

# NOWHERE TO ESCAPE IN GAZA.

## THE WAR TURNED THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS INTO A CATASTROPHE

20 November 2023

### A CLOSER LOOK



Palestinians conduct a search and rescue operation after the attack of the Israeli army at Maghazi refugee camp in Gaza City, Gaza on November 03, 2023. Photo: © Omar Ashtawy/APAimages

The war on Gaza – indiscriminate bombardments, a complete siege of the Gaza Strip, and forced displacement of its population – exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in a context where the population has nowhere to escape.

The humanitarian crisis in Gaza was there before 7 October, when the war started. The Gaza Strip is a 365 square kilometre piece of land, surrounded by military-controlled walls and fences on the north, the east, and the south, and by the sea on the west. A sea that Gazans are not allowed to navigate or to use for fishing beyond a few miles. Around 2.3 million people living in the Strip – 70% of them already internally displaced after the creation of the State of Israel and the following expansion of the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territory – don't have the freedom to move in and out. Only a few are allowed to do so for work purposes. The Gaza Strip is under a blockade operated by Israel and Egypt since 2007, when Hamas affirmed its de facto government in the Gaza Strip. The blockade subjected the import and export of any kind of goods to Israeli control. Quoting UN OCHA, "Decades of protracted Israeli military occupation, 16 years of the Gaza blockade, internal Palestinian political divisions, and recurrent hostilities between Israeli security forces and Palestinian armed groups have resulted in Gaza's dire economic situation". Even before the 2023 war, the Gaza Strip

heavily relied on humanitarian aid, for both small and big-scale interventions.

WeWorld has operated in Palestine since 1992. Traditionally, as in the rest of the Middle East, WeWorld characterised its intervention by the proximity to the communities and their involvement in the strategic planning of the priorities, the strengthening of both civil society and local institutions, together with technical and programmatic expertise primarily in the WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) sector, but then expanding towards multisectoral interventions under the umbrella of Integrated Protection, as well as Local Economic Development and Resilience Building. Since the opening of an office in Gaza City in 1997, WeWorld intervention in Gaza has been traditionally focused on humanitarian needs, especially in the WASH sector, focusing on the shortage of drinking water caused by the overexploitation of aquifers in the past 30-40 years and the consequent increase in salinity in most areas of the Strip. After the Cast Lead Operation (2008-09), WeWorld has focused its intervention on the growing needs of vulnerable households in terms of Integrated Protection, and on the urgent need to enhance the local capacity to manage and supply drinking and domestic water. In addition, strengthening the capacity of local authorities in the sustainable management of resources and in responding to the basic needs of the population

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has been a guiding principle as well as the subject of direct interventions.

A few years ago, thanks to an initiative of the European Union and with the push and support of many NGOs, development funds were directed to the Gaza Strip, under the consideration that a swap in the conception of aid in Gaza was needed: Gazans' future relies on the development of their capabilities and resources, both of them very present, and not only in the mere delivery of aid, water, or food. Poverty in Gaza is a consequence of the geopolitical scenario, and not of the lack of resources. WeWorld is one of the first INGOs that started working in Gaza with development funds.

Before the war, the projects of WeWorld in Gaza focused on WASH and Integrated Protection, in close coordination with the UN Cluster system (WeWorld is a member of the Strategic Advisory Group of the WASH and Shetler Clusters): from an innovative system to detect and reduce the water losses (with relevant savings) in the water network in Khan Younis municipality (in partnership with the University of Berlin), to the construction and rehabilitation of WASH infrastructure in hospitals and healthcare centres (among them Al-Shifa hospital). All efforts aimed at ensuring equal access to safe water and quality health services to the people of Gaza. In 2022, WeWorld was funded by UNICEF to elaborate the National Standard for WASH in Health Care Facilities. The multilayer and long-term intervention in the WASH sector allowed WeWorld to be positioned among the main WASH actors in Palestine.

Once the war started, the already severe humanitarian situation deteriorated very quickly. After the Hamas attacks on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, Israel closed immediately all the crossing points between the Gaza Strip and Israel. Since the 11<sup>th</sup> of October, a complete siege of the Strip has been put in place, stopping completely access of food, water, medicines, or any type of goods. Since no fuel has been allowed, electric plants will not function anymore once the fuel reserve is over, as well as hospitals and water desalination plants, and, of course, means of transportation. After almost 6 weeks of war, not one day of ceasefire has been allowed, and the bombardments are continuous and indiscriminate. More than

