

Gaza Urban Voucher Programme (UVP) and Rabbit Raising Intervention



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The background

Urban Voucher programme (UVP)

The Urban Voucher Programme (UVP) is a pilot project providing cash vouchers to 2,335 households, funded by the World Food Programme (WFP) and implemented through our partner in Gaza, MA'AN Development Centre.

The UVP was developed in response to a complex and protracted emergency and was designed to support target households to improve their access to food and reduce negative coping mechanisms. The pilot replaces General Food Distributions (GFD) with commodity specific cash vouchers to support small retailers and strengthen the local market, and to diversify foodstuffs consumed. Cash vouchers allow for the provision of commodities that are high in animal protein, such as eggs and cheese, which are not provided by in-kind food distribution.

The UVP was designed to run from October 2009 to December 2010. An expansion phase, based on the recommendations of the Mid-term Review (MTR), is scheduled to begin in January 2011.

The objective of the UVP is to target households living between the absolute and the relative poverty lines. Many of the beneficiaries are “the new poor”, having recently lost their livelihoods as a result of the movement restrictions imposed by the blockade.

Rabbit Raising intervention

The rabbit raising intervention is funded by ECHO and the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and implemented by MA'AN Development Centre.

The rabbit raising intervention seeks to protect the

Beneficiary receiving rabbits. Photo: Karl Schembri/Oxfam





Beneficiary receiving vouchers. Photo: Karl Schembri/Oxfam

livelihoods of unemployed people and to provide very poor households with increased consumption of protein or vitamin-rich food. This activity was implemented with the intention of increasing household consumption of fresh meat, and allowing beneficiaries to sell surplus rabbits to local markets at affordable prices. Rabbit rearing has been shown to be a sustainable and profitable intervention for small-scale household food production. The intervention was also expected to empower women, as household members recognise the economically productive role that women play. 286 Gazan households were involved.

The rabbit raising intervention was implemented as part of a twelve-month project starting in November 2009.

The rationale

Type of emergency

The humanitarian crisis in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) is a complex emergency caused primarily by persistent civil, political, and military conflict. The conflict has been marked by periods of differing intensity. Following the

second Intifada (upsurge) in 2000, the Israeli government tightened its grip on the movement of goods and people in and out of the territory. The Gaza Strip has been blockaded since the Hamas Party took control in June 2007. There have been extreme restrictions on the import and export of goods and restrictions in the freedom of movement in and out of the territory. 'Operation Cast Lead' launched by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in December 2008/January 2009 resulted in a large number of deaths and wounded and caused widespread destruction of housing and infrastructure. Despite the unilateral ceasefire declared by Israel on 18 January 2009, violence is still an ever-present reality. Furthermore, the improvements in the security situation have not been accompanied by a reduction in border restrictions for people and goods. Gaza's established crossings remain for the most part sealed off and tunnels now play a significant role in the economy.

The Urban Vouchers Programme (UVP) began at the end of 2009 when the food prices had stabilised sufficiently to allow for the implementation of such a project.

Assessments

A Socio-Economic Food Security Survey was conducted by WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) from April to June 2009, was based on a sample of 7,536 households in the Gaza Strip. It is estimated that nearly 1.6 million people are food insecure in the oPt, (38% of the population). An additional 12% are believed to be vulnerable to food insecurity¹. Food has been available, yet it is estimated that 973,600 people in the Gaza Strip (61% of the population) are food insecure due to lack of access. The Palestinian Medical Relief Society has found that up to 52% of Gaza's children are anaemic.

A report by Oxfam GB found that “despite the fact that the underlying cause of food insecurity in the oPt is politically induced, household and community-level relief and recovery interventions remain among the best options for tackling the food insecurity problem in the oPt”².

The urban context

According to the WFP/FAO survey, food prices remain above their long-term average. This food price increase, coupled with a reduction of real wages, has curtailed household's purchasing power.

Living conditions for most Palestinians in Gaza have continued to deteriorate. The ongoing blockade has crippled the private sector, driving unprecedented numbers of Palestinians into unemployment and poverty. Global price increases for fuel and food commodities have had a severe impact on the population, due to the high dependency on imports. The productive capacity of the manufacturing, construction, furniture, and clothing sectors has been significantly eroded.

The oPt produces less than 5% of its cereals and pulses, and prices of locally produced meat, poultry and vegetables have risen significantly. The severe limitations on imports of agricultural inputs, fuel and spare parts have devastated the agricultural sector. An estimated 70% of agricultural lands in Gaza are no longer being irrigated. 40,000 permanent and temporary jobs for farmers usually exporting their produce have been lost³. In total, the losses to the agriculture community as a result of the military operation in Gaza are estimated to have come to \$268 million.

