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### ***Education, Vocational Training and Employment***

*“Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory...education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among racial or religious groups...”*

This is what has been universally recognized since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Furthermore, the Declaration specifies that education ‘*creates the “voice” through which rights can be claimed and protected*’, and without education people lack the capacity to ‘*to achieve valuable functionings as part of the living*’.

Thank you very much. It is a pleasure for me to be here again with you. It is not only a pleasure, it is an honor and it is the opportunity for me to say thank you to the **Foundation Promocion Social de la Cultura**, to Pilar Lara and to all those working in the Foundation who have been very friendly, so supportive, and have accompanied Caritas Jerusalem all through the past years. I will not start naming you all, because I may forget some, you are all very important to us, to Caritas in the Holy Land and to Palestinian people. Through your support and solidarity you have helped us to build bridges, helped us to be agents for peace and to give a message of hope for better days in the Holy Land so thank you very much.

It is an honor to be part of this round table to share with you my thoughts about this powerful tool and such a basic and simple right. Yet with this simplicity, there remains the need to discuss an issue that is of world wide importance, especially in developing countries. With conflict, war, and occupation such a right no longer becomes a given and people do struggle and face hindrances to receive education, that not only is a right but a necessity and a tool in today's world.

Education goes beyond the ability to read and write. It becomes a basic building block to prosper, develop, seek new skills, access information and build bridges of understanding. It becomes a powerful tool allowing people to be agents of peace. Without education an individual will not have the ability to know and understand his other basic rights, and will not have the skills to demand these rights. Within a Palestinian context, lack of proper education does hinder our chances to fair and just peace negotiations with Israel.

I am a Palestinian from Jerusalem. In 1948, my family along side 750,000 Palestinians became refugees, dispossessed, and dispersed around the world. My family lost everything we owned, even the security of a home and a roof over our heads. My father, the sole provider of the family, had to start from zero, not only to make available the basic needs of the family, but also to play the role of the psychologist of the family helping us deal with loss and trauma, when both my parents needed that help themselves. Because he was an educated man he succeeded in helping his family survive with dignity and somehow restore the sense of peace and security in our hearts. Among the first things he did was make sure that all his children pursue the education in reputable educational institutions. He strongly believed that this was the best and a solid investment he can make to reap the most profit.

Education is a rich treasure that no one can do without. It allows people to participate dynamically in all activities that are required to sustain growth and development in a society, and be active member in their communities.

Palestine faces severe challenges in the education sector especially being a country living under Israeli occupation.

- From 1967 till the arrival of the Palestinian National authority (PNA), Israel's investment in primary and high school education was kept at a minimum. While curricula were being developed and updated in Israel to meet the new demands of a growing world, no efforts were injected to change and modernize the Palestinian curricula, in addition to forbidding the teaching of Palestinian history and struggle.
- Israel has the full control to close schools and particularly universities such as Bir Zeit University if such institutions showed civil disobedience activities or any political activism.
- Access to education on all levels, schools, vocational training, colleges and university, is fully controlled by Israel. The separation Wall and the Israeli check points control the movement of Palestinian people and goods. Countless are the stories where young students are humiliated and frightened at these check points only to be denied passage to go to school. Students from Gaza are forbidden to enter the West Bank to pursue higher education. The latest story that highlights the denial of access to a basic human right is the story of Berlanty Azzam, a senior at Bethlehem University. Berlanty is from Gaza. She was able to receive an exit permit from Gaza to attend the Vatican-run University which fully sponsored the student. Berlanty has not been to Gaza to visit her family since 2005 knowing well that if she returns, she will not be allowed to leave again. Upon her return from Ramallah to Bethlehem, Berlanty who graduates this year (BA Business Administration), was detained at a check point known as "the container" and was deported back to Gaza. She has three more credits translating into one course only. All efforts, local and international, and all humanitarian pleas to allow her to return to finalize her studies failed. With no political affiliation or activities, and nothing on her record, Israel decided single-handedly to ruin the future of a young woman seeking to fulfill a dream and live a "normal" life under occupation. Now, she has no means to leave Gaza which has been under an Israeli siege. Bethlehem University Vice President Brother Jack Curran laments the situation clearly stating that "The Israeli military has banned Palestinian residents of Gaza from studying at Palestinian universities in the West Bank".

