

Development Studies Programme--Birzeit University
&
United Nations Children's Fund

Risk Factors and Priorities: Perspectives of Palestinian Young People

(A Participatory Study)

1999

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United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was founded in 1946 as a response to children in crisis all over the world following World War II. Since then, the organization has evolved from an emergency organization to a human development organization that aims to protect children's rights all over the world, through social mobilization, empowerment, advocacy and capacity building of governmental and non-governmental organizations working on behalf of children. UNICEF is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the goals adopted at the World Summit for Children in 1990. UNICEF is present in almost every country in the world and its programmes are highly country sensitive and developed in close consultation with local authorities and organizations. Although UNICEF has been working with the Palestinians since many decennia, the UNICEF Special Representative's Office for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was established immediately following the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993. The basis for UNICEF's support is a three-year Master Plan of Operations (1998-2000), signed jointly by the Ministry of Planning & International Cooperation of the Palestinian Authority and UNICEF.

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Preface

In recent years, the concept of “participation” as a tool for development planning and research has taken the forefront as a necessary and indeed vital element for creating and enacting sustainable human development programs. It goes without saying that providing the community with the opportunity to voice their concerns and needs is key to enabling viable and necessary change. Furthermore, it is of absolute necessity to involve the community in a systematic way throughout the development process. That is, to empower the community to create, implement and maintain development projects so as to better serve their needs, and sustain and propel them to a better and prosperous future. Thus it is self-evident that those who must be given the most opportunity for input are tomorrow’s future—today’s youth.

Palestinian youth suffer a double-dose of marginalization. As Palestinians, they have suffered the inequities of life under occupation and have endured a life deprived of the basic freedoms of expression and movement. As youth, they must not only contend with the usual pitfalls of adolescence, but they must cope with them in a society which traditionally does not pay enough attention to young people. Thus, if community participation in development is aimed at providing a better reality for future generations, it is unfathomable that today’s youth are continuously neglected and unrecognized as an essential part of society.

In order to help draw attention to the case of the Palestinian youth, the Development Studies Programme (DSP) has taken it upon itself to include issues pertaining to youth and development within its developmental vision. From its inception the DSP has attempted to facilitate the voicing of youth concerns and opinions, thereby creating a way to heed them, by forging partnerships with various youth organizations and advocacy groups on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Many workshops and meetings have been held with youth leaders and advocates in order to clarify youth issues and pinpoint the areas that need addressing.

Thus it is in cooperation with UNICEF that the DSP has taken on the task of approaching youth in a direct and informed manner to facilitate the open expression of their views and concerns without fear of reproach. The perspectives of young people are respected as a vital component of development discourse at the DSP. As such, this study has been undertaken with the aim of not simply accumulating information on youth, but to use this information to enlighten development discourse and in turn actively promote the drafting of youth-oriented policies.

The DSP would like to thank UNICEF for its foresight in realizing the importance of integrating youth perspectives into the development process, and for their technical support throughout. The DSP expresses its deep gratitude to the youth organizations involved in this study for providing the facilities and the access to the youth involved herein. The DSP thanks the participating experts who so graciously shared their time and knowledge. And lastly, the DSP would like to extend its warmest appreciation to all the youth who participated in this study, and to thank them for allowing us a brief glimpse into the realities of their lives. They are to be commended for the enthusiasm and readiness with which they approached these workshops.

Executive Summary

The current study on the risk factors to physical and mental health and well-being, and the priorities of Palestinian youth was conducted jointly by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Birzeit University Development Studies Programme. The goal of the study was to encourage and enable the participation of Palestinian youth in assessing their needs and priorities. This study was intended to contribute to the development of policies and programs geared towards fulfilling the needs of Palestinian youth, as well as promoting the capacity of national and local bodies to effectively plan and program for the needs of youth in a participatory approach.

The study involved interviewing 134 children and youth between the ages of 10 and 22 through a series of focus group discussions. These workshops took place throughout the areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with a sample of youth taken from the areas of Nablus, Ramallah and Bethlehem/Hebron in the West Bank, and Gaza City and Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip. They were encouraged to identify and discuss their perceptions of the risk factors affecting their physical and mental health and well-being, and subsequently their needs and suggestions for confronting these risks. Additionally, the study interviewed and took into account the experienced opinions of professionals working in the government sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), professional and community organizations, as well as youth leaders, so as to find out what they themselves perceived were the risk factors, needs and priorities of Palestinian youth.

Among the many issues raised and discussed by the youth were those concerning political participation, economic situation, health, education and family relationships. The perpetual Israeli occupation continues to restrict both movement and freedom of expression. The Palestinian Authority has yet to seriously enact an all-inclusive platform encouraging youth participation and facilitating the voicing of their concerns, a fact which has had a demoralizing effect on youth today. A deteriorating economic situation with decreasing job opportunities is a continuing source of disillusionment for Palestinian youth. The current lack of quality healthcare, and a system that does not take into consideration the holistic health of young people, also disaffected the participants. They repeatedly mentioned an unresponsive educational system that does not serve to enhance independence and self-confidence among its students. Familial influence and control over the lives of young people are an incessant source of despondency. Furthermore, youth expressed the need for youth-oriented programs, activities and centers to combat the above-mentioned risk factors. Thus it appears that the underlying tone throughout all the discussions reflected general feelings of marginalization, fear and frustration felt by the youth.

The notion of marginalization could be sensed in the social and political concerns and resulting anguish expressed by the youth. The conservatism of Palestinian society compounded by the continuing Israeli occupation are all evidence of authoritarianism, which in turn restricts the youth's natural and healthy development into adulthood. Lines of communication with parents at home and educators at school are a one-way channel which limit young people's creativity and ability to express themselves at this critical stage. These general restrictions prevent them from both articulating their needs and being heard, leaving their concerns and issues neglected.

Fear was a prevalent theme throughout the discussions in that many youth consistently restrained themselves from fully expressing their ideas. That is, when a sensitive topic was broached--gender roles, sexual education, relationship with the family, etc--many refrained from making any outright statements or taking any stances that openly flew in the face of traditions. These issues included, but were not limited to, the fear of the unexpected, poverty, authority, failure, etc.

Frustration stemmed from the participants' general feeling of not being in control of their lives. Again, in adherence to traditions and the forced willingness to please authority figures, they were unable to make the decisions affecting their very lives, whether in terms of education, economics, politics, health or social matters. Their eagerness to please goes right back to their fear of unsettling the status quo. The lingering occupation also promotes frustration with its incessant restrictions on movement, whether at home or abroad, which in turn directly corresponds to restrictions on education, employment, social awareness, and the like.

It can be said that the impact of the above-mentioned issues is twofold as it concerns girls and young women. The fact that Palestinian society is male-dominated and encourages discrimination against women adds additional burdens to female youth. Issues such as early marriage, violence, and a general lack of equality in all aspects of life were considered major risk factors according to most young female participants.