Previously self-reliant families are progressively falling into poverty and are unable to escape due to the absence of job opportunities. These predominantly lower-middle class or middle class households have been severely affected by the increased restrictions and economic restraints. Their resources have been slowly depleted and they now represent a group, termed the 'new poor'.

Unemployment is high in the Gaza Strip at approximately 36%. Young people are especially affected, with unemployment rates of 57%. Moreover, cash-for-work operations mask these figures and the actual rates could be higher still. Those with work are facing increasing difficulties to manage due to unadjusted salaries, a degrading economic environment and high dependency ratios.

Approximately one-third of Palestinians reported a decrease in income in 2008, with the poor having disproportionately suffered, with a 40% reduction in earnings.

Negative coping strategies have been adopted, such as reducing the quality and quantity of food consumed. High costs have led to the exclusion of meat and fruits are from the average diet.

The Projects

Implementation methodology

The UVP programme was a pilot programme designed to help the beneficiaries procure a specific part of their dietary requirement through existing market mechanisms. Some UVP objectives were to:

- Provide beneficiaries with specific access to food rich in animal protein
- Use local shops as procurement and distribution mechanisms, ensuring cash is directly injected into the local economy at the micro level
- Boost the local economy by increasing purchasing power
- Provide beneficiaries with the advantage of choice and flexibility of day, time and food items to be purchased. This approach takes into consideration beneficiary dignity
- Release the resources that beneficiaries were using on items included in the voucher scheme, allowing them to use the resulting savings on other items, such as fish, meat and debt repayment
- Promote local production and procurement by making it conditional that the shops involved in the project stock locally produced voucher foodstuffs
- Encourage local producers and suppliers of diary products to meet shop demand

Every month a booklet containing 4 vouchers (one per week) is distributed to the beneficiaries. Each voucher value is 64 Israeli New Shekel (ILS) (about \$17 USD). The vouchers can be exchanged for a selection of food items, chosen by the WFP to provide a diversified food basket. The items are **bread, rice, wheat flour, yoghurt and labneh, milk, cheese, vegetable oil, eggs, and pulses.**

Reem Said Hassanein and her husband have six children. She belongs to the a section of the manual middle classes that have seen their savings dwindle to nothing in a few years, becoming Gaza's "new poor".

"Today is the first time in three years that my husband has been called to work for the day, I have no idea how it will be tomorrow as there are no guarantees for more work. When we got married in 1998 we could buy our house and furniture and live a good life, but now I can't even buy food for my children's breakfast before they go to school, were it not for the food vouchers we're receiving. Now they have breakfast everyday and their daily diet includes bread, thyme, milk and eggs."



Gaza Urban Voucher Programme (UVP) and Rabbit Raising Intervention

Four of these nine items are locally produced and support the local producers and manufacturers. The 'food basket' provides 4,828 Kcal per day per household. A total of 23 supermarkets across the three governorates were involved in the project.

In the rabbit raising intervention, the 286 targeted beneficiaries received 4 females and one male rabbit along with sufficient cages, 200 kg of fodder, and a veterinary kit. Training was provided to all beneficiaries.

Who was targeted

Beneficiaries

The UVP has 2,335 beneficiary households in urban and peri-urban areas across three governorates, North Gaza (453 beneficiaries), Gaza (1083 beneficiaries) and Khan Younis (799 beneficiaries). The programme sought to target

the very poor and the 'new poor' and ensured that there was a coordinated effort with the Ministry of Social Affairs and United Nations Relief and Works Agency UNRWA to prevent duplication.

Partners

UVP was funded by WFP and implemented through our partner in Gaza, MA'AN Development Centre. Oxfam was responsible for communication with WFP and for providing payment to the supermarkets.

The rabbit raising intervention was funded by ECHO and implemented by MA'AN Development Centre. Oxfam provided managerial and administrative support.

MA'AN Development Centre is a Palestinian NGO registered under the Ministry of Interior. It has been an Oxfam partner since 2006. The mission of MA'AN is to work towards sustainable human development in Palestine.

Nariman Farahat had extremely low calcium levels that required treatment. The medication was ineffective and left her feeling weak. Since she started receiving the Oxfam food vouchers, her calcium levels have risen to normal healthy levels for the first time in years, thanks to a daily diet of yoghurt, milk and cheese.

Nariman's six children, including five-months-old twins, are also feeling the benefit of the vouchers.

"I have never felt this good and healthy. I used to feel very tired and was taking pills that had little effect. I was keeping the little food we had for my children but with the food vouchers I can now make some savings and I feel much more energetic."





