

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability of Street Vendors in the Gaza Strip

Gaza Strip, 30/04/2020



The economic situation of the Gaza Strip has deteriorated continuously over the past twenty years. The suffocating Israeli siege that started in 2000, followed by a comprehensive blockade for the past 13 years, several destructive Israeli military operations, and the consequences of the Palestinian internal division, have led to an economic collapse. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 45% of the labor force was unemployed in the Gaza Strip in 2019, i.e. 215,000 female and male workers. This figure only concerns the unemployed, who are still searching for a job. Tens of thousands of them have been discouraged by the utter lack of job opportunities and long-term unemployment, and have given up on actively looking for a job.

Due the lack of employment opportunities, many youth and graduates, and workers of all ages, who have lost their job opportunities, have been working as street vendors to earn a living and provide for the needs of their families. They have set up stalls and carts on sidewalks in busy streets, in front of health and educational organizations, mosques, and any other locations, where there is a concentration of people. In addition, street vendors have been setting up their stalls alongside the seaside street, selling food, drinks, sweets, toys and other goods that attract the attention of passers-by.

The situation of street vendors and attitudes towards them

The **measures taken to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Gaza Strip have negatively affected street vendors**. The authorities in Gaza decided to close weekly public markets, as well as schools and universities, and banned any gatherings on beaches and in public spaces, where the unemployed used to display simple goods, hoping that they will be able to sell them to secure a livelihood for their families.

Measures to organize, control and remove street vendors from their chosen locations have been amplified since the Covid-19 pandemic started. Street vendors in the Gaza Strip have protested against the fact that municipalities have been chasing them from one location to another, forcing them to leave or confiscating their goods. Furthermore, municipalities sometimes impose fines on street vendors that are higher than the cost of the goods they buy from big merchants by registering debts with them and repaying them in installments, after earning a few dozen shekels by selling these goods. Hundreds of street vendors also complain that the municipalities are transferring their stalls and carts to



locations that are far from city centers, while the successive economic crises has made it impossible for the unemployed to find job opportunities as wage workers.

W.B. is a 35 year old street vendor, who sells coffee and tobacco and supports a family of 6. Before, he used to work in the construction sector as a frames builder, for a wage of 80 shekels per day. Four years ago, he could no longer find employment due to the economic situation and the lack of work in his sector. He did not obtain any job opportunity through the government, nor any assistance from the Social Development Ministry or civil society organizations. He was obliged to deal with wholesale merchants and build a small cart of 1*0.5 meters that he parked next to a sidewalk on one of the busy streets of the Gaza Strip. This was his last resort to provide food for his children. He says that he works there from 6:00 a.m. until 12:00 p.m. to earn about 10 shekels at the end of the day. The municipality confiscated his cart several times. He wonder what solutions there are, what is required so that his family can live in dignity, and about human rights. With the Covid-19 pandemic and the imposition of preventive measures in the Gaza Strip, he is no longer able to make a living.

R.B. graduated in Islamic law (shari'a) three years ago. He is married and has four children, and supports his mother and three sisters as well. His father passed away two years ago; he used to work in the Israeli labor market and left them nothing. R.B. could not obtain any job opportunity, as the university has withheld his diploma due to the tuition fees he has been unable to repay. He had to look for work that would sustain him and his family. He set up a small cart and started selling cotton candy near the beach, although he lives in the most eastern part of the Gaza Strip. He walks to the beach with his cart at 7:00 a.m. and has no fixed hour for ending his day, all this to earn about 10 shekels a day. The municipality chases him and other street vendors on a daily basis. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, he has been unemployed as gatherings are forbidden, especially near the sea.

Officials consider that street vendors cause traffic jams, which constitutes an additional burden on roads, the width of which does not exceed 5 meters, at best, for two way circulation of vehicles, passers-by, and shops. Municipalities also think that the presence of street vendors and their stalls or carts in city centers and main streets mars the appearance of shop fronts and the city. They see them as an additional burden for the municipality's solid waste removal system, particularly during Ramadan and other festivities and holidays, while they do not contribute in covering the costs of this service.

Shop owners complain that street vendors represent intense competition for them, as their goods are cheaper than the ones sold by shops, and customers are more likely to choose the cheaper option due to their low purchasing power, regardless of lower quality.

Measures taken by municipalities that affect street vendors

Some municipalities tried to provide specific spaces on the outskirts of cities for street vendors. However, street vendors themselves want to remain in the central marketplaces, where there are many passers-by. Street vendors consider that



alternative locations proposed by municipalities are far from city centers, with few people and potential clients passing by, and that it is not worthwhile for them to set-up their stalls there.

Nuseirat municipality moved street vendors to the marketplace on Al-Masdar land east of Deir Al-Balah, where a market is organized every Monday on an area of 25 dunums according to the planning scheme prepared and implemented by the municipality, in coordination with security forces, to reduce traffic jams. The municipality distributed notifications to street vendors and informed them that it would start removing any shop's infringements on sidewalks and move stalls of street vendors. A couple of days ago, the municipality started distributing numbers to street vendors to move them to the aforementioned marketplace. It assigned numbers and allocated slots in the new market to the 250 street vendors that had been identified. However, while distributing the numbers, the municipality discovered that there were actually 560 street vendors, which caused some issues. At the same time, some street vendors protested against their removal to the new location, and organized a sit-in to voice their refusal of the municipality's decision to remove street stalls, which are their only source of income. Most municipalities in the Gaza Strip have implemented similar campaigns.

Recommendations:

Although the measures taken by municipalities are legal, they are not fair to street vendors, which depend on their stalls and carts to earn a daily income in the midst of an already difficult economic context that has worsened due to successive crises, culminating in the one generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this context, the ability of street vendors to make a living should be protected. Municipalities and other competent authorities should support them through:

- Allowing them to earn a living for their families by organizing their work inside marketplaces
- Providing alternatives and sources of income to them
- Selecting appropriate locations, which are easy to reach for customers
- Exempting street vendors from taxes and fees imposed by municipalities
- Establishing a dialogue with street vendors, and enabling them to organize themselves in a representative body that can defend their rights and interests in front of competent authorities to solve the issues they face in their work
- Adopting and imposing protective measures to safeguard their safety at work in line with physical distancing standards, while at the same time preserving their livelihoods