In essence, youth needs should be examined comprehensively, with programs and activities catering to the improvement of Palestinian young people's psychological and mental health. Young people's needs, views and opinions should be taken into account in any development plan by policy-makers in order to ensure the building of a healthy and successful Palestinian society.

Section I

Concept & Methodology

A. Introduction

Adolescence is the period of the lifecycle that blends childhood into adulthood—as infancy is the gateway to childhood, so adolescence is the gateway to adulthood.¹ The adolescent years are a transitional period of rapid growth and development, and the changes that young people undergo during this period of their lives are all-encompassing. Physical, emotional, psychological, social and spiritual changes all intensify the metamorphosis from free-spirited and unencumbered child to young adult obliged with duties and responsibilities. As children pass through adolescence, they attempt to develop a sense of self and begin to work towards self-reliance. Yet they are torn between two worlds—that of a young adult yearning to break out of the confines of childhood, and that of an adolescent who is still dependent upon and subject to parents. They remain dependent on adults to meet their basic needs for health and development—needs that are defined as rights in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (subsequently identified as the Convention). The fact that the Convention was drafted at all exemplifies children's continuing vulnerability, and in turn the urgent need to protect their rights to health and development.

The Convention provides the legal basis for the enforcement of the basic human rights to which each child is entitled. That is, "the right to survival; the right to the development of their full physical and mental potential; the right to protection from influences that are harmful to their development; and the right to participation in family, cultural and social life."² The Convention sets out the rights for every child to lead a healthy and productive life. It recognizes and seeks to enforce the rights of children to express their views "in all matters that concern them," and to have those views be "given due weight."³ The Convention urges governments to implement a minimum standard of laws ensuring the overall well-being of children including, but not limited to, health care, education, and social and legal services. The Convention attempts to serve as a guiding force in countries where these basic human rights are not allotted to children. However, in societies where traditions and customs still rule everyday life, and innovative laws are suspected, the institution of the Convention's standards becomes doubly difficult.

In Palestinian society, around 46.9% of the population are under the age of 15. An additional 27.4% are between the ages of 15-29.⁴ Palestinian youth have lived for an extended period of time in an environment characterized by frequent violence and traumatic events, the closure of educational institutions, and daily restrictions affecting every aspect of their lives. This environment has denied them many of the educational and psycho-social development opportunities enjoyed in more normal circumstances, leading to and increasing concern about future prospects and their place in a peaceful state. This, coupled with a society described as conservative and traditional, makes it difficult for young people to express their needs freely and openly.

¹Youth Health – For A Change, UNICEF, 1997

²The Convention on the Rights of the Child: Questions Parents Ask, UNICEF

³ibid

⁴Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. The Demographic Survey in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Preliminary Report, March 1996

The signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993 by Israel and the PLO brought about new changes and realities. While Palestinian institutions and bodies had been operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip throughout the occupation, only following the signing did they begin to function under the auspices of a Palestinian governing body present in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. National policy planning began, and slowly but surely these policies are being enacted and integrated.

Palestinian youth organizations have been in existence in small numbers for some time, but only now are they beginning to seriously take action in aiding today's youth. Previously, very active youth organizations had been functioning in the West Bank, most of which had been politically affiliated. Although they have done much in terms of creating a voluntary work ethic and encouraging participation, most of the activism was highly political and partisan, calling into doubt its sustainability. Most did not even broach issues relevant to the holistic well-being of children and youth. Thus, in spite of the continuous efforts of these organizations to meet the needs of young people, they have not been able to respond to the enormity of the need due to lack of resources and professional skills. There continues to be insufficient local awareness of the holistic needs of young people. In addition, the nature of Palestinian society being structured around the notion of seniority and patriarchy leads to power being left in the hands of the elders, thus leaving youth needs further compromised.

In addition, few studies have been conducted attempting to identify young people's perceptions of the issues that concern them. A study by the Palestinian Coalition for Women's Health in 1995 investigated adolescents' perceptions of their own health and well-being. It revealed the necessity of reaching out to young people, listening to their own views about issues of concern, and trying to incorporate those opinions into the policy-making process.⁵ Similarly, a 1997 study by the Palestine Youth Program—Quakers Service attempted to investigate youth's perception of their needs, rights and roles, the importance of taking people's views seriously, and the necessity to work jointly for the fulfillment of their needs. The study found them to be crucial priorities in the broader nation-building process.⁶

Needs-assessment workshops conducted by various Palestinian organizations working with young people, including government ministries and NGOs such as the Palestine Youth Union, Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association and the Tamer Institute for Community Education to mention but a few, contribute to highlighting young people's issues and concerns. Though considerably few workshops have been conducted, they are nonetheless a beginning for incorporating young people's voices in the planning and implementation of youth programs.

⁵Needs Assessment on Adolescent Women's Health, Palestinian Coalition for Women's Health, 1995

⁶Palestinian Youth: Needs, Rights and Roles, Quakers Service—Palestine Youth Program, Unpublished Study, 1997, in coordination with the Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association and the Palestinian Youth Union

B. Purpose of the Study

Palestinian adolescents have many of the same needs as adolescents anywhere. Yet the young Palestinian has had to endure and mature under special circumstances. The occupation alone has had a traumatic and lingering effect on the lives of all Palestinians, let alone the young and impressionable. Coupled with a conservative and traditional social mentality, the Palestinian youth has had to overcome a great number of obstacles on the road to healthy physical and emotional development.

The limited information available on the perception of adolescents' own needs prompted UNICEF and the Development Studies Program at Birzeit University to conduct a study investigating Palestinian youth's perceptions of the risk factors affecting their lives and needs. The study aims at promoting youth participation in the developmental process through their own participation in discussions regarding their need to live a healthy life--physically, mentally, socially and spiritually.

This study aimed at identifying risk factors to a healthy life facing young Palestinians, as well as assessing their needs and priorities using a participatory approach. It provided a forum of discussion for Palestinian young people in order to express and articulate their needs, priorities and roles in development. This study intends to contribute to the development of policies and programs aimed at fulfilling the needs of today's Palestinian youth. Additionally, it hopes to aid national and local bodies in effectively planning for the needs and rights of youth.

The objectives of the study are:

- To identify youths' perception of their own needs and risk factors to physical and mental health and well-being. The purpose is to provide youth generated data for planning, program reviews, monitoring and evaluation.
- To assist in the participation process of youth in identifying their problems and actively bringing about change. This process can then help youth in systematically examining their own needs and issues, and in turn encourage them to find solutions to their problems.
- To assist in improving data and understanding of young people's problems, particularly those related to their lack of access to services, information and participation, so as to develop short and long term programming responses to the identified issues.
- To assist in identifying and creating partnerships between governments, NGOs, youth, communities and donors so as to better serve the needs of youth.
- To highlight youth issues so as to increase general awareness of their concerns.
- To try to lobby for policies which might facilitate the development of appropriate support services dealing with youth.

C. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, a participatory approach was used due to its relevance to the study's goals and objectives. Focus group discussions with young people provide a better way to understand their perceptions of their needs and the risk factors affecting their lives by giving them some sense of freedom to express themselves without fear of reproach from adult authority figures. Issues identified from the youth focus groups were then presented and discussed with experienced Palestinian professionals who then also identified what they perceived were important issues for investigation.

Phase I

Focus & Analytical Group Discussions

Youth and community centers in different areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were approached to gain access to youth. Location of the centers played a major role in the selection of the sample. Additionally, the diversity of the youth attending the centers, in terms of geographical distribution, age, socioeconomic backgrounds, disability and work status, all aided in selecting participants for the focus groups.

The study included boys and girls and young men and women within the age range of 10-22, with focus groups divided into the age brackets of 10-14, 15-18 and 19-22. Young people from the West Bank varied in location, hailing from the general areas of Nablus in the north, Bethlehem and Hebron in the south and Ramallah in the central West Bank. Within these divisions there could be found geographic and socioeconomic variances as youth came from the main cities and surrounding areas, including villages and refugee camps. In the Gaza Strip, youth came from the general vicinities of Gaza City and Khan Younis, and again, from cities and refugee camps. Composition of the focus groups was made up mainly of students from schools, community colleges and universities. Some participants were working or had dropped out of school.

The design of the study included four preliminary focus group discussions followed by three analytical focus groups. The initial focus group discussions served to lay out the basic framework of needs and risks as identified by the participants. Within these focus groups, issues were introduced and discussed at the pace of the participants. Upon completing the initial workshops, results were sorted and then presented to the three subsequent analytical focus groups, participants of which were encouraged to discuss, analyze and prioritize these issues.

The initial focus group discussions were open-ended and not in a question-answer format. This insured that participants did not feel pressured, and instead encouraged a free exchange of ideas. The workshops began with an introduction of the interviewers, followed by a presentation of the study, its purpose and goals. Introduction of participants would then take place utilizing various ice-breaking techniques, including games to better facilitate participants in getting to know each other (i.e. participants spoke to and then introduced the person sitting next to them to the group as a whole, etc.).

Following introductions, participants were asked what they believed the risk factors affecting their lives were. Once a participant introduced a topic (i.e. early marriage, education, etc), others would join in the conversation giving their opinions and debating the feasibility of others' ideas. Discussion tended to flow from one topic to another, with frequent backtracking to previously mentioned issues. For the most part, the facilitator did not interrupt discussions, except in order to guide the group in discussing the main topics, that is, risks, needs, roles and rights. The facilitator would also occasionally steer the group towards elaborating further on a particularly heated topic. However, in cases where a participant was overly aggressive and seemed intent on pushing his/her own agenda at the expense of others, the facilitator attempted to provide positive reinforcement and examples showing that diverse ideas and opinions are all part of a healthy debate.

Different methods were used in the focus group discussions. The younger age group, 10-14 year olds, were asked to express risk factors and needs using various techniques such as drawing, free-writing and role-playing. A presentation of the drawings was made to the group as a whole, and discussion followed. These drawings and writing samples later provided the basis upon which data analysis for this age group was done. For 15-22 year olds, straightforward discussion of needs and risk factors ensued freely. The presence of the facilitator provided a sense of guidance with minimal interference. The facilitator led discussions using recommended focus group techniques.⁷ Sessions were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed in-depth.

The analytical groups consisted of the same composition of participants and involved discussion of preliminary findings from the focus groups. Analytical group discussions differed from the initial focus group sessions in that analytical group discussions were much more structured and had an agenda. They intended to debate, analyze and prioritize the findings from earlier focus groups. Analytical workshops involved a facilitator presenting findings to participants and prompting debate as to their validity. Participants were asked to write and present their opinions, opening up their ideas to debate. Votes and ideas were taken into consideration and tallied, and this provided the basis for collating the data from all focus groups.

The following table illustrates the distribution of participants in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip according to location, age and gender.

Distribution of Participants

	West Bank	Gaza Strip	Total
Type of Locality			
Towns	34	24	58
Villages	22	15	37
Refugee Camps	21	18	39
Age Group			
10-14	16	22	38
15-18	37	10	47

⁷ A Manual for the Use of Focus Groups, WHO Document TDR/SER/MER/92.1

19-22	24	25	49
Gender			
Girls	38	26	64
Boys	39	31	70
Total	77	57	134

Phase II

Interviews with Experts

A list of fifteen professionals and youth leaders with experience in the fields of health, education, counseling and youth issues was compiled. Prior to the youth focus group discussions, six individual interviews were conducted with the experts. Following the focus group workshops and the first stage of analysis, another nine analytical interviews took place.

All initial interviews followed a standard format. The interviewer would first introduce the purpose of the study and then ask the following questions.

1. What, in your opinion, are the needs of Palestinian young people in terms of physical, educational, mental, recreational, work related and marriage related, and in terms of youth aspirations?
2. What are the rights of young people in relation to those needs?
3. What roles can young people play towards fulfilling their needs?
4. What are the risk factors to the physical and mental health and well-being of Palestinian youth, and their sources?

List of local experienced professionals and activists interviewed.

Preliminary interviews

Muharram Barghouti	Ministry of Youth & Sports	West Bank
Ziad Amr	Union of the Disabled	West Bank
Robert McGregor	UNAIS – affiliated with the Union of the Disabled	West Bank
Salwa Najjab	Palestinian Coalition for Women's Health	West Bank
Hania Aswad	Panorama Youth Network – Youth and Democracy Project	West Bank
Muhammad Al-Fara	Ministry of Youth and Sports	Gaza

Analytical Interviews

Rita Giacaman	Institute of Community & Public Health—Birzeit University	West Bank
Dua'a Qurei'	Palestine Youth Union	West Bank
Laura Wick	Palestinian Coalition for Women's Health	West Bank
Abdul Kader Abu Awad	Palestine Red Crescent Society – Rehabilitation	West Bank

	Department	
Ra'fat Al-Aidi	Youth Leader	Gaza
	Ministry of Youth & Sports	Gaza
Hashem Thalathini	Gaza Program for Mental Health	Gaza
Rania Khayyat	Palestinian Youth Network	West Bank
Mu'taz Abdul Hassib	Palestinian Youth Network	West Bank

Collation of Data

Transcripts of focus group sessions and analytical sessions with Palestinian youth, in addition to interviews with professionals were examined carefully and results were collated into tables defining priorities under each heading, with subsequent sub-headings following. The results were then analyzed by tallying the number of times a particular heading was listed by a participant. This allowed for reaching a numerical order of priorities mentioned by participants. Additionally, regional variations, age and gender distribution were all accounted for to reveal differences in views according to region, age and gender. Finally, the content of each interview was examined separately, revealing general approaches and views of young people's needs and risk factors. It is necessary to note that while the basis of this project was quantitative, the analysis has proven to be mostly qualitative.