50% of housing units have been destroyed and more than 1.65 million people have been internally displaced. Currently, around 1 million people are hosted in 258 schools (154 UNRWA, 104 public), and the rest at family houses or in hospitals and churches. [These numbers](#) increase every day. The health system was declared collapsed days ago, and some of the main hospitals in the north (e.g. Al-Shifa and Al-Quds) are under direct military attacks. Some 625.000 students (100% of the students in Gaza) have no access to education since the first day of the war. No humanitarian aid has been allowed into Gaza between the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, and in the following weeks, only an average of 40 trucks per day have been authorised to enter, which is way below the pre-war average and extremely insufficient to meet the needs of the population under complete siege since the 11<sup>th</sup> of October. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, the head of UNRWA declared that without fuel all the remained humanitarian operations in Gaza would completely stop within 48 hours. The health conditions in the Strip are worsening every day, not only because of the collapse of the health system but also because of the lack of a functioning sewage system, the lack of a solid waste and wastewater treatment, the increased risk of water-borne diseases, the complete lack of hygiene services for children, men and women, who are renouncing to menstrual hygiene common practices for the lack of safe and dignified spaces and resources. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, WeWorld was among the main WASH actors in Palestine publishing the “[Not enough water to survive](#)” statement, denouncing the catastrophic water, sanitation, and hygiene situation in Gaza

In these hours, the team of WeWorld has been able to collect and distribute around 122 m<sup>3</sup> of domestic and drinkable water to around 78.200 internally displaced people, using only carts pulled by donkeys. A drop in the ocean, but a drop that keeps the solidarity and the humanitarian spirit alive, as well as the trust of the population on the humanitarian system. WeWorld developed a [response plan](#) that considers three possible work-streams, depending on the evolution of the war and the humanitarian access. In the coming weeks and months, WeWorld has been already trusted and funded by the UN system to be part of the integrated humanitarian intervention, mainly in the WASH sector.

Since this war started, we understood that the crossing points for people and goods between Israel and Gaza would remain closed for a significant amount of time, maybe for good. The only chance to provide humanitarian aid to Gazans would be from the southern border with Egypt, through the now sadly famous Rafah crossing point. The international community was probably not ready for such a huge change of scenario,



Rafah Palestinians, holding jerry cans, line up in front of a gas station to get gasoline and diesel on the third day of the Gaza truce.  
Photo: © Abed Rahim Khatib/APA images

## > Samir, a voice from Rafah, Gaza Strip, Palestine

Samir is a WeWorld staff member. He is from Rafah, he is one of the few Palestinians in Gaza who is still living in his own house. After two weeks of war, he lost 19 members of his family, including his brother, in one single strike, after they evacuated from the north to the south, as indicated by Israeli authorities. Samir is now active in delivering water and other non-food items on behalf of WeWorld. "These are tough days, unlike any we have seen before in the Gaza Strip. Every family has someone who was killed, injured, or displaced" he told us, "All residents of the Gaza Strip have been affected by the punitive measures, from the suspension of fuel entry and the complete power outage to the ongoing siege, and the absence of basic life necessities. I lost part of my family in the bombing of my brother's house, but I could not stop, even at that point. Today we were able to provide water supplies to the displaced people who fled the bombing, after much effort. Most of them are children, women, elderly." Samir is a social worker with 18 years of experience in the humanitarian sector and was working on an innovative integrated protection and local economic development project. "Before this escalation, I never worked in the water supply sector, but I found no other option than act and look for possible sources to help these people, as many other colleagues are displaced, they live in very crowded places and the communication with them is not always easy. What we see is the daily exacerbation of people's suffering due to displacement, poor health conditions and complete lack of hygiene resources." We asked Samir what he sees in front of him, in the next days: "The coming days will be undoubtedly harder, with the onset of winter. What we provide to the citizens is a small part of their daily needs, but we will not be able to meet the main needs of the population without a ceasefire that will allow us and other organizations to move and support the citizens."

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so additional efforts from the UN system, in coordination with the Egyptian government and the Egyptian Red Crescent, had to be made. On the INGOs side, the large majority of those operating in Gaza don't have a stable presence in Egypt, where the registration requires a long administrative process. WeWorld – as other INGOs – deployed a Humanitarian Aid Unit in Egypt to assess the possibilities of delivering humanitarian aid through the Rafah crossing. The cooperation among the UN system, including a Logistic Cluster, the INGOs, and the Egyptian actors is already in place, and it's fundamental to provide a meaningful assistance once the Rafah crossing – which opening depends on political factors and not on humanitarian ones – will be full-time active.

The absolute priorities, once the provision of humanitarian aid is concretely allowed, are the restoration of life-saving facilities such as electric plants, hospitals, and desalination plants, which will need huge amounts of fuel to function. At the same time, the installation of dignified and safe human shelters and the allocation of spaces and resources for the education of 625.000 students, are priorities that encompass the future of Gaza.

The only solution to provide humanitarian support to the population in Gaza is a complete and durable ceasefire. The dramatic level of destruction of private and public infrastructure, the enormous number of internally displaced people, and the transformation in terms of demography and density of population, together with the incalculable loss in terms of human lives and collective and individual trauma, will require a restructuring of the humanitarian architecture in what will remain of the Gaza Strip – which after the complete evacuation of the north will reduce its surface by at least 40%. What will be left will be an incredibly densely populated area with around 2 million internally displaced people, with a severe lack of infrastructure, uncertain governance, and political interests polluting the humanitarian narrative, which is the only one we should all abide by.

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