs. Based on the reports issued by the Ministry of Labor<sup>13</sup>, the number of adversely impacted workers can be classified by sector: 2,435 in the commercial sector, 2,990 in the service sector, 3,000 in the tourism sector, 4,341 in the industrial sector, and 7,000 in the agricultural sector.

**Host communities/families** – Many of the host communities/families themselves receive food assistance from WFP and other Food Security Sector partners, but during and after the conflict they have stretched their resources to support family and community members who lost their homes, assets or livelihoods. During this and other crises host communities have been the first line of support when displacements take place, sharing what they have, up to and including food they have in stock which in theory is enough to support their households.

**Impact on agricultural sector** - The latest escalation of the conflict caused severe losses in the agricultural sector. According to the MoA assessment<sup>14</sup>, the estimated losses reached US\$103 million:

- a. The MoA assessment, based on verified farmer's reports, details the damages including livestock and plant production, damaged farm assets, and destroyed greenhouses, wells, animal sheds, animals, and trees. The market impact is currently limited, as exportation of vegetables is banned. However, the losses will affect livelihood and food security of farming families and could last several crop seasons.
- b. Access to farms in conflict-affected areas was restricted during the escalation. Major losses for vegetables and poultry farmers were documented. Losses of plants and animals due to lack of irrigation and watering were reported.
- c. Lack of electricity needed for farm operations caused significant losses for Gaza farmers. Some areas experienced 16 hours of electricity cuts each day, leaving farms with no irrigation and no pest control. Limited damage was reported in perennial crops while seasonal crops and poultry farms were severely affected. Electricity cuts prohibited milking dairy cattle, which has lowered the productivity of cows even after the end of the escalation.
- d. Serious damages to the industrial and commercial sector were reported, impacting the long food supply value chain. These include the destruction of many industrial, processing, production, and retail activities inside the industrial zone 'PADICO'.

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<sup>11</sup> MoL, The Impact of The Latest Israeli Aggression (May/2021) on The Palestinian Labor Market and Labor Force (Preliminary report), May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> MoA, Preliminary report of the losses of the Agricultural sector during the war. June, 2021



- e. Several agricultural input storehouses were totally destroyed causing multimillion losses to the owners and lack of input supply to the farmers. One example is Gaza's biggest storehouse of agrochemicals which burned down causing severe environmental crisis and exposing the neighbouring environment to toxins<sup>15 16</sup>.
- f. The commercial crossing of inputs and raw materials used in the agricultural sector is closed resulting in increased cost of agricultural inputs such as seeds, agrochemicals and fodder. Table 1 presents the changes in the market prices of fodder in the local market.

Table1: Changes in the price market for fodder in Gaza strip<sup>17</sup>

Fodder type	Unit	Price before escalation (NIS)	Price after escalation (NIS)
<b>Concentrate ruminants fodder</b>	Ton	1600	1800
<b>Barley and maize</b>	Ton	1400	1500
<b>Laying chicken fodder</b>	Ton	1600	1700
<b>Meat chicken fodder</b>	Ton	2500	2650

**Food availability** - Food supply in the local market was minimally affected by the conflict with food prices relatively stable with very few exceptions. As reported by grocery wholesalers in Gaza, all key food items were readily available, but demand significantly decreased which was attributed to charity food meals that were provided to conflict-affected families which reduced their need to purchase food in the local stores. Currently, flour remains available in the Gaza Strip, with steady wheat flows through Kerem Shalom crossing, and prices relatively stable<sup>18</sup>, with the only reported concern being a shortage of empty bags for packaging flour. Likewise, fresh food such as meat and vegetables was reported in normal supply during and after the escalation. Vegetables retailers stated that the supply of vegetables has increased after the ceasefire when a ban was imposed by the authorities on vegetable exports out of Gaza.

**Contamination of agricultural products** - Plant production farmers reported huge, deep holes in their lands caused by the airstrikes, which constrains future cultivation, and possibly risks exposure to contamination. Lack of resources and research facilities in Gaza may limit the ability to conduct research on the environmental impact of these explosions on the quality and productivity of the natural resources (land and water).

**Fresh food prices** - Farmers reported a significant decrease in vegetable prices after the escalation of hostilities which is widely believed to be linked to the vegetable exportation restrictions. The result is that locally produced vegetables currently cost more to produce than their local market selling price which is particularly concerning considering that farmers typically purchase agricultural inputs on credit and repay following their sales. Table 2 shows the current prices of vegetables in Gaza market against the breakeven prices (the cost of production)

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