Shopkeepers who trade the vouchers for specific goods. Photo: Karl Schembri/Oxfam

The UVP identified 2335 households, according to the following criteria:

- Households living in urban and peri-urban areas
- Households with 4-7 members, selected from the Assistance to Vulnerable Group (AVG) caseload
- Households heads who have been unemployed for over three months
- Households with an income below 2,407 ILS (\$633) per month (below the relative poverty line)
- Beneficiary households are identified through the Proxy Means Test Formula (PMTF), a targeting mechanism that ranks households according to poverty using a set of assets based indicators as a proxy for income

The exclusion criteria are:

- Families where any member has an UNRWA card (except women holding an UNRWA card married to a non-refugee in the West Bank)
- Families who receive food assistance from other WFP or non WFP programmes (except if complementary food assistance such as fresh food)
- Families working with members as full-time employee of UN agencies, NGOs or the PA

The rabbit raising intervention identified 286 beneficiaries, according to the following criteria:

- Households experiencing long-term unemployment or loss of livelihoods
- Female-headed households, if the women or a member of the family are able to participate in project activities
- Households with a daily income lower than the World Bank poverty line of \$1.6 USD per person per day;
- High dependency ratio households – for example, large households with insufficient economic productive capacity.
- Households that are not beneficiaries of the European Commission funded PEGASE mechanism
- Strong motivation and commitment
- Space for the hutches

Cross-cutting issues

Urban Voucher Programme:

Exit strategy

Due to the nature of this chronic and complex emergency, humanitarian assistance is still required and is likely to be so for the foreseeable future. Until the underlying political causes have been addressed, there is little scope for alternative action. WFP is conducting research into many and varied aid provision strategies, such as supporting small dairy and eggs projects and food-for-work.

Gender

Feedback from the large majority of the women involved in the project was very positive. They commented on a suitable and beneficial range of commodities. Furthermore, feedback indicates that women found that voucher exchanges enabled them to feel like normal customers due to the choice and convenience involved.

Accountability

Oxfam and MA'AN have used a number of accountability and financial procedures, such as voucher serial numbers, book keeping processes, re-payments to shops and crosschecking beneficiaries with UNRWA.

There have also been complaints boxes in each of the supermarkets. Anecdotally beneficiaries considered this feedback system very useful and an important part of the program.

Cost efficiency and effectiveness

This pilot project is part of a process to learn more about the comparative advantages and disadvantages of cash, vouchers and food as alternative or complementary transfer modalities. There is currently no agreed methodology to evaluate food versus vouchers, though the Mid-term Review will analyse this. The vouchers provided by UVP allow beneficiaries to have access to a diversified food basket (including fresh dairy products and eggs), and also provides a cash injection into the economy.

Rabbit Raising intervention:

Sustainability

An Oxfam evaluation found that prospects of sustainability are relatively high, due to: a strong sense of ownership of assets provided; a good level of knowledge and skills among the beneficiaries; relatively low maintenance and operational costs; and commitment by implementing partners to provide follow-up services⁴.

Gender

Female-headed households were a prime target for this intervention and 40% of the beneficiaries were women.

Accountability

A number of well-recognised community-based organisations (CBOs) were identified to support in beneficiary selection and to act as vital channels of feedback and support for the households involved.



Miriam Al Hirbawi, a 75-year-old Palestinian, says the last years have been the hardest ever since her family was forced out of its village in the 1948 ethnic cleansing. "I haven't bought olive oil in the last three years," she said. "Fresh meat is also too expensive. How am I supposed to cope? I have no brothers, sisters or family to help me. I only cope with the help of neighbours who give me some food and clothes."



Young beneficiary of the Rabbit Raising Intervention. Photo: Karl Schembri/Oxfam

Impact

UVP

A mid-term review of the UVP pilot is currently in progress and will measure the impact of the project. Anecdotal evidence gathered during stakeholder interviews suggests that the voucher scheme has had an immediate beneficial effect. A number of parents reported an improvement in both their own and their children's health. Information received from health clinics suggested that there was a reduction of symptoms associated with rickets and anaemia.

Key Successes

- The involvement of supermarkets has supported local producers, and has a positive impact on the local economy
- The shops participating in the programme have an increased and secure income
- The shops involved in this scheme have been strengthened. They can now maintain a larger stock availability, increase credit to customers and upgrade their premises or resources
- The number and type of commodities available through voucher purchase has a positive impact on dietary diversity and micronutrient availability
- Beneficiaries resources have been freed to spent on other household requirements
- The beneficiaries involved have indicated that the UVP has improved householder's sense of dignity and choice

Rabbit Raising Intervention

A survey, four months after beneficiaries received their rabbits and equipment, found immediate impact and positive results.