Section II

Presentation of Findings

A. The Perspective of Youth

This section describes the issues of most concern to a sample of Palestinian adolescents. These issues fall within the general realms of political, economic, social and cultural perspectives. Ordering does not reflect the degree or frequency of answers.

Political Instability and the Need for Participation

As came out of the focus group discussions throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the main risk factor to a healthy life was the political situation. Most participants mentioned the effect of the Israeli occupation on all aspects of life such as education, work, and restrictions on movement, with particular emphasis placed upon it by those living in Gaza. Among the younger participants, those between the ages of 10-14, the occupation was described as being a barrier to their lives. For children living in Gaza, the occupation was in direct relation to their very livelihood. When they were asked how the occupation affected them personally, they gave the example of fathers working in Israel and how, when there is a closure, the father gets angry and the whole house is then affected by his anger. Deteriorating economic conditions lead to stress and anger. The youngsters mentioned the fear of their father not returning if anything happened at work, citing for example the burning of a bus of laborers in Gaza. For them the occupation was also a physical barrier for work and movement. They discussed not being able to work because of checkpoints and barriers limiting travel. Most cannot even travel to the West Bank, even for a visit.

For the older groups, 15-18 and 19-22, the occupation symbolized the futility of hoping for a better future. Many cited the “glory” of the Intifada days, when youth had been able and were eager to participate in the “struggle.” However, many felt that the peace process did not bring about any positive changes, leaving many youth disenfranchised and cheated. Disenfranchised because they have lost their primary roles in the political struggle, and cheated because they do not feel that the peace process has brought or will bring the occupation and its effects to an end.

Additionally, the occupation serves as a block to both physical movement and intellectual development. Participants in the West Bank discussed their frustration at not being able to travel to the Gaza Strip or even communicate with youth there out of solidarity. Participants feel detached from their counterparts in Gaza or the West Bank and a few even expressed difficulty in comprehending the concept of being one people, one nation, a result of the lack of communication and corresponding ignorance. For Gazans, the occupation was a barrier particularly to their ability to travel and get an education. Restrictions on movement outside of Gaza forbid them from traveling to universities either abroad or even as near as the West Bank.

An interesting note was what appeared to be the youth’s analysis of the Palestinian National Authority’s (PNA) performance. As one young man from Gaza stated:

"We in Gaza were really eager to welcome the leadership back to Palestine. Now we are disappointed because the PNA did not fulfill youth's aspirations and expectations. Inequality of opportunities prevail."

Economic Conditions

The current difficult economic situation and lack of work opportunities were considered a prevalent risk factor for youth today. The fear of poverty was evident in all workshops but nowhere was it more obvious than in Gaza among the 10-14 year olds. It came across very clearly in their answers and their role-play. They said that poverty affects their access to healthcare. If a child does not have money and needs medical attention, it is not possible. They also spoke about how it affects their school possibilities. Children are often forced to withdraw from school because they are unable to buy school supplies. Children were able to clearly connect poverty and delinquency like theft. The children also spoke about the need for transportation to and from school. Some in the group said they walk several kilometers to and from school. Another important issue is that of child labor. Often children are forced out of school and into the work force in order to assist their families.

Psycho-social factors

Under the category of psycho-social factors fell the general risks of delinquency, misuse of freedom, violence, drug abuse and rape. A big complaint among participants was the aimlessness of youth today, specifically young men. Many participants stated that most young men today have no clear goals and express no hope for the future, the proof for which is manifested in the phenomenon of droves of young men lining the streets of main cities such as Ramallah. Some young people used the example of the Intifada to show the difference between the young people of today and those of a few years ago. Again, the youth of the Intifada were considered to have had goals and responsibilities, willing to take action at all costs, whereas today young folks have nothing to look forward to and are not willing to seek out opportunities. The absence of hope and opportunity opens up these young people to delinquency for lack of anything better to do.

However, in response, one 22-year-old male from the Ramallah area stated that most young people do have the will and the energy to work or study for a better future. But the fact remains that there are no outlets and no opportunities. They feel that they have no one to encourage them and nowhere to go. Many felt that too much free time leads youth to smoking, drinking and meeting and spending time with "bad" people, "bad" influences.

A common thread that ran through all of the focus groups regardless of age and location, was the insistence on the establishment of more youth centers. They stated that they need outlets for entertainment, exercise and spending leisure time, a safe environment accessible to all young people. In addition, organized activities could be offered to keep young people off the streets and busy, as well as to offer opportunities for improvement and a chance for the future. Youth also expressed the need to further develop and mobilize existing community centers in terms of programs and staff, as they do not feel that existing centers fulfill their needs. That is, many feel that current youth centers simply provide space without organization or activities. Participants further elaborated on the fact

that youth centers could provide a safe haven for communication with the opposite sex, a topic still taboo in most circles of society.

Young participants, children in the 10-14 year old age bracket, expressed wishes for playgrounds and recreational facilities as well. They would like a place where they can freely express themselves without fear of reproach from authority figures. In some of their drawings, they expressed the need for these centers and facilities by drawing elaborate "plans" of the types of facilities their ideal society would make available to them. In one particularly insightful plan, an 11-year-old from Ramallah drew what appears to be a city plan filled with centers, restaurants and amusement park rides (see Appendix 1). Of particular interest is the care that the young girl took to include a gym so as to learn karate for fun. In addition, she drew, amongst all these apparently recreation oriented facilities, a hospital fit with a counseling center. The fact that a child of 11 would find it necessary to include a hospital with a counseling center and a gym for karate shows that these children are feeling alone and helpless, are in need of outlets and are themselves making a connection between emotional and physical well-being.

Gender Roles

Traditions and customs that discriminate between boys and girls were another source of risks to healthy development according to participants. While most participants readily admitted that this kind of discrimination does exist and that in most forms it is detrimental to the development of both females and males, very few were willing to make statements denouncing outright the practice in its forms. Young women pointed out the differences in behavior by parents towards male and female children. While most young men are granted the freedom to come and go as they please and to associate with whomever they choose, young women are kept under tight watch. As one 16-year-old girl from the Bethlehem area stated:

"Boys can come home whenever they want. But if I were to go out at 4pm and return at 4:30pm, I would be severely questioned. 'What were you doing? Who were you with?'"

