

YOUR MECA DOLLARS @WORK

Women's Urban Agriculture Initiatives in Gaza

MECA recently began an exciting partnership with the Gaza Urban and Peri-Urban Agricultural Platform (GUPAP) to support women "agripreneurs" whose lives and income were particularly impacted by the Israeli bombardment of Gaza in May 2021.

MECA Director of Gaza Projects Dr. Mona El-Farra describes her experience meeting with the women who are starting small businesses based on traditional agricultural practices and shares the words of Leila Muhammed Zubbeidi who started a small food business.

An increasing number of women are suffering from post-traumatic stress and domestic violence, hand in hand with enduring tough poverty, no work chances, very low income. The list of deprivations is too long to count.

On the bright side of life. I attended a meeting that was organized by MECA partner the Gaza Urban and Peri-Urban Agricultural Platform and met thirty lovely and brave women. They have worked hard and presented their small income-generating projects that help to support themselves and their families. The projects varied from honey production to spices and herbs, from livestock to fishing, from natural cosmetic products to detergent manufacturing and much more.

Some of these women are living by the borders in Gaza, just 300 meters away from their land that was stolen in 1948. Others are fisherwomen or housewives who are striving to make a living. Many are single mothers.



Winner! Best MECA photo of 2021. More photos and information at www.mecaforpeace.org/2021photos

MECA's project with GUPAP "Enhancing resilience of Gaza women agripreneurs in crisis" gave them a chance to make the change for themselves and their families.

I am very proud of Palestinian women. This is our resilience against occupation.

Power to women and love to MECA supporters everywhere. With your solidarity and your support, we can continue to fight poverty and oppression of the occupation, we can continue our struggle for our rights, for peace and justice in Palestine.

MECA Gaza staff met with women "agripreneurs" to learn about their "urban agriculture" businesses. CREDIT: GUPAP

One woman tells her story, page 3



From the Director

By Zeiad Abbas Shamrouch

One weekend in November, children were playing in the playground in Susiya, a small village near the occupied West Bank city of Hebron. The playground had just reopened after repairs to fix safety issues. Suddenly, a group of Israeli settlers invaded the playground and began to smash the play structures. They screamed curses at the children and brought a German Shepherd dog to frighten and attack them. When mothers from the neighborhood showed up to protect the children, the Israeli military came to protect the settlers. Now the village has received a military order that the playground must be destroyed.

Just a few weeks earlier, in October, Israeli occupation forces destroyed two newly constructed rooms in the six-room Khirbet Al-Maleh School in the Jordan Valley. MECA had provided funds for the new classrooms and small clinic, and we worked with Rebuilding Alliance on a campaign to get members of the US Congress to pressure Israel to restore the structures. (Go to www.mecaforpeace.org/SaveOurSchools to send a letter.) The rest of the school building and four other schools in nearby Palestinian Bedouin communities are under demolition orders. They could be destroyed at any moment.

Since 1948, generation by generation, Palestinian children have been targeted by the Israeli occupation. During my childhood in Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem in the 1970s, the only place we could play was in the dirt streets of our camp. We didn't have a playground or a park. Even our play in the streets was constantly disrupted by the attacks of the Israeli occupation forces. At our United Nations school, the teachers usually rang the opening bell by hand. But many days, the shooting by the Israeli army was the bell that woke us up. Instead of the bell, bullets or teargas would bring us running into the classroom. And often we were under curfew, my whole family squeezed into one small room for weeks at a time while we were prevented from going to school.

Now, in the beginning of 2022, Palestinian children are still suffering the same attacks on their right to be children. Not just children living in refugee camps, but children all over the West Bank who need to cross checkpoints to get to their schools. Children who are attacked by settlers as they try to walk to school. And children are arrested, tortured, and imprisoned by the only country in the world that tries children in military courts.

For children in Gaza, it is the siege that defines their lives. Children under 15 constitute 41 percent of the population of Gaza. The siege started in 2007, so for those children, they have spent their whole lives in an open-air prison, surrounded by barbed wire, walls, snipers, military ships in the



harbor, and drones overhead. These children have never been allowed to visit other parts of Palestine: Jerusalem, just 62 miles away, or Hebron, less than 50 miles away.

And now there are hundreds of children working in the streets in Gaza. Because of the economic impact of the siege, they have dropped out of school and are trying to help their families by selling chewing gum or other small things. This is also a growing problem in the West Bank, and also for Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Lebanon, where tens of thousands of children have become child laborers at the age of eleven or even younger. Of course, in addition to losing out on their education and the childhood they deserve, in the streets they are vulnerable, they can be abused.

Many reports have been published about these human rights violations, but no one has yet held Israel accountable. Compiling reports has become an alternative to taking action. The news about how many Palestinian children have been killed, tortured, imprisoned, or put on house arrest has become routine. The international community should be ashamed that Palestinian children are living without a childhood.