- 97.6% of rabbit beneficiaries had consumed, sold, or donated an average of 21 kg of rabbit meat a month, equivalent to a value of 534 ILS (approx \$140 USD) per month
- The beneficiaries reported that the number of rabbits had trebled in the first four months and households had an average of 36 rabbits to continue rabbit rearing.
- 71.4% of the beneficiaries had reduced their level of debt, and 52% of total beneficiaries stated that they were able to avoid crisis sales of household assets.

A recent Oxfam evaluation found that two years after the initial support, 50% of rabbit kits that were distributed were still producing. A profitability analysis conducted by the evaluation team estimated that the return from the rabbit kit would be about 1,978 ILS (\$520 USD) in the first year, and 3,940 ILS (\$1036 USD) and 4,559 ILS (\$1899 USD) in the subsequent years.

Key Successes

- Successful livelihood diversification
- Dietary improvement
- Increased sense of dignity and strengthened access to community dynamics and markets
- Sustainable and profitable project design
- Improved family relations and reduced reports of household violence
- Improved household recognition of the economic potential of women
- Accessible for a wide range of people, as it is home based, and does not require hard physical labour

Lessons learnt

UVP

Data gathered at the MTR is currently being collated. However, previous evaluations and analyses have pointed to the following:

- The project and its benefits could be expanded through increasing the range and number of supermarkets involved
- The inclusion of more locally produced commodities could further support economic growth. Currently, four of the nine products are locally produced. The MTR will examine the potential to include fresh vegetables and meat
- Review the suitability of the WFP PMTF formula as a proxy for food insecurity as part of the targeting mechanisms
- An internal monitoring system could be developed to allow for more shops and for clients to visit multiple shops
- Alternative to paper vouchers, for example electronic cards, should be considered.

Rabbit Raising Intervention

The project evaluation provided a clear guide to the lessons learnt. A summary of these follows:

- Develop better communications with CBOs to allow for more effective feedback and trouble shooting
- All interventions, such as rabbit raising, require a technical and economic feasibility analyses
- Replication interventions require justification and a clear rationale
- Interventions should be tailored to the particular needs and competencies of the target beneficiaries
- Many households requested support to build barns for their rabbits, for health and sustainability.
- A closer focus on on-site training and follow-up visits will maximise the training outcomes

- Beneficiaries could become mentors and advisors to other community members seeking to rear rabbits
- Explore other possible roles for the beneficiaries to share knowledge and influence community members, for example at livestock shows
- Explore the possibility of combining a cash transfer component with the rabbit raising to cover the gap between initial provision and readiness for sale
- Understand the effect of the rabbit provision on the market price of rabbit meat
- Conduct a market mapping analysis of rabbit and chicken meat. This analysis is currently underway to inform the next stage of intervention

Potential for replication

The UVP is a pilot project, and there are plans to scale up to include 15,000 households. The methodology used is appropriate to contexts where food is available, shops or supermarkets have the capacity to participate, and there is a desire to support more local economic growth.

The rabbit raising intervention is a replication of an earlier intervention in Jabalia. It is appropriate to other contexts where rabbits are commonly eaten, and where other sources of meat are expensive or not accessible. The

number of rabbits distributed, however, has caused a decrease in market price. It is important to take this into consideration when planning for the next intervention and in balancing need and expected income.

It is important to stress that neither UVP nor the rabbit intervention represent a solution for the livelihood and dignity crisis in the Gaza Strip, but a temporary response to the extent allowed by the present circumstances.

Acronyms

AVG	Assistance to vulnerable groups
CBO	Community Base Organisation
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Office
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FSL	Food Security and Livelihoods
GFD	General food distribution
ILS	Israeli New Shekel
MTR	Mid Term Review
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
PMTF	Proxy Means Test Formula
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
USD	United States Dollar
UVP	Urban Voucher Programme
WFP	UN World Food Programme

Waseem Mushtaha, project officer with Oxfam partner Ma'an Centre for Development visiting the Ashour mini market, one of the designated shops from where beneficiaries can redeem their vouchers. Photo: Karl Schembri/Oxfam



Notes

1. Evaluation of Promoting Food Security Project in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Full Report, Oxfam GB Programme Evaluation October 2007 p 9
2. Ibid p 39
3. Urban Voucher Project in Gaza, Oxfam original Programme Implementation Plan, Oxfam internal document
4. Op cit Oxfam GB Programme Evaluation, p 8