Freedom of association is another right often taken for granted by young men. In another example, a different 16-year-old girl stated that she had once joined a dabkeh group⁸ as an after-school activity. However, when her father found out that there were boys her age participating, she was pulled out immediately. Gender often plays a role in education as well. As one young woman from Ramallah pointed out:

"Even if a girl is smarter than a boy, the boy will always be the one chosen to go to university."

However, even with all this clear bias in favor of boys, and the general consensus by most participants that these are not favorable conditions for young girls, in one focus group discussion, all participants with the exception of one 16-year-old girl, seemed to agree and came to conclusion that while everyone is entitled to their rights, girls and boys are not

⁸ traditional Palestinian dance troop

equal. Many argued that girls and boys have different roles in society and that they can never be expected to be treated in the same way because they are inherently different. In a separate focus group discussion, a comment was made by a young woman, a 22-year-old from Ramallah, that girls do need more looking after than boys because they are defenseless and could get "hurt" when going out. This young woman is herself a university student and had assumed throughout the discussion the role of the young and modern, educated woman.

Related to the issue of gender roles and traditions and customs is the issue of early marriage. Early marriage came up in every workshop and was considered a great risk to healthy development. Most people agreed that early marriage has a negative impact not only on the girls themselves but also on their children and families as young girls would not be well equipped to deal with the responsibilities of marriage and children. Early marriages were seen as a direct result of undereducated parents. They were also considered risky in terms of health. Some participants were vehement in their opposition to early marriage stating that a young girl is not "a dress or a box of cookies to be bought and sold. She has an identity" (17-year-old, Bethlehem area).

However, many participants again steered the discussion towards looking at the positive aspects of marrying young. For one young man, a 16-year-old from the Bethlehem area, marrying daughters off young takes a heavy economic burden off of the father. For others, the decision to marry young was based on the prospects for marriage in the future. As one 17-year-old girl stated:

"If a girl waits until she is 25, she will get offers from much older men. Why wait? Better to take the first offer at 18."

For some young women, marrying prospects often decide whether or not they will attend university. Some stated that it is too difficult to find a husband after university. Often men will not want a very educated woman out of an inferiority complex. Some women look at it as useless to go to university if after marrying there will be no possibility to work.

An interesting side note is a comment made by a young man in response to a comment made by the facilitator that each person has the right to set his or her own priorities, whether that be to study or marry. He stated that for girls the choice is not up to them. The father decides, and not even the mother gets a say in some cases. So why say that girls can do whatever they want in theory, when in reality they are subject to others' decisions?

It appeared in the end, however, that most participants agreed that improved communication between parents and children was the key to understanding and healthy development. Additionally, education and the availability of information on the risks of the above-mentioned issues would help bridge the communication gap and aid the developmental process.

Health Issues

The issue of quality healthcare was another topic mentioned and discussed thoroughly by all focus groups, regardless of age and location, although the type of care tended to vary. For some, as in those from Gaza, it was the issue of simple medical attention that was of concern. Poverty leads to lack of care, which in turn exacerbates existing medical conditions and problems. Some were interested in receiving thorough quality care and cited personal examples to show the extent of the current neglect. A 16-year-old in the Bethlehem stated that the closest she and her friends ever got to a medical checkup at their school was once “every two months when someone comes to check our nails. They don’t check anything else. They think this is the only aspect of health.”

Health needs comprised a variety of sub-topics including the need for health education courses about sexuality, women’s health, family planning, nutrition, first aid and AIDS. The need for quality healthcare that includes psychological and physical health was another sub-topic emphasized by participants. This is confirmed by the fact that high schools almost completely omit from the curriculum any discussion on the body, sex education or other related topics. Adolescents are left to themselves to understand and grasp what is happening to them, and they are often obliged to resort to inaccurate information to manage their bodies and their health.

Another factor is that schools and programs are often constrained by the norms and values of parents, educators, religious and community leaders, policy-makers, etc. As a result, most youth-oriented programs rarely offer the information or services most needed. As one girl in Ramallah stated:

“I would like to know everything about the changes that are happening to me, but I do not know whom to ask or where to go to get information.”

Emphasis on a healthy environment was also mentioned. The need for clean water and the importance of a good understanding of the role of environmental health on youth health and well-being were all discussed. It was clear that these youth do indeed have a comprehensive view of health.

Educational Issues

Under the general heading of education come two issues of great importance as expressed by the youth—teacher/student relationships and curriculum. For the younger participants, relationships with teachers needed vast improvement. At school children feel verbally and physically humiliated by teachers, which in turn put up a barrier between them and the desire for education. For example, if a child were to ask for clarification of information, a teacher’s reply might be, “if you are stupid you don’t deserve my efforts.” Children expressed the need to have teachers be clear in the way they explain lessons and to allow students to ask questions safely. They stated their wish “to be encouraged rather than threatened.” Even at this early age, youngsters were able to connect school violence with dropout and delinquency.

For older participants, much of the same frustrations could be sensed. Many expressed the need to be heard by teachers and to have teachers at least put in an effort to teach and explain. Some commented on the fact that teachers do not know how to deal with adolescents at this stage. Many of the problems faced in schools are due to a communication breakdown between students and teachers.

In terms of curriculum, many participants expressed the need for a re-adjustment of priorities. There is so much emphasis placed on the academic that it leaves no time for other activities. Many complained of taking too many classes and carrying a full load to the point that even classes designated for “fun” (i.e. art, PE, etc) are often usurped and used for other subjects. Many expressed frustrations based on the distribution of classes, which maintains no balance between subjects and activities. Some cited, for example, the fact that in one year they are obliged to take physics, biology and chemistry, simply for the sake of taking them.

The concept of guidance counseling came up several times. Many believed that guidance counseling could help empower students to choose their own course of study rather than simply going along with whatever parents wanted. Some mentioned being “forced” into the academic stream. They suggested an improvement and increase in programs for vocational training. Many asked that school curriculum be made more practical and relevant to everyday life rather than purely theoretical and based on memorization.

Violence

The issue of violence in schools and in the home was one that only came up in a roundabout way. Younger participants were much more open to discussing violence in the home than were older youth. The exception to this was one young woman in Nablus who briefly mentioned it, but only in passing and in terms of its effect on mental health. In fact, in one workshop in Gaza, 10 out of 13 children said that they were physically abused. Often the physical abuse came as a result of school performance. Some children spoke about parents imposing a stressful agenda upon them. Children felt that parents should allow them some playtime after school rather than insisting they study or work. For children, it is simply a matter of prioritizing activities. In speaking about their parents, their words echoed what was stated about teachers:

“We wish parents would hear us, understand us and give us more choice within the possible limits.”

Still others mentioned the need for parents to look after them in a more caring way, without hitting or screaming at them.