Working in MECA, we have to address this reality. I remain optimistic because people on the ground have their own initiatives to reduce the impact, to change the children's lives. I have been working in MECA for twelve years, and I never thought we would have a project on child labor, because Palestinians have always made sure their children went to school. But now a MECA project in Gaza brings psychologists and social workers to families to support children to return to school. Another MECA project supports children in Silwan, East Jerusalem who have been traumatized by interrogations, prison, or house arrest.

Throughout Palestine, we work with our partners to protect the children and help them heal. The Israeli occupation tries to confiscate their right to their childhood. We work to give it back. If the Israelis destroy a playground, we build a playground.

When mothers from the neighborhood showed up to protect the children, the Israeli military came to protect the settlers. CREDIT: IMEMC





The Making of Maftoul

By **Leila Muhammed Zubbeidi**, agripreneur (see page 1)
Jabalia Refugee Camp, Gaza, Palestine, originally from Beir Dares.

I started this project alongside my daughter Aya and my niece Safa', where our marketing strategy relied on word of mouth through our family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. We also played part in preparing healthy food parcels for organizations and initiatives, where this helped provide jobs for 15 women—including recent university graduates.

This project provides maftoul [Palestinian couscous] favored by many, does not cost much to prepare, and we provide the best quality and professionalism at doing this. We started this project with support from Dr. Mona El-Farra where she helped us get the pots and material to prepare the maftoul.

You've lit a candle to us in the midst of this darkness. No words would describe how great it is for us to depend on ourselves and finance ourselves and provide job opportunities to other women instead of waiting for external aid.

On a personal level, our lives have been touched and changed by this project, now we have a source of income—a solid source of income—in addition to having this amazing community of hard-working passionate women. Eighteen amazing women to be exact.

We are beyond blessed and grateful to have gotten support from Gaza's Agricultural Forum and MECA where they've provided the necessary equipment for us to launch our project, in addition to providing training in communication and marketing skills.

Note: You may see maftoul in your grocery store labeled as "Israeli couscous" but it is one of many traditional Palestinian foods that Israel has tried to rebrand as its own. You can purchase genuine Palestine maftoul and much more at MECA's online store ShopPalestine.org



Scholarship Profile

Every time I receive a letter from you, I go running to my mother to share with her the news of getting the scholarship! You have no idea how much of a relief it is. I know I already said thank you a million times, but truly, thank you."

—Asma', Medical Student at Al-Quds University, 20 years old

Asma' has experienced some serious difficulties in her young life, which apparently, has given her a passion for caring for others, in her own family and in the larger community. Asma's father was killed by Israeli forces when she was only two years old. Her brother was paralyzed in a car accident and can no longer help the family. In addition to her many family responsibilities, Asma works with an organization for the blind, acquiring books in braille, reading aloud to blind people, and recording audio books. Asma maintains a demanding course load and has been able to sustain high academic performance. She has not selected her specialization yet but is leaning towards becoming an obstetrician-gynecologist.

Waed Abbas, MECA Palestine Projects & Social Media Coordinator has spent a lot of time on the phone with Asma and shared these thoughts, "As a Palestinian, I always worry that living under such harsh military occupation and hard conditions, we might lose some kindness from our hearts. But our students, each year, re-confirm to me that good hearts will never fail to find kindness and spread it. Asma' is a clear example of that."

Aid Update: Food, School Supplies, and Winter Relief

Much of MECA's work continues to be focused on providing direct aid to families, as the pandemic lockdowns of work-places exacerbated the poverty created by ongoing siege and occupation in Gaza, and economic collapse in Lebanon.

We are very pleased with the initiative MECA provided, which finally allowed the children to go back to the school. The smiles this project drew on the faces of the students have given hope in our hearts to continue the educational process again.

—Asmaa, Elementary School Teacher



During MECA's annual Winter Relief campaign in Gaza and Lebanon's refugee camps, staff, partners, and volunteers distributed warm clothes, new shoes, blankets, heaters, heating fuel, and weather protection for homes.



A farmer in Lebanon harvests fruit from his orchard to include in food parcels for refugees. Over the course of 2021, more than 16,000 families in Gaza and Lebanon's refugee camps received parcels with food staples, fresh produce, eggs, and poultry from local farmers, small businesses, and women's collectives.



Schools reopened for in-person learning in Gaza in September and 6,000 children were delighted to receive new backpacks filled with books and school supplies.



The production of backpacks for schoolchildren in Gaza brought much-needed income to Palestinian workers.

Support and Leadership Opportunities for Jerusalem Youth

As Israel continues its multiple efforts to take over all of Jerusalem, people in the area of Silwan face constant threats, including, home demolitions, arrests and detention of young people, and attacks by settlers and soldiers. MECA's partner, Madaa Creative Center provides support to young people who are arrested; a library with arts, reading, and writing activities; a sports field and teams; a community café, academic tutoring, and more. The Youth Leadership program highlighted below was created to address the psychological, social, and recreational needs of young people who were arrested and detained and others who have experienced trauma.

MECA Palestine Projects & Social Media Coordinator Waed Abbas recounts the experience of one struggling young man who was guided and supported by the social workers at the Madaa Center.

