

Together they produced one daily hot meal for everyone

Research brief: Community led responses and mutual aid in Gaza

Organised, researched and published by: The Community Led Initiatives Palestine Working Group & Local2Global Protection

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Summary

This paper documents how volunteer community groups and individuals have led mutual aid and community response efforts in Gaza since October 7th, 2023. As victims, survivors, and first responders to the crisis, volunteers among the civilian population in Gaza have provided immediate and longer-term protection and other forms of assistance where it is most needed: rescuing wounded from the rubble; recovering bodies for burial; providing shelter, food, water, clothing, blankets, medical and psychosocial care, and sharing crucial information as well as cash with the most vulnerable. In-depth consultations with key informants showed that mutual aid and community-led responses were among the first and the most important emergency responses – even when compared to externally led humanitarian interventions.

When asked for the advice they'd give to external aid actors, responders requested that local communities and volunteers living in the crisis have deeper involvement and leadership of responses. Alongside greater inclusion, requests to ensure more relevant responses, and better quality assistance and implementation of aid were equally prominent.

We humans are supposed to have similar rights and lifestyles. Our only demands are to live and have the right to decide our destinies. Sorry to say that but I am so shocked and disappointed with this world. Is us living too much for them? We see the silence when Israeli leaders call us human animals, when they demand our killing with a nuclear bomb. Is it too much for our kids to live safe?

Male respondent, Deir al Balah

In this project, we interviewed 23 responders in Gaza. Given the situation on the ground, this research brief is necessarily limited in terms of gender and geographic coverage. It thus offers an early and incomplete overview of the vastly larger and more complex reality of mutual aid and community-led responses across Gaza. We nevertheless hope that this brief will serve as a

source of inspiration for those planning humanitarian responses for the people of Gaza. These glimpses of solidarity, humanity, and associated mutual aid offer striking examples of hope in an otherwise deeply tragic reality.

This brief is entirely dependent on the responders who spent their precious time, energy, and connectivity to share their insights with us. However hard we try, we'll never be able to do justice to the realities forced upon them.

Methodology

In mid-February 2024, a short survey was developed and shared with approximately 30 – 40 community members in Gaza, prompting responses from 20 community groups. This effort builds on ongoing conversations since October 7th, 2023, with a network of individuals and organisations with years of experience working with community-led responses in Gaza. The short text message-based survey was followed by key informant interviews with three senior Palestinian NGO staff in Gaza (two male, one female), all working directly with volunteer groups leading various forms of community responses. The research strives to 1) provide evidence of community-led responses during the ongoing emergency, and 2) identify the community responders' needs and

It's difficult for me to see all these people suffering, always crying, with no needs met. I have strength, access to some resources, and we need to minimise other people's suffering. If it's only by talking with them, this is what I need to do.

Female respondent, Khan Younis

opportunities for outside actors to provide relevant support to community-led and other mutual aid efforts.

As such, this brief provides an early and incomplete snapshot of some of the community-led responses carried out in Gaza since October 7th, 2023. The

responders describe their own experiences and observations in informal shelters, hosting communities, as well as their own neighbourhoods and local communities. The responders were asked to share their experience with how individuals and volunteer community groups support and help fellow community members during the ongoing emergency in Gaza. They were also asked to share advice on how humanitarian organisations and outside actors can best support community-led responses happening on ground. A categorised summary of all responses is included as an annex to this brief. More than 100 examples of community-led response initiatives were provided by the responders.

Geographical locations: 20 people from Middle Area, 2 people from Khan Younis, Respondent 23 spoke of both Rafah (south) and North Gaza. Two of the key informants had left Gaza by the time they responded.

Gender: 21 male, 2 female

Background

Following the attack by Hamas on October 7th, 2023, claiming the lives of some 1,200 people as well as the captivity of more than 250 hostages, Israel launched its most intense and—in terms of civilian casualties, suffering, and damage – devastating military campaign on Gaza ever.

By mid-June 2024, more than 37,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza as the land strip faces near complete destruction. With an unprecedented level of emergency, much of the humanitarian focus until now has been on the severely restricted humanitarian access, pressure for ceasefire, hostage release, and desperate need of increased aid supply. At the same time, a crucial aspect of the humanitarian response has largely been overlooked. Within Gaza, critical humanitarian aid and life-saving assistance is being provided by ordinary Gazans themselves drawing on the meagre resources they have available. Such responses led by community volunteers within Gaza are the focus of this report.

Mutual aid and community response to crisis

Assisting people in need with food and water constitutes the single largest category of mutual aid reported by the responders in Gaza (35 examples). Communal soup kitchens, provision of baby formula, food, and water – including collective efforts to reduce the costs for the most vulnerable and communal efforts to repair local water infrastructure – are examples of how volunteers and neighbours are responding **based on their own initiative** and resources. Many responders stressed how such efforts were particularly aimed at the most vulnerable families and individuals. Many of these volunteers have themselves been displaced numerous times by now without any stable access to resources or assistance. One respondent reported how groups of volunteers (often youth) in informal shelters would coordinate to identify, map, and distribute available food and water supplies, often each volunteer taking on the ‘responsibilities’ of supporting up to 30 families each.

