



DESTROYING MENTAL HEALTH?

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS
OF THE CURRENT WAVE OF DEMOLITIONS
IN PALESTINE



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- INFORMATION NOTE -

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CONTEXT

A WAVE OF DEMOLITIONS IN 2016

Since the beginning of January, the intensity of demolitions and displacement of Palestinians in the West Bank have reached the highest levels in seven years. Between 1 January and 15 March 2016, 378 Palestinian homes and structures were demolished by the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA), displacing 750 Palestinians, including 260 children, as much as half of the Palestinians displaced during the whole year of 2015.

Most of the demolitions happened on the ground that Palestinians had no building permits. Yet, only 1.5% of the Palestinian permits applications are approved, which leaves them with no choice other than building illegally.

Most of the affected villages are Bedouin and herding communities, coming from Hebron or already refugees after being expelled from the Negev during the Nakba of 1948. They are targeted by relocation plans advanced by the government of Israel. Their displacement will allow the expansion of existing settlements, notably Ma'ale Efrayim, Shiloh, and Petza'el in North West Bank, and Ma'ale Adumim (E1 plan).

Bedouins generally refuse to be transferred to urban areas as it involves the loss of their main source of livelihood (herding) and the loss of their culture and traditions that depend on a rural lifestyle.

THE INTERVENTIONS OF MEDICOS DEL MUNDO AND MÉDECINS DU MONDE

MdM Spain is working in Palestine since 2006 to improve the access and the quality of public mental health services, and since 2014 to improve the resilience of 34 Bedouin communities affected or at risk to be affected by critical incidents in the Jericho District, Jordan Valley (C Area) and East Jerusalem (E1 district).

MdM France is implementing a mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) emergency response program to prevent and mitigate the psychological and psychosocial impacts of critical incidents on

Palestinian communities living in 31 communities of the Northern West Bank (Nablus, Salfit, Qalqiliya). Since the beginning of 2016, considering the wave of demolitions, the team of MdM France has extended its area of intervention to respond to the needs of psychosocial support in other communities impacted by demolitions in the North West Bank (including Tubas governorate).

Both organizations are providing Psychological First Aid (PFA), following emergency Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) protocols. They focus on crisis intervention, organization of collective response, and referral to mental health specialized services.

This briefing gives an overview of the psychosocial risks associated with demolitions and displacements, and the challenges of humanitarian interventions to address these impacts that are often disregarded in emergency contexts. It also provides key information and recommendations to the international community, donors and NGOs.

NEGATIVE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACTS

It is not possible, given the short period, to provide figures about the long term psychosocial impacts of the current wave of demolition on the affected communities (men, women, and children).

However, there is little doubt that demolitions have serious psychosocial impacts for the individuals and the affected communities.

FROM THE DEMOLITION ORDER TO THE ACTUAL DISPLACEMENT: A LONG AND STRESSFUL PROCESS FOR THE AFFECTED COMMUNITIES

It is important to take into account the fact that a house demolition is a long process, starting from the time the household receives a stop working order (in certain cases), followed by a demolition order. Both can be brought to court, so families often enter a legal fight that can last years and can lead to feelings of frustration, insecurity or stress.

The stress can become more acute when their court case is dismissed and they know they are at risk to be displaced at any time.

The demolitions often happen very early in the morning. The Israeli security forces enter the community and demolish and/or seize the targeted structures.

After the demolitions, the families have to gather their herds, flocks and their belongings, in the middle of the rubble of their houses when they couldn't take them out. Then, they have to find ways to meet their basic needs: shelter, water, food, etc. They can be supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or relatives but these interactions can also be a source of stress (moving in with relatives in houses that become overcrowded).

Certain families face multiple demolitions: their tents or shelters can be repeatedly confiscated by the Israelis, repeating a traumatic incident. Some lose structures necessary for their livelihood and face economic hardship. Some have to move and then lose connection with their supportive network, some kids see their school demolished, and certain parents are worried for their children.

Therefore, even though it is not possible to draw conclusions at that stage, it is likely that the current wave of demolitions will have negative psychosocial consequences on the affected communities, possibly in the long term, notably on children and adolescents from 12 to 18 years old, who need to feel safe and secure to grow up harmoniously.

FIRST RESULTS OF MDM INTERVENTIONS

From December 15th 2015 to March 15th 2016, MdM Spain intervened on 9 cases of demolitions of residential and non-residential structures in Jericho governorate, the