



## TARGETED PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE IN THE GAZA STRIP

### Occupied Palestinian territory



Lots of people in the Gaza Strip need psychological support. A competence centre co-funded by the SDC is providing support. © GCMHP

Hardly any other people in the Middle East suffer from mental health issues to the same extent as the Palestinians. The political, economic and social consequences of the closure in the Gaza Strip is affecting people's health. The Gaza Community Mental Health Programme – supported by the SDC – is providing them with counselling, courses and therapy. 20,000 people received support in 2017 alone.

All of the Gaza Strip's borders are controlled by foreign powers. Very few inhabitants are able to leave the territory which has an area of 365 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 1.9 million. Poverty, the highest rate of unemployment in the world, daily interruptions to water and power supply and political and social conflict – a long list of issues makes everyday life difficult. It is little wonder that children and adults are increasingly suffering from mental health issues. A survey carried out by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2017 indicated that around 296,000 children and 223,000 caregivers from disadvantaged social strata require regular support. They suffer from a wide range of symptoms: nightmares, bed-wetting, aggressiveness, grief, apathy, anxiety disorders, stress, a sense of powerlessness, hopelessness, depression and suicidal thoughts.

The Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP), which was founded in 1990 and has 70 staff, provides targeted support and runs community centres in Gaza City, Deir al-Balah and Khan Yunis. Switzerland has been supporting the competence centre since 1997 and – together with Sweden and Norway – covers around three-quarters of its budget. Switzerland has contributed half a million Swiss francs a year since 2005. This financial commitment helps lots of people in need. Over 20,000 people benefited from the wide range of services in 2017 alone.

#### Many women are using the helpline

The counselling and therapy services provided at the three community centres are the main part of the programme. They include one-to-one and group sessions with children and adults, relationship therapy and advice for parents having problems dealing with their children. They also run workshops focusing on psychological issues in nursery and school classes. A free telephone advice service was used by more than 1,300 people in 2017. Around two-thirds of the calls are made by girls and women. They often concern parenting issues but relationship problems and domestic violence are also frequently dealt with.

Those affected appreciate the services provided by the community centres. Over 94% of them indicated they were satisfied in a survey carried out in 2017. «The programme allows people to express their concerns in a protected environment and to receive help,» explained Jacqueline Birrer who works for the SDC. That is not just important for the person concerned but also for those around them. «If a father is no longer able to work due to depression, for example, the entire family has a tough time,» remarked Birrer. The treatment is equally important for the many children suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder due to the events of war. «It allows them to return to school and complete their qualifications. The future of an entire generation is at stake here.»

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## Workshops, courses and research

As well as running the three community centres, the GCMHP also provides workshops and courses for students, teachers and other professionals who are frequently faced with mental health issues. The range of topics covered includes autism, post-traumatic stress disorders, psychological first aid, various methods of psychotherapy, stress management and trauma therapy. In total, more than 1,200 people attended these courses in 2017. The third element of the programme involves the organisation of conferences and research activities which are often carried out in conjunction with prestigious universities from all over the world.

The SDC regards its support for the competence centre as part of its long-term commitment to the most vulnerable social strata in the occupied Palestinian territory. «The need for mental health support services will only decrease when the living conditions of the local population in the Gaza Strip improve,» explained Marie Gilbrin Duruz, head of the SDC co-operation office in East Jerusalem.

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## Project in brief

### Background

The population in the Gaza Strip suffers from trauma, mental health and psychosocial problems such as anxiety, depression and grief, as a result of the complex situation generated by the long-term blockade imposed by Israel, recurrent armed conflict (most recently in July–August 2014) with high civilian casualties and the internal Palestinian division. The mental health situation is co-determined by the poor socioeconomic living conditions in the Gaza Strip, a severely reduced access to health care, increased poverty and unemployment. This has an important impact on the wellbeing and mental health of the people, who feel hopeless as regards their future – no economic development, no possibility to leave the Gaza Strip.

### Objectives

GCMHP provides high quality, integrated and specialized mental health services to enhance and sustain the Palestinian society's wellbeing, based on the principles of justice, humanity, and respect for Human Rights.

### Target groups

Psychological patients, in particular vulnerable groups such as children, adolescents, women and, in general, individuals who need to improve their mental performance, victims of violence and human rights violations. The direct beneficiaries of the intervention are around 10.800 people.

About 870 professionals of the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) sector such as students, ministries, NGOs and CBOs staff whose skills and performance are enhanced.

Persons with mental health problems or traumatised by the regular armed conflicts and blockade of the Strip will benefit from the project as well as professional working in the field of psychosocial support and mental health.

### Partners

Partners of the GCMHP consortium (SDC Lead); SIDA (Sweden), Norway and others.

### Budget

Current phase Swiss budget CHF 1'964'000.–. Total project since first phase (including project partners' contributions) CHF 12'171'200.–.

### Project phase 8

01.02.2015–31.12.2018

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## Imprint

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation;  
Cooperation Office Gaza & West Bank

Link to SDC's strategy in the oPt:

<http://www.swiss-cooperation.admin.ch/gazaandwestbank/>