- Detention and imprisonment of university students is another policy used by Israel to enforce its occupation thus forbidding access to education. As an example, according to the Bir Zeit University's Right to Education Campaign, 411 of its students have been incarcerated since Nov 2003. Six of its students are currently held under Administrative Detention, whereby people are imprisoned without charge, based on evidence from Israeli intelligence that is only shared with the military judge but not shared with the detainee or his/her lawyer. Administrative Detention is for six months, and on a renewable basis. Another example is at Hebron University where currently 47 students and 3 faculty members are in Israeli prisons.
- Destruction of school and university property is also a common Israeli practice. Again, the incidents are too numerous to list, but one example is the bombardment of the UNRWA school in Gaza. The siege on Gaza also delays entry of necessary items to rehabilitate destroyed schools as well as school supplies. Christopher Gunness, a spokesman for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), reported at the beginning of February 2009 that "Two hundred and twenty-one schools for 200,000 children only have 40 percent of their books because we can't get paper and glue into Gaza."
- Another challenge facing the PNA is the number of Palestinians under the age of 18. According to the latest study of the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics, on the eve of the International Day of the Child, 49.4% of the population is under the age of 18. These numbers pose two serious issues; providing actual classroom space for 1,940,000 students coupled with quality education, and second, providing job opportunities for them upon graduation. Relying on donor money and aid to support its huge budget, the PNA has to work hard at allocating the necessary budget for education in all its forms. This in turn becomes a challenge itself since donor countries are experiencing donor fatigue especially in light of the world economic crisis.
- Providing quality education in the different sectors remains yet another challenge. There is a need to upgrade the system to empower students with tools to prepare and enable them to enter the workforce and to give them enough skills to compete in a closed economy with limited job opportunities. A mean of doing so is to invite international people with expertise to spend a semester or a year at universities and vocational centers to train local trainers as well as students. One might think that this is something easy to implement, except that Israel controls the working visas and entry permits to those who wish to come to Palestine, and often Israel does not renew the permits midway through the semester. The English Department at the Arab American University in Jenin was almost suspended when it failed to recruit English nativespeaking teachers due to Israel's refusal to issue work permits.
- Loss of income to local universities from international students who have interest to pursue Arabic language courses and Middle Eastern studies, but are unable to attain the proper permits and visas from the Israeli government to enter the country. According to Bir Zeit University, "In the academic year 2006-2007, 13 students attending the Palestinian and Arabic Studies (PAS) Programme were not permitted entry/ re-entry to start or continue their studies. This effectively puts the Arabic language and culture programme at risk as it is entirely self-sufficient and dependent on foreign students' access to the University".

As mentioned earlier, education has the responsibility of preparing student to enter the workforce and compete for jobs. Unfortunately, Palestinians have to compete in a closed economy, in an economy that operates under siege. The new job opportunities opening up for new graduates in the private and the public sectors are limited. With no free movement of people and goods, and ending occupation, any growth in the economy is non-existent. The Ex-Minister of Palestinian Economy, Bassim Khoury, stated that the economic future of Palestine is bleak, and whatever economic growth is achieved is misleading. He added that the figures do not represent growth based on economic activities but rather the aid received by the PNA to support its budget and the additional aid received by NGOs.

In our case, and sadly so, education becomes a double edged sword. We invest in our youth, trying to give them the best we can within the limited resources, impediments and hindrances, and then they are unable to find jobs in our economy. These youth opt to seek employment especially in the Gulf countries and elsewhere, leaving behind some educated people and the unskilled laborers, robbing the country of the vibrant youth. The importance of having this pool of educated people and intellects lies not only in the need to have economically active members of society. They are the future of this country and they form a viable partner to peace negotiations with the Israelis. With education, understanding replaces ignorance, thus opening opportunities to real tolerance and reconciliation. Only then we will be able to discuss a genuine peace based on justice.