Poverty in Jerusalem

Reviewed by Jamil Hilal and Penny Johnson

"National Palestinian Participatory Poverty Assessment Report (The Poor Speak Out)," *Palestinian Ministry of Planning and International Co-operation & United Nations Development Programme, forthcoming, 2003.*

Unless one is travelling strictly within city limits, public transportation in Ramallah generally goes not to the passengers' destinations, but to various checkpoints. In the busy morning traffic of 21 October 2002, passengers in shared cabs travelling to the Surda checkpoint between Ramallah and Birzeit, already anticipating the miseries of checkpoint crossing by foot, allowed themselves a few cynical remarks as they passed the Best Eastern Hotel at the north-eastern entrance to Ramallah. There, a large and attractive banner draped across the hotel entrance signalled yet another conference or workshop among the plenitude that occur in Ramallah on an almost daily basis, barring the

occasional curfew or invasion. The banner read: "The Poor Speak Out."

"You should see the poor here," said one man hurrying down the hotel steps and speaking irritably into a mobile phone. He was referring to the well-dressed crowd of ministry staff and non-governmental representatives that filled the conference hall.

The occasion was the release of the *Palestinian Participatory Poverty Assessment*, a two-year project conducted by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme, with substantial funding from the United Kingdom's Department of International Development.[1] Conceived as the next step after the *1998 Palestine Poverty Report*[2] in developing a Palestinian national strategy to eradicate poverty, the project aimed to build such a strategy (or strategies) by incorporating the "voices of the poor" at the local level. With this goal in mind, research teams in each of the sixteen Palestinian districts conducted group discussions ("focus groups" in policy parlance) and individual interviews with poor unemployed men, housewives, female and male university graduates, and others, visited poor households and recorded case studies of poor families. Attention was paid to definitions, causes, and ways to combat poverty. Focus groups were also held with local elites to explore the same issues.

As the derisory comments of passers-by indicate, there are inherent contradictions in such "participatory" endeavours, as in the field of poverty research in general. Indeed, some of the poor men and women interviewed were equally sceptical. One unemployed man from Bani Suheila told a research team: "It's all nonsense. Who wants to listen and who would act? Many have come before you and done nothing…"

Poverty as a research subject is also highly shaped by state agendas and concerns; as Pierre Bordieu has noted, "State bureaucracies and their representatives are great producers of 'social problems' that social science does little more than ratify whenever it takes them over as 'sociological problems." [3] In the Palestinian context, poverty is a post-Oslo subject,[4] using a vocabulary and concepts that were not present in the period of the direct Israeli military occupation; poverty as a discourse is thus, in a sense, "produced" in the interim period of limited Palestinian authority. However, its production is complicated by the role of international donors and their anti-poverty agendas and by the tentative and porous nature of the Palestinian Authority's agendas on social issues. In the present period of emergency with at least 60% of the population defined as poor,[5] is it useful to "assess" (rather than act) and if so, where does the usefulness lie?

As researchers who are "implicated" in the participatory poverty assessment, we believe such projects are not futile, but certainly will be pointless if they do not move beyond bureaucracies and into public and political discussion and action. Indeed, the sixteen district reports of the PPA, which are summed up in the national report but also merit individual attention, offer a wealth of observations and experiences that capture how the overarching crisis in male unemployment changes specific family dynamics and strategies for survival. The dilemmas poor families and individuals face are also articulated: women's work, for example, is seen both as a solution to poverty and a problem given the insecure conditions and community crisis in which such work takes place. Interestingly, large families and

early marriage are also seen both as solutions and problems, with the former having particular resonance in the Jerusalem context, as discussed below. Poor men and women describe the inadequate, irregular and sometimes non-existent nature of emergency aid - and its distribution through political and personal connections. The reports can also be read as encounters between two different worlds, that of the researchers and that of poor men, women and children. As we will see within the Jerusalem report, researchers are both overwhelmed and sometimes disapproving of what they find in their journey into the world of "the poor," particularly in their encounters and opinions of unemployed young men, and the Jahalin Bedouin community.