The violence that children experience in schools is best exemplified in the drawings made during the focus group workshops. The vast majority of drawings contained some reference to a teacher hitting a student, most often with a stick or ruler, and then some comment on the rights of the student. More often than not the child is drawn in tears, asking to be left alone. In one drawing by a 12-year-old girl from Bethlehem, the picture consists not only of a teacher hitting a student and the student crying, but within the setting

of the classroom there are many slogans, all variations on the rights of young people (see Appendix 2). This shows that children are aware of their basic rights. However, the fact that the violence continues and all they can do is draw pictures about it, proves that these children are in reality helpless and in need of advocacy.

Differences of Perception based on Location, Age and Gender

While the findings heretofore discussed represent general results for male and female youth between the ages of 10 and 22 in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, it is interesting to note the particularities specific to youth according to their location, age or gender. This would allow for more specific and appropriate policy planning and programming. Additionally, it gives the reader a better feel for the realities faced by youth in different contexts. For example, while all youth, indeed, all Palestinians, have suffered from the Israeli occupation, its effects could be felt differently according to location, age and gender. In turn, rehabilitation efforts for youth in varying groups would have to vary as well.

Of particular interest is the difference between youth living in the West Bank and youth living in the Gaza Strip in terms of their priorities. In the Gaza Strip, psychological and mental health issues were the first category of risks, with economic situation following second. In the West Bank, health needs came first, with the need for community centers and public facilities second. This can be attributed to the impact of the living conditions in Gaza where restriction of movement is more deeply felt and continuous closures have left their scars. This in turn leaves young people feeling marginalized, without any control over their lives. As one 20-year-old young man from Gaza stated:

“I remember the times when we used to initiate the struggle against occupation hoping for a better future. Now the occupation is still there but our hope for a better future has died. I do not feel I can affect change.”

For another young woman, 17 years old, the experience of living in Gaza has had such a profound psychological impact that she sums up existence in Gaza in the following way:

“We are living in a prison named Gaza. Day after day we do the same things, see the same faces, and you can imagine what effect this has on our state of mind.”

As for perceptions according to age, the older group emphasized psychological and mental health issues. This is to be expected as these older participants are subject to different life pressures and are expected to assume more responsibilities than the youngest age group who emphasized the need for community centers.

Gender distribution of the needs of Palestinian young people in the West Bank and Gaza reveal that women experience an undue amount of stress, which can in turn deem their needs more urgent than those of males. This is linked to the social and cultural norms that put extra burdens and pressure on women in this society. The family is often an important source of pressure because of the unequal treatment between boys and girls, and the traditional roles it tries to impose on them. This finding also came out in the study on

Adolescent Women's Health by the Palestinian Coalition for Women's Health.⁹ These findings demonstrate that young women's needs are often forgotten by policy-makers and service providers alike. Young women simply need a new and innovative approach to their holistic development. Current services do not fulfill young women's needs which encompass psychological, social, educational and environmental well-being.

B. The Perspective of Experts

This section describes experts' perceptions of the risk factors affecting young people's well-being, their needs, rights and roles as well as their opinions about the roles of governmental, non-governmental and international organizations in fulfilling youth's needs. For the most part experts' perceptions matched those of the youth, only differing in order of importance.

Risk Factors and Needs as Perceived by the Experts

Lack of knowledge and information regarding the psychological changes that young people are going through represent the first risk factor to a healthy life according to the experts. Young people pass through this stage unequipped with the necessary information regarding the physical and psychological changes they are experiencing which affects their development and well-being. With schools omitting any mention of the subject in the curriculum, and parents ignoring discussing these changes with their children, youth are left to fend for themselves. Thus according to the experts, education and awareness raising is needed, involving both parents and children, as parents' lack of awareness on how to deal with their children poses a huge risk. Additionally, awareness raising targeting parents on how to communicate better with their children about these issues is needed.

Under this general heading, quality healthcare, which would include the provision of youth friendly health services and programs for young people, could serve to ease the adjustment. Health education on sexuality, sex life, anatomy and physiology of the body, rape, incest, menstruation, drug abuse, popular medicine and information on how to live a healthy life would also prove useful for adolescents.

Psychological tension as a result of the political situation is the second risk factor to which young people are subjected. Israeli occupation and its negative impact on all aspects of life including restriction of movement inside and outside Palestine, aggression against youth in specific, and the danger of war pose a major risk factor to Palestinian young people. Following the Intifada, the lack of opportunities for participation on the part of Palestinian youth in political activities resulted in their feeling of marginalization and unworthiness, forcing many to turn to fundamentalism as a way out. In order to combat these risks, there needs to be an increase in counseling services and rehabilitation especially following the Intifada. An increase in the number and quality of cultural, educational and entertainment activities will also provide rehabilitative resources.

⁹Needs Assessment on Adolescent Women's Health. The Palestinian Coalition for Women's Health, 1995.

Traditions and customs which hinder the development of society is another category discussed by experts. Discrimination against girls such as prohibiting them from pursuing their education, early marriage, and violence all represent risk factors to a healthy life. Consequently, the most obvious need is to deal with the issue of discrimination against girls and women. Activities such as education and awareness raising, theater and sports could all serve to ease discriminatory practices and increase women's confidence.

Socioeconomic conditions including the high rate of unemployment especially among young people, the spread of social diseases as a result of spare time, lack of education and awareness, and child labor are all issues of importance discussed by experts. The need to address these issues could best be met by providing job opportunities for young people.

Educational issues such as the absence of professional counseling in schools, teaching methods and curriculum, and lack of a quality educational system represent another risk factor. A quality education system catering to the needs of youth and assisting in developing their capacities is needed.

The absence of youth organizations, programs and activities that fulfill youth needs in entertainment, mental stimulation and education represent another risk factor as mentioned by the experts. Thus there is a need for programs and activities to reconnect youth with the identity and culture that were destroyed during the prolonged Israeli occupation. Youth exchanges to get to know the different Palestinian areas and different youth groups are essential. Additionally, youth need to have a role and representation in decision making in programs and activities that concern them. Youth and community centers need to be perpetuated and those already in existence need to be supported in terms of physical infrastructure and human resources.

An interesting note made by the experts that was all but ignored by the youth in their focus groups was the issue of media neglect of young people's issues. Limited programs, if any, target young people and highlight issues of interest concerning their lives, realities and the problems they are facing. Thus the proliferation of youth targeted programming would prove helpful.

Rights of Young People

There was no dispute over the fact that young people's rights are to live decently, in security and dignity with the full realization of their potential. A consensus emerged over the rights as embodied in all declarations of human rights. Nonetheless, since those rights are not being realized due to several factors, the most important being the political situation, action-oriented research was deemed necessary for the purpose of developing policies that protect young people's rights.