Twenty-one examples document the range of ways in which people and volunteer community groups have helped

Some of the displaced people provide assistance by delivering water and food to people with disabilities and the elderly

Male Respondent, Deir al Balah

one another in the creation of temporary shelter. These include everything from individuals assisting in building makeshift shelters out of available materials and tents, to families taking displaced individuals and families into their own homes, to the communal efforts to establish and run informal shelters housing larger numbers of displaced people. Much of this is done as in-kind help and voluntary labour to help particularly disadvantaged families. Some contributions were cash

for vulnerable individuals and families to buy materials needed to build shelters. Youth groups within and from the surroundings of the shelters appear to be prominent in these efforts and are reported to lead in clearing garbage and general clear up in and around the shelters/displacement areas.

While food, water and shelter appear to be the predominant forms of mutual aid efforts, a number of other community-led responses were also mentioned.



38

Providing Food and water



18

Shelter



16

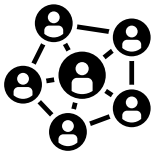
Cash assistance

Private or collective sharing and assistance



16

Toilets, sanitation and garbage collection



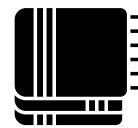
12

Community coordination of mutual aid



12

Health, medical assistance, advice and treatment from medical professionals (also displaced)



8

Provision of blankets and clothing



7

Psychosocial Support



4

Assisting the elderly and people with disabilities



4

Access to electricity



3

Aid distribution (general)



3

Resolving internal (family) conflicts



2

Rescuing wounded and trapped, removing the dead and, burials



1

Education

Another initiative is to evacuate people from the ruins. They did not care about their own lives. They just came to help us and save us! Even with a big risk that the Israelis would bomb the same house again.

Female respondent, Khano Younis

Though **rescuing wounded** and helping them to reach medical help when and where possible as well as **removing the dead** and assisting in burying them did not appear frequently in the short text message responses. But the responses of key informants, as well as available media and social media accounts

We have seen across Gaza a great “solidarity movement” where those who still had a home took in very large numbers of displaced. The community groups have tried to reach and support the displaced – outside more formal shelters and camps as well. There may be thousands if not ten thousand of such “micro displacement centres” where maybe 50 – 100 people have moved in with family and friends in existing buildings and homes.

Male Respondent, Khan Younis

demonstrate that that such acts of mutual aid have indeed been frequent and important. The fact that it does not appear more frequently in the survey responses may be a result of how the questions were phrased, the expectations of the responders as to what kind of answers were valid – and possibly the fact that this kind of activities have become so usual and self-evident, that they may have been taken for granted by many responders.

Equally crowdsourcing information did not come up in the short survey responses but was brought up in the in-depth conversations. Despite frequent and strategic blackout of internet and telecommunication channels, **crowdsourcing information** via social media on safe areas, working roads, escape routes, functioning cash points, potential shelter space, availability of food and other resources was identified as important in day-to-day survival.

When asked how external humanitarian organisations can best support community-led response efforts, responders highlighted several factors. Seven responders asked for **improved consultation and coordination** with people in need, communities, or

The first thing is that any humanitarian services or aid must be discussed and planned with the people themselves, because people are the most able to identify their needs, much of the aid was not helpful or did not take the culture of the community into account.¹

community representatives on needs and types of support. Another seven responses focused on **ensuring sustainability** in responses as much as possible given the circumstances. **Improved coordination** among NGOs, agencies, and authorities was called for by four responders. Fewer than four responders mentioned issues such as **relevance and quality of aid**, improving or upholding **standards, monitoring, equal reach and inclusion** of those most in need - and the importance of **advocacy and speaking out**. Seventeen responses were requests for specific relief such as food and semi-permanent shelters (caravans). For details of these please refer to the annex.

1. Examples of unhelpful aid mentioned were certain types of canned food as well as transparent tents and shelter material which were deemed culturally inappropriate.

Conclusion

Reading this brief and the detailed annex associated with it, it is important to bear in mind that these responses were born out of the immediate realities people were facing when the research was undertaken. Israeli forces continue their attacks in Gaza including in and around densely populated Rafah, forcing large numbers of civilians to once again leave whatever resources they may have behind and flee - some for the fifth or sixth time since October 2023. Given the ferocity of previous attacks and the disregard for protection of civilians and international humanitarian law displayed so far, it must be expected that realities will be up-ended yet again – and the situation continue to worsen.

The two shelters are community based and 100% community led. A national NGO facilitated and supported from the beginning, but the shelters were led and coordinated by the communities through the emergency committee and community groups.

Male respondent, Khan Younis

This means that mutual aid and voluntary community-led responses will have to adapt to new realities once again – including the fact that most people in Gaza are facing utter exhaustion after nine months of intense military destruction, along with lack of basic –let alone sufficient— access to protection, water, food, shelter, medical and psychosocial care—the essentials required to live. As we have seen for instance in [Sudan](#) over the last 13 months, this does not mean that mutual aid and community-led responses will disappear, but response strategies and activities will change according to changing realities.

The attached annex provides a more detailed and richer presentation of mutual aid and community-led responses in Gaza. Given the situation, this brief offers an initial reflection on the efforts of volunteers and communities in Gaza. Many more will remain invisible to the outside eye. The responses documented here are testimony to the solidarity, humanity and resilience of the civilian population under attack in Gaza. No writing or documentation can do justice to their efforts and their sacrifices.

We hope that this brief will help national and international aid actors understand the crucial importance of flexible, urgent, and sensitive support to volunteers and community members as they try to help one another through realities no human being - no child, no woman, no man – should ever be subjected to.

Community level responses have been the main driving force for survival in Gaza. It comes very naturally - even if the volunteers have not been trained. They are survivors and they can do anything.

Male respondent, Khan Younis

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