Participatory Methods and Participatory Pitfalls

The conventional way of assessing poverty relies on determining a poverty line through surveys of family income, or expenditure and consumption. This poverty line is determined quantitatively but depends on a subjective decision from policymakers as to where to the draw poverty line, with many implications for social services and the social contract. It is useful in mapping poverty and changes occurring through time, but the notion of poverty is abstract and schematic - measured by income gradations - and it cannot contribute to an exploration of the causes or dynamics of impoverishment and ill-being.

A participatory poverty assessment (PPA) introduces explicit qualitative methods in the study of poverty, although once again researchers or policymakers have the power to select those who are considered poor enough to participate. At best, however, PPA techniques - primarily focus groups, case studies and qualitative interviews, often accompanied by community mapping - give "voice" to poor women, men and youth in diverse family and social settings, as they describe what being poor means to them, the dilemmas of poverty and strategies for coping and change.

Four locations in the Jerusalem district (or governorate) were selected for carrying out the assessment - the Old City, Shu'fat Refugee Camp, Beit Duqqo and the Arab Jahalin residential cluster. The difference in types of locality guided this selection; but perhaps also of interest is their commonality resulting from a somewhat tenuous geographic placement in the "Jerusalem District," an administrative unit of Palestinian governance that lacks both governance and administration. Although Palestinian Ministry of Local Authorities budgets - and their absence - play a part in the village of Beit Duqqo, residents of Shu'fat refugee camp and the Old City refer to both Israeli and Palestinian Jerusalem institutions. The Arab Jahalin, on the other hand, are perhaps more characterized by being pushed out of Jerusalem than included in it. The selection of a Bedouin community is notable; to our knowledge, none of the other myriad policy studies and surveys produced under Palestinian Authority auspices directly examines specific dynamics or characteristics of Bedouin communities in the Palestinian Territory.

All locations are of course affected by the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the Israeli labour market and by Israeli spatial regimes of checkpoints and permits. One advantage of talking to poor people in four specific locales is clear: the composite picture of poverty given by national statistics needs to be complemented by local understandings and strategies. The problems of the Arab Jahalin student who can't study because of the noise of electric generators, the Gaza woman living in the Old City with a husband addicted to drugs, or youth in Shu'fat shut out

of the expensive Shu'fat youth centre because of factional disputes obviously need specific solutions.

Focus groups varied slightly in each location, but generally there was a strong focus on poor women heading households, poor women who were housewives with husbands unemployed or with limited income, unemployed youth and poor male and female adolescents. Surprisingly, in contrast to other district reports, unemployed adult men themselves were not prominent as subjects, perhaps reflecting a dominant if erroneous assumption in social welfare thinking in Palestine that families with able-bodied men are usually able to escape poverty, or a more tenable assumption that households without able-bodied men at all suffer the worst poverty. This assumption also seemed to propel the selection of six case studies of households which were interviewed in depth: two were female-headed households (a widow and a divorcee) and three have failed male breadwinners (a husband who is a drug addict, a husband who is mentally ill and, in a strange equivalence, a husband who has a West Bank identity card). The last case study was a very large family of twenty-two members and an unemployed and often ill male head. Here, a dominant assumption that able-bodied men can support their families (even of twenty-two members) had another unhappy twist: the Ministry of Social Affairs stopped stipends to this family when the son reached eighteen. While other district reports had greater representation from unemployed men - and the effects of their unemployment are the overarching theme of all of the reports - the researchers' selection of participants in a participatory process can of course determine findings (and thus a word of caution about the emphasis on poverty and drug/alcohol addiction in the findings below). The selection also resulted in a lack of case studies from the Arab Jahalin community, where the researchers expressed honestly their problems in interviewing and their perception of the community as culturally and socially alien.

Despite these reservations, the fact that poor households were selected on the basis that they reflect specific situations of poverty is helpful. In Jerusalem, this meant uncovering one of the most crucial differences: whether the head of household (or other members) held a Jerusalem ID card (Israeli) or a West Bank (Palestinian Authority) ID card.