Roles of Young People and Government, Non-Governmental and International Organizations

Experts unanimously agreed that Palestinian youth are in need of rehabilitation especially after the Intifada due to the unusual circumstances in which they live. Following rehabilitation, their role would first be to begin lobbying and promote advocacy for the purpose of fulfilling their needs, and promoting their programs and activities. Together with the Palestinian National Authority, they could assist in the developing and implementing of a national plan for youth. It would also be up to the PNA to increase its budget for youth programs. Increased coordination with NGOs and between ministries is needed. Documentation of all projects and activities is essential.

Administrative measures are needed such as rehabilitation of the employment system; appointment of staff on a professional basis; creation of ethical working, analytical and thinking habits; and the initiation of work plans between the different sectors, clubs and youth centers. These would serve the purpose of having better and effective programs.

Youth would then participate in the building process of Palestinian society through participation in the decision-making process, assuming responsibility for themselves, their school, street, the community and the country, learning to respect the freedom of others, and to know their role and work against their marginalization.

The role of the Ministry of Education would include the evaluation and modification of the school system according to the needs of students. Capacity building of the teaching staff, encouraging non-academic branches and changing people's perception towards them would be included. Encouraging extra-curricular activities and cooperating with organizations that work in this field is a must so as to expand possibilities of involvement for students. As for financial support, a decrease of school fees and allowing for special hardship allowances would prove helpful. Cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs to train school counselors who would then be available in schools proportional to the number of students would offer more academic freedom for students. The role of the Ministry of Youth would be to assume an executive role where the support and facilitation of youth organizations' activities is needed.

Non-governmental organizations should have a clear policy regarding their work with young people. The role of NGOs is to coordinate, cooperate and organize their work using a clear and defined strategy for the creation of higher quality programs. Coordination can be on different levels: on the one hand among NGOs, and on the other among government organizations. Coordination between these two sectors would be crucial to prevent duplication in activities and funding. Their role is to be transparent and to put conflicts, individualism and competition behind and work on rebuilding the society on a more solid basis. They should organize awareness raising activities for parents on neglected yet important issues such as gender, sex education and how to better deal with their children.

International organizations would serve in a capacity so as to be flexible without imposing their own programs or agenda, and to commit themselves to local plans and vision. In addition, they will assist in building youth and community centers and aid human resources

development. They will support youth programs in remote areas, and assist in youth exchanges.

C. Discussion of Results

Among the many issues raised and discussed by the youth were those concerning political participation, economic situation, health, education and family relationships. The perpetual Israeli occupation continues to restrict both movement and freedom of expression. The Palestinian Authority has yet to seriously enact an all-inclusive platform encouraging youth participation and further extending a voice to youth which has in turn demoralized them. A deteriorating economic situation with decreasing job opportunities is a continuing source of disillusionment for Palestinian youth. The current lack of quality healthcare and a system that does not take into consideration the holistic health of young people also disaffected the participants. They repeatedly mentioned an unresponsive educational system that does not serve to enhance independence and self-confidence among its students. Familial influence and control over the lives of young people is an incessant source of despondency. Furthermore, youth expressed the need for youth-oriented programs, activities and centers to combat the above-mentioned risk factors. Thus it appears that the underlying tone throughout all the discussions reflected general feelings of marginalization, fear and frustration felt by the youth.

The notion of marginalization could be sensed in the social and political concerns and the resulting anguish expressed by the youth. The conservatism of Palestinian society compounded by the continuing Israeli occupation are both evidence of authoritarianism which in turn restricts youth's natural and healthy development into adulthood. Lines of communication with parents at home and educators at school are one-way channels limiting young people's creativity and ability to express themselves at this critical stage. These general restrictions prevent them from both expressing their needs and being heard, leaving their concerns and issues neglected.

Fear was a prevalent theme throughout the discussions in that many youth consistently restrained themselves from fully expressing their ideas. That is, when a sensitive topic was broached--gender roles, sexual education, relationship with the family, etc--many refrained from making any outright statements or taking any stances that openly flew in the face of traditions. These issues included but were not limited to the fear of the unexpected, poverty, authority, failure, etc. The fear of failure in school, for example, was prompted by the fear of consequences from parents. The fear of poverty stems from experience. Young people are all too familiar with life in poverty and the lack of any hope for a better future leaves them fearful of what may await them.

Frustration stemmed from the participants' general feeling of not being in control of their lives. Again, in adherence to traditions and the forced willingness to please authority figures, they were unable to make the decisions affecting their very lives, whether in terms of education, economics, politics, health or social matters. Their eagerness to please goes right back to their fear of unsettling the status quo. Discussions of early marriage revealed young people's frustration at the lack of control over one of life's major decisions as young women are married off without taking their opinions and feelings into consideration. The

lingering occupation also promotes frustration with its incessant restrictions on movement, whether at home or going abroad, which in turn directly corresponds to restrictions on education, employment, social awareness, and the like.

It can be said that the impact of the above-mentioned issues is two-fold as it concerns girls and young women. The fact that Palestinian society is male dominated and encourages discrimination against women adds additional burdens to female youth. Issues such as early marriage, violence, and a general lack of equality in all aspects of life were considered major risk factors according to most young female participants.

Concerning the regional variations between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, it appeared from the focus group discussions that young boys and girls in the West Bank were more open to discussing social issues than in the Gaza Strip. The closure and restriction of movement in Gaza is reflected psycho-socially in the ways that young people expressed themselves. Also, it was obvious that there was more fear in Gaza, possibly a result of young people's previous experiences as well as the hard living conditions endured in Gaza. This was reflected in their avoidance of personal issues and of speaking of themselves specifically. That is, it was easier for Gazan youth in general to discuss political issues rather than addressing more personal and specific issues.

In Gaza, limited resources and dependence on work in Israel makes the economic situation that much more of a concern. On the other hand, in the West Bank, there appears to be more diversity and opportunity, comparatively speaking, which allows the economic situation to be less of a concern.

Differences were evident between the focus groups according to their age groups as well. For the younger group between the ages of 10 and 14, personal and specific issues were much more easily and openly discussed than for older participants, regardless of location. They were much more willing to discuss issues that directly influence their lives such as violence at home and in schools. The older participants were instead much more eager to discuss general social and political issues.

While both older and younger participants discussed parent-child relationships, they each addressed different aspects of the relationship. The younger children were more interested in creating a more understanding and caring relationship, whereas for the older participants, the very essence of the parent-child relationship was evolving and in need of change. It was directly related to the fact that older participants were at a point in the developmental stage where they were attempting to build an identity and be more independent.

As for gender differences, the most important was the issue of existing as opposed to accomplishing. This is meant to say that for girls there is more interference in their very being, their feelings, emotions and decisions. It was in this sense that the relationship with parents was more of a concern for girls where parents' interference has a more direct impact and influences girls more than boys.

In essence, youth needs should be examined comprehensively, with programs and activities catering to the improvement of Palestinian young people's psychological and mental health. Young people's needs, views and opinions should be taken into account in any development plan by policy-makers in order to ensure the building of a healthy and successful Palestinian society.

