

**“I would love to travel freely in the country where Israelis no longer occupy our lands and threaten the Aqsa.” (Female, 6th grade)**

### **Child Resilience in East-Jerusalem (occupied Palestinian territory): Baseline Study**

With funding from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MA'AN Development Center (MA'AN) and Save the Children are piloting a school based psychosocial support programme in seven schools in East Jerusalem. The programme focuses on a new approach aimed at improving children's psychosocial wellbeing in a prolonged conflict situation. Its overall objective is to enhance the access of Palestinian children to quality and protective educational opportunities through specifically targeting 600 East Jerusalem children and their families. The programme uses a nonclinical psychosocial and protection methodology that focuses on children's positive coping skills and resilience. **During September and October 2011, MA'AN and the SC staff conducted a baseline study to gauge the perceptions of children, parents and teachers of children's wellbeing, resilience and coping mechanisms.** The team used a qualitative methodology, both a wellbeing exercise along with focus group discussions. A total of 7 focus groups discussions were conducted with 20 children (12 girls and 8 boys), mainly 11 to 12 years of age, 9 mothers and 18 male and female teachers aged between 35 and 40 years.

#### **Baseline Summary:**

**On the occupation** *“The occupation is making our lives very hard; I will feel much happier if there was no occupation or wars.” – (Female, 6<sup>th</sup> grade)*

- 📌 All of the participating children were fully aware of the restrictions the occupation poses to them and their caretakers. They are very outspoken on how the occupation has an impact on their life and their freedom of movement. The occupation is omnipresent in their lives and it is mentioned by their parents and relatives on a daily basis as a main issue affecting the community's wellbeing;
- 📌 Most of the parents mentioned shortage of living and recreational spaces, restrictions of movement, lack of equal employment opportunities and concern for their children's physical, social and mental wellbeing;
- 📌 The majority of the teachers admitted that their lives have become much more stressful and the high demands without proper compensation have caused them to lose focus, become less dedicated and unable to separate their personal lives from their work.

**On community environment** *“I do not trust anyone, in the neighbourhood where we live I hardly trust my family members”– (Male, 6<sup>th</sup> grade)*

- 📌 Most of the children in the focus groups seemed very fearful and untrusting of their community. They mention frightening issues such as killing and kidnapping of neighbourhood children, along with high criminality rates, drug abuse and theft and a lack of general trust in their neighbours. This restricts their possibility to access recreational activities, like normal child play, and the formation of friendships and healthy social relationships;
- 📌 The great majority of parents and teachers share these fears. They feel frustrated with the deteriorating conditions of their society and family structures and the disintegration of their community identity, without being able to present alternative and positive societal model.

**On family relations** *“-[As a mother] You feel like you're the mother, father, friend, everything in their lives” - (Mother)*

- 📌 The children interviewed agreed that family was the biggest part of their day to day interests; they worry and care deeply for their families and are preoccupied with their families' social and psychological health;
- 📌 Girls often mentioned feeling discriminated and excluded by their parents in family decision making issues;

- 📌 Parents prefer keeping a close eye on their daughters, whereas the boys are often allowed to play outside to 'vent',
- 📌 **The mothers interviewed mentioned that fathers are often absent, and that in many cases, mothers carry all the burden of domestic life.**

**On entertainment and play** *"I have too much free time, I get bored because there is not much to do [...] the only thing I can do to relieve boredom is going online"* - (Male, 6<sup>th</sup> grade).

- 📌 Most of the children mentioned simple activities such as spending time with their families and football as their favourite pastime;
- 📌 The mothers interviewed describe computers as a major activity children engage in after school, some of them do not know how to monitor their children while they are surfing the web;
- 📌 **Parents are mainly concerned about their children's safety, and won't allow them play outside, limiting the opportunities to develop relations with their peers;**
- 📌 **Children and parents suffer from the lack of entertainment possibilities;** there is a severe shortage of safe spaces to play in East-Jerusalem.

**On friendship ties** *"I fear that my children are surrounded by bad company. If they become friends with a badly educated child they will get influenced greatly by that friendship and adopt the same manners and ideals"* – (Mother).

- 📌 The participating boys and girls have different views on friendships, however positive friendships for both genders seem to contribute to their general coping skills and strengthen their confidence;
- 📌 **By parents and teachers friendship was generally perceived as something negative:** they emphasize the negative behavioural impact certain friendships generate. Having "bad friends" is often considered the cause of children's misbehaviour.

**On educational environment/discipline and punishment** *"I want to follow in the footsteps of my science teacher, she's fair, doesn't allow favouritism, and she's my role model. However to be a famous scientist I am afraid I will suffer prejudice due to me being Arab or Muslim"*- (Female, 6<sup>th</sup> grade)

- 📌 The children participating in the focus groups mentioned that they are facing enormous pressure to excel in their studies, in order to reach higher education; there is a **very high curricular load** which is discouraging; children worry from a young age about their grades;
- 📌 Parents and teachers mentioned that both boys and girls act out in a violent way as a means to resolve conflicts, especially with their peers.
- 📌 It was repeatedly mentioned by the children that **favouritism is a very big issue, sometimes teachers favour children because of their family background and fear of repercussions from the families;**
- 📌 According to the parents and children's perceptions, violence widespread in schools; teachers are not perceived as a positive adult model by many children, who often behave disrespectfully and violently. .
- 📌 Both the parents and the teachers' groups agreed that risk of school drop-out is high, especially for boys; they want to work and contribute to the household. **10<sup>th</sup> grade seems to be the turning point where many children decide to look for a job**
- 📌 **Teachers have difficulties using other tools than corporal punishment to discipline children,** they are against the new laws that prohibit corporal punishment; they argue children are not being disciplined for their misbehaving and there is no better means of discipline than those used on the teacher's generation i.e. "the stick." This is how teachers have been "disciplined" and it is generally acknowledged that parents continue to use this method to discipline their children in the household.

**On gender** *"When she gets married she will have to be energetic in her house, clean up and fix things, her in laws won't appreciate her being lazy"* – (Mother)

- 📌 Once boys and girls reach the tenth grade, interaction is usually discouraged by adults. They stop talking to the other sex, which widens the gap between the genders;

- 👤 Parents' perceptions on gender remain traditional; girls should be prepared to be wives and mothers, whereas boys need to become the breadwinners for the family.

Despite all the difficulties, the children interviewed continue to have big dreams both for **their personal future and the one of their communities.**

- 👤 Achieving a satisfying professional career seems to be one of the main aspirations, but also the liberation of Palestine from occupation is a recurrent hope;
- 👤 Children are aware of the fact that obstacles come from any side, including their own community social norms and that their community should change to make their future different.

### **We need:**

- Modification of the curriculum with more focus on a comprehensive learning experience including play and entertainment;
- To raise awareness among parents and teachers about the importance of play and social relationships;
- High scale investments in quality education for children in East Jerusalem;
- Community based child protection mechanisms to enhance the protection and safety of children in their communities;
- Professional and vocational career counselling for boys and girls to enhance their opportunities to adequately access the job market; more attention for vocational training and after school programmes;
- Awareness raising on positive discipline approaches for caretakers to reduce and eliminate physical and humiliating punishment at home and in school;
- Create safe play areas and community centers where children can spend quality time with their peers and form relations outside the family environment, with the approval of their families;
- Guaranteeing freedom of movement for all the children of Jerusalem, including those living in Shufat refugee camp, without military checkpoints.
- Adequate enforcement of laws to protect children outside of their homes and to ban corporal punishment at home and in school.