I wanted to cry from happiness, my son is finally back! He's back to his joyful amazing self.

Fourteen-year-old Tariq (not his real name) lost his father at a young age. His mother is from the West Bank, and without a Jerusalem resident's ID, it's very difficult to travel back and forth so she and her children are cut off from her family.

Tariq used to be among the top in his class, but he became alienated from his community, and his family. He didn't want to spend time with friends and his academic performance deteriorated tremendously.

The social workers from Madaa worked with Tariq and his family and, after many sessions, convinced him to join the Youth Leadership Program and attend the youth camp. His behavior has completely shifted. Tariq was voted the youth leader of his group, and he's now a mentor to other young people. His academic performance is back on track, and he's interacting with his peers, his mother, and his siblings.

When Tariq returned from camp, his mother said, "He never spoke this much his entire life! He told me everything that happened in three days. I wanted to cry from happiness, my son is finally back! He's back to his joyful amazing self." Tariq added, "I believe these were the best three days of my life! I am so happy I joined!"

MECA supports the Youth Leadership Program at the Madaa Creative Center in Silwan, East Jerusalem, one of many psychosocial initiatives for children, youth, and families.



More Than a Meal

By Wafaa El Derawi, Nutrition Coordinator

In September 2021, after multiple pandemic lockdowns, children returned to school and preschools (known in Palestine as kindergartens). Kindergarten students in eight of the most marginalized communities in Gaza started the new year with fresh, healthy meals provided by MECA through the PaliRoots Meal Program. PaliRoots.com is an online business and a community that receives thousands of donations from customers and through highly successful social media campaigns.

It is frightening to report that a third of children in Gaza suffer from malnutrition. The decades-long Israeli occupation has devastated the economy and the Israeli blockade of Gaza, now in its fourteenth year, has created an artificial shortage of some foods. Many kids are either experiencing, or at risk for, stunted growth and developmental problems. The goal of the PaliRoots Meal Program is to offer meals that are high in protein and calories and that provide at least 44 percent of children's need for iron. The program provides income for women in the local areas who shop for and prepare the meals. As a nutritionist, I oversee the program and provide workshops for mothers about getting the most nutritious food for their families. Children will be assessed and, when necessary, treated at a local nutrition clinic.

We already see signs of success on the ground. In kindergartens where we have implemented this project, the number of students has doubled. The children seem excited to go to school, knowing they will have a tasty, hot meal. They ask what tomorrow's food will be, and eagerly line up in the yard for meals.



My son never used to eat, but today he eats a full meal with his classmates, and I see his face is bright.

The children's happiness extends beyond the food. The children seem to feel reassured that there are people who love and care for them. In a particularly touching moment, I saw one child hug the nutritionist who entered the room carrying meals of rice and chicken.

But I also cannot forget the face of a child from Al-Fawares Kindergarten, who was holding a plate of meatballs and asked me what it was. I know that poverty in Gaza is increasing and becoming deeper, but still I was shocked to discover that there really are children who have never eaten meat before.

I can only hope that as a result of our program, more and more mothers will report experiences like the one this mother described: "My son never used to eat, but today he eats a full meal with his classmates, and I see his face is bright."

Visit MECA partner at
PaliRoots.com



Nourishing meals at school funded by the PaliRoots Meal Program are a treat, especially for children whose families can't provide enough food at home.

Maia Project Update: Five Schools Get New Water Units

Since the Maia Project began over a decade ago to address Gaza's severe water crisis, MECA has installed a total of 82 water purification and desalination units in Gaza schools, kindergartens, and neighborhood centers to provide safe, clean drinking water to more than 115,000 children every day. The Maia Project faced significant obstacles over the last two years. First, many schools were closed because of the pandemic so existing units could not be adequately tested and

maintained. Then, the Israeli bombing in May 2021 damaged roads so badly that it was difficult for MECA Maia Project Coordinator Ghada Mansi to visit the schools and contractors were unable to bring equipment to the sites. Despite these setbacks, new water purification and desalination units were installed in December 2021 in four schools and one kindergarten.

Schoolgirls drinking clean, safe water from their school's new Maia unit.



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Winter 2022

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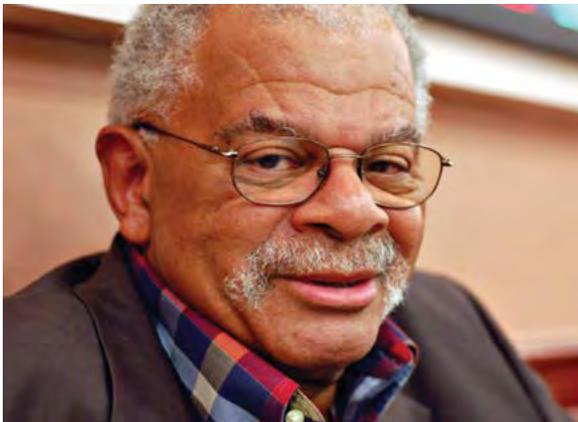
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March 28, 2022

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