D. Comparison between perspectives of young people and experts

Experts and Palestinian young people placed emphasis on similar issues, yet there were some differences regarding the perception of each of the risk factors and needs of Palestinian youth.

For the risk factors to physical and mental health and well-being, the political situation was the major risk factor as perceived by young people. For the experts, lack of information about psychological changes during this period was the first risk factor, and the political situation was the second risk factor. Young people and experts gave all other risk factors such as psycho-social and social factors, socioeconomic situation, traditions and customs, health and educational issues equal importance.

Concerning the needs as perceived by young people and experts, psychological and mental health issues were considered the first need as perceived by young people followed by the need for youth and community centers. For experts, the need to deal with discrimination against women was followed by the need for information on physical changes during this period and these were deemed the main issues. Psychological and mental health issues followed by the need for youth and community centers were the third and fourth needs as perceived by experts, whereas youth considered social and economic needs to be of importance. Both experts and young people stressed the need to tackle educational and health issues. Experts stressed the importance of programs to reconnect youth to their identity and culture, and to promote youth's role in decision-making.

An important analytical note to make is the importance that experts placed on rehabilitation--rehabilitation that they said is needed as a result of the Intifada. It is interesting to also note that this same feeling could be sensed among the sample youth's comments about the Intifada as well. It appears that they have idealized the days of the Intifada and in turn immortalized the youth who participated in it. The Intifada was a youth movement, an insurrection of the young. It was fueled and ignited by the frustrated masses of young people who, like the youth of today, saw no way out of their situation. Thus, today's Palestinian young people seem pressured to live up to the example of the youth of the Intifada, and take their lives and futures into their own hands.

However, in the comparisons they insisted on making between the "aimless" youth of today and the action-oriented Intifada youth, it became clear that they have not grasped or understood the fact that these are different times in which they are living. The Intifada youth were aiming strictly at political goals, with the hope for subsequent social and economic betterment. Today's youth, as came out in the focus group discussions, are more concerned with progressive social issues. Thus, the urgency expressed by the experts for rehabilitative counseling seems to be directly correlated to helping youth

assume an independent role and permitting them to voice their concerns without feeling as though they must live up to an idealized conception of what they should be feeling and doing.

Section III

Conclusion

A. Concluding Remarks

This study attempted to identify Palestinian youth perception of the risk factors affecting their lives as well as their needs. The research methodology of focus group discussions provided youth generated data and allowed for the participation of youth in identifying their problems and making suggestions for interventions. Living conditions, political, social, cultural, and economic issues all combine to represent risk factors affecting Palestinian youth. Consequently, it is important to develop a clear policy for youth and youth issues based on action-oriented research in participation including youth.

The study showed that youth issues should be examined from a total context and not from fragmented points of view. Youth themselves realize that health and well-being are holistic and encompass many aspects of life. Palestinian youth live the unstable conditions experienced by all Palestinian people. Their feelings of deprivation therefore spring from the absence of their basic rights to security, mobility and access to information and services, among other issues. The findings of this study illustrate the vast neglect of youth issues in Palestine. The findings show that young people lack information, services, or even the mere recognition that their needs exist.

It is important to note that while the data gathering stage of the research project was quantitative, it was qualitative analysis that provided the results and will provide a method for producing a plan of action. While it is necessary to understand the ordering of issues as expressed by both youth and experts, what is of particular importance is the qualitative analysis of the data. It is impossible to think of all these issues as being independent of each other. They are all interrelated and need to be dealt with keeping this fact in mind, regardless of whether youth or experts named one issue first, second or third.

Additionally, it would be a mistake to assume that the comments and suggestions expressed by the youth in this study are the end-all for policy planners and builders. That is, as evident from the focus group discussions, most of these youth, if not all, are still in a transitional stage wherein they are experiencing an ever-changing view on the issues that affect them. It became apparent that many issues were not fully comprehended or analyzed by youth, which in turn stems from a lack of information and empowerment. It is clear that these youth need assistance in sorting out the issues so as to be able to engage in informed debate in the future.

On a similar note, it could be of great assistance to the development of youth oriented policy if in the future a similar study or series of focus group workshops were held including disabled and working youth. This would then aid in gaining a better understanding of the diversity of needs of all Palestinian youth, from all walks of life.

Finally, planners and decision-makers should adopt a biopsychosocial model that recognizes the complex interaction of the biological, psychological and social phenomena that influence individuals during this period of development. Moreover, youth are a valuable human resource that should be supported, taken care of and given the opportunities needed to develop their potential and be able to positively participate in the development of Palestinian society.

B. Recommendations

Policies must take into account the complexity and depth of the issues facing youth today. What needs to be recognized is the interrelation between the many issues affecting youth, thus influencing the way in which these issues are dealt with. Full coordination between concerned parties and a partnership between government and non-government bodies must be undertaken. Youth as well need to be considered partners and not simply subjects. Youth issues must become an integral part of development planning, and in turn part of a culture that respects the rights of children and youth.

Findings must be directed at the sustainable development of Palestinian youth, and not be used only to provide a quick-fix or to form part of a trendy scheme. Tolerance of ideas must be an integral factor in order to ensure the pluralism of aid to all youth, including the disabled, working, abused, impoverished and neglected.

“The National Program for Palestinian Children” was a plan enacted in 1996 by the Palestinian National Authority in order to lay the foundation for promoting the welfare of Palestinian children in all aspects of life, including those discussed in this study. Many recommendations were made in that document that could serve to enhance policy planning and development. However, this current study also aims to aid in the developmental process by making recommendations based on its own findings.

The recommendations emerging from this study are as follows:

- To create programs targeting parents, educators, and adults having direct contact with and influence on children and youth for the purpose of raising awareness on issues such as child raising and rearing, communication skills, moving away from authoritarianism, and encouraging children's creativity and potential.
- To establish youth and community centers, in addition to creating programs to develop both the staff working with young people as well as the physical infrastructure of existing community and youth centers. This also extends to the establishment of women's centers as gathering places for meetings, discussion and activities.
- To create and increase the number and quality of guidance and counseling programs both in school and youth centers.
- To introduce awareness raising workshops that would involve parents as well as youth.
- To promote health education activities with issues such as physical and psychological changes, anatomy and physiology of the body, etc. Youth and community centers, schools and the media can all contribute to organizing such programs.

- To improve the Palestinian educational system in terms of teaching methods, curriculum and extra-curricular activities and to create a Palestinian curriculum that is more relevant to youth needs and ambitions.
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- To create programs in the media that take youth ideas and needs into consideration. These would then be prepared and presented by youth.
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- To increase lobbying of laws that protect the rights of youth (i.e. early marriage laws, family and school violence laws, child labor laws)
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- To encourage youth exchange activities inside and outside Palestine with both Arab and international youth organizations.

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