Identities and Entitlements

For the purposes of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the Jerusalem District is divided into two distinct entities: J1, inside the expanded Jerusalem municipal borders (and thus due to the Israel's illegal annexation in 1967, inside an expanded Israel) and J2, outside those boundaries. Of our four locations, Beit Duqqo and the Arab Jahalin settlement are in J2, and thus outside the purview of Israeli institutions and social services - and generally bereft of the Israeli identity card. Shu'fat Camp and the Old City, inside the municipal borders, nonetheless have a sizeable population of West Bank identity card holders, whether through marriage or migration for work opportunity. (Indeed Shu'fat residents complain of the expansion of the camp's population for the latter reason as families move into the camp to be closer to possible work).

In his conclusive examination of the 1948 Bengal and other famines, Amartya Sen found that famines generally are not caused by lack of food, but by lack of entitlements.[6] Poverty in Jerusalem seems to follow a similar, if less drastic, pattern: poor people frequently asserted that the non-possession of an Israeli identity card caused or contributed to poverty. As one Old City resident said, "holders of West Bank ID

cards who live in Jerusalem can barely find a loaf of bread to support themselves." This is so because a holder of West Bank identity card cannot work inside the Green Line without a permit. This circumstance became extremely difficult after the eruption of the Intifada in September 2000. The same applies to the ability to find work without a permit (i.e., "illegally") in Israel. Those without a Jerusalem identity card are not entitled to the social security benefits, including unemployment insurance and child benefit allowances, which Jerusalem identity card holders receive from Israeli social services

Even those with an Israeli identity card, however, found it increasingly difficult to find jobs in Israel or in East Jerusalem in the wake of the eruption of the Al Aqsa Intifada. Tourism spiralled downward, affecting jobs in both East and West Jerusalem, and Israeli suspicions and constrictions on Arab workers, even those with identity cards, spiralled upward. A poor housewife from Shu'fat camp explained: "we have an Israeli ID card but it is useless; my two sons cannot find work; all have become poor." Israeli identity cards holders complained that they lost their jobs for security reasons and were replaced by "Russian workers."

Missing the Orient: Can the Palestinian Authority Make a Difference?

A feeling of neglect ran through the accounts of poor people in diverse locations and backgrounds, related both to the lack of Palestinian authority and protection and to a feeling of danger and threat, often expressed as corruption emanating from Israel, whether from politics or society. Residents of the Old City felt they had lost their guardian when the Israeli authorities closed down the Orient House. This is interesting in light of earlier survey findings in 1999 (when the Orient House was open) where about half of Jerusalemites felt no institution represented their interest, with the Orient House chosen by only 7% of the sample (and only 2% within municipal boundaries).[7] Whether part of a rather universal tendency to value what is missing or a reflection of the worsening conditions of Intifada times, poor residents in the Jerusalem district not only felt abandoned, but pointed to subsequent internal problems, contradictions and conflicts.

The poorer families of Shu'fat Camp noted that internal or factional conflict in the camp had caused the closure of an expensive new Youth Center, funded by the Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction (PECDAR); in Beit Duqqo, clan conflicts had re-surfaced, while village council budgets and support for education formerly supplied by the Palestinian Authority had effectively disappeared. Among the Arab Jahalin community, the poor feel neglected by both civil society organizations and the Palestinian Authority, and young people feel deprived from access to vocational training that could provide them with a minimum of job security. The absence of a central national authority to regulate services and attend to needs, particularly in education and youth facilities was pithily expressed by youth in the Old City. As one youth from the Old City interjected, "no one cares about us; it is better for us to die. Let us get rid of the situation we are living in; we are not living in a state and nobody cares about us." Young men pointed to both drug taking and alcohol as a way to forget and suggested that the Israeli authorities try to break down their spirit by encouraging drugs.

Fears of Corruption and Deviance: "Chicago Camp"

The identification of drugs and drinking as part of the cause and consequences of poverty is unique to the Jerusalem report, although it may well be the case that respondents in Jerusalem felt both freer to

identify this problem, and used it to identify more general feelings of alienation, frustration, fear for the future, and concern about young people. The fact that at least one resident of Shu'fat Camp pointed out that addiction was actually worse during the first Intifada, did not mute the general sense that "drugs were everywhere."

Although the Jerusalem district report does not contain any direct voices of poor men and youth (or women) addicted to drugs and alcohol, such addiction is prominently identified as a problem in the accounts of Old City and Shu'fat women and youth - although often at least at one remove. Such accounts are probably a mixture of actual experience of husbands, sons, relatives or neighbours (almost always male) "lost" to addiction (one woman complained that her husband spends their insurance allowance on drugs, for example), and a pervasive fear of corruption or deviance (evident in Shu'fat Camp and the Old City in particular) that originates, at least in discourse, with "Israel." As one woman asserted: "Israel has ruined and corrupted the morals and manners of the youth by means of income security which it pays to them and which makes them think only of drinking and taking drugs." Interestingly, Israel's social insurance payments crop up as passports to both addiction and the idleness of young men, including in the accounts of the researchers themselves, who were made uneasy by what they perceived to be the voluntary idleness of young men.

While Israel might be seen as the source of corruption, images are also taken from other places. One housewife from Shu'fat Camp exclaimed, "They call the camp the 'Chicago camp' because drugs are everywhere. What are we to do? Do we have to chain our children at home?"

The Dilemma of Women's Employment

The problems of corruption, particularly in public spaces, however, are not limited to addiction: corruption also affects women and girls as they seek education or income, particularly, it seemed, in Shu'fat camp. The lack of a girls' secondary school was cited often, as it was in Beit Duqqo. In Shu'fat camp, however, the problem of girls' education was compounded by the fear of sending girls outside the camp to "Jerusalem schools" which were perceived as possible sources of immorality, whether from the presence of morally corrupt girls or harassing young men. As in other district reports, the voices of girls expressed a crisis in confidence, spoken with both the will and the absolute despair of adolescence: one teen-ager from Shu'fat camp said: "when a girl compares herself to her brothers in education, her heart is filled with agony. I feel that learning is useless so I become disinterested in studying since I will end up in someone's house." From her perspective, a future of marriage is a move from family confinement to confinement in the husband's ("someone's") house.

Of great importance for family survival and multiple long-term consequences are the possibilities of women's income-generation and employment. As in other district reports, women's employment is often perceived as a dilemma. Although most Palestinian public opinion polls have shown a widespread general acceptance of women's employment, the voices of poor men and women show us both that women's work is both a key to family survival and that the actual practice of women going out to work is highly conditioned by particular circumstances. As a poor woman who supports her family from Shu'fat camp says, "There is no work inside the camp; if so, the pay will be very little; the highest salary is 500 shekels [equivalent to $120]. There is work in Israel but the families

do not accept because they are afraid of being exposed to scandals."

Poor women interviewed *were* working, in jobs ranging from employment as a janitor or olive picker or kindergarten teacher, as well as making embroidery (with problems in marketing) and food at home for sale, but the sense of women's work as a problem was pervasive. The lack of institutions in communities to train women for jobs near home was also clear. There were no centres inside the Old City, for example, to help women to develop skills useful for finding employment and thus support a family or supplement its income.

Large families were also seen by poor people in Jerusalem and other districts as both a cause and cure for poverty. The immediate difficulty of supporting large numbers of dependents was well understood, but many children were also seen to constitute a form of social security. For residents of Jerusalem with access to child allowances, large families also had an immediate benefit, but even those who utilize this benefit feel a dilemma. A poor woman from the Old City who is the main bread winner in the family (her husband is a drug addict) put it this way: "They have more and more children because of the insurance; if there is no insurance, they will not have any children. It is a terrible thing to have children and let them suffer; I had my youngest daughter in order to increase my insurance in order to pay for the rent."

Definitions of Poverty: What Are Basic Needs?

Like the poor in other Palestinian districts, the Jerusalem poor define poverty as the inability to satisfy the basic needs of the family as reflected in food, clothing and suitable housing, but also (as in other districts) strongly identify poverty as an inability to provide the necessary education for the

Garbage collects in East Jerusalem streets.
Source: The Reality of Jerusalem's Palestinians*, photographer Hofsep Nalbandian*

children of the household. The latter emphasis is not because other material needs are not pressing: women in particular report coping strategies that involve reduction or substitution of food, along with the accumulation of debt. A housewife from the Muslim quarter in the Old City explained, "One cooked meal will be portioned into two halves for two days." A housewife from Beit Duqqo resorted to "buying a kilo of frozen meat for 16 shekels," and added: "Apples and banana, I don't look at them."

The emphasis on education even when families are in dire straits is not surprising, as it is one of the major long-term strategies used in the Palestinian context (emigration is another strategy) to combat poverty. Some also linked poverty with "the poverty of mind" or the inability to manage well the affairs and resources of the family, and to ignorance that stands in the way of women seeking paid employment outside the home. The inability to fulfil social obligations particularly towards kin (in marriage, birth or religious occasion) because of inadequate means or lack of sufficient income also entered into definitions of poverty, but was not emphasized as strongly as in other districts. Conversely, social solidarity (where poor people are

assisted by family, neighbours and community) was questioned more by Jerusalem poor women and men than in other districts, with some seeing the emergence of a heartless and materialistic culture, although others continued to report anonymous gifts of food on their doorsteps and loans from family and storekeepers.

Unlike other districts, some young people directly blamed their deprivation and misery on uneducated parents who did not know how to raise them. But more linked deprivation to lack of access to facilities in the public space (youth clubs, libraries and playgrounds). Indeed, the absence of services, poor services or services available only to certain individuals and groups was voiced by all communities and groups within them as a major problem contributing to poverty and deprivation.

Thinking Aloud About Combating Poverty in Jerusalem

The views of the poor, in the Jerusalem district like elsewhere in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, on combating poverty can be regrouped under three strategies: job creation for men, youth and women seeking work; providing better and fair access to basic services, and establishing a social security system to compete with that provided by the Israeli state. The district report also contains a plethora of specific needs and requests, particularly related to physical and social infrastructure such as roads, renovations of old houses, clinics or schools and youth clubs, as well as needs voiced by poor women for better credit facilities for small projects, institutional assistance in marketing and better childcare facilities. While none of these are systematic, the report could serve as a useful guide for more sustained community and national action - if that is not too utopian a hope.

For if there is one overriding concern voiced by the "Jerusalem poor," it is the situation of young people - usually but not always meaning male youth. Here, poor men and women - and the youth themselves - are perhaps expressing the existential, as well as material, dimension of deprivations in the Jerusalem District: as one young man said, "We do not lead our life, our life leads us."

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Endnotes

[1] Jamil Hilal wrote the PPA national report, based on the sixteen district reports, and worked extensively with the research teams. Penny Johnson contributed a policy paper, *Women, Gender and Poverty in Palestine: Learning About Family Crisis, Survival and Development from Poor Women, Men and Children*. This report draws heavily on the participatory poverty assessment's Jerusalem district report, written by Sabreen Al Zein, Ihtram Fazauna, Musab Abbas, and Wafa Bushnaq Shaqaqi (Supervisor) that will be published soon by the Palestinian Ministry of Planning and International Co-operation & UNDP, as well as on the *National Palestinian Participatory Poverty Assessment Report (The Poor Speak Out)* also to be published soon.

[2] See National Commission for Poverty Alleviation, *National Poverty Report 1998*, Ramallah: Palestinian Authority, 1998.

[3] See Pierre Bordieu, 1990, In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 55.

[4] See Johnson and Hilal, 2000.

[5] See World Bank. "Fifteen Months - Intifada, Closures and Palestinian Economic Crisis - An Assessment," Washington: World Bank. 23 March 2002.

[6] See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981.

[7] See review of "The Reality of Jerusalem Palestinians Today," by Kate Rouhana in JQF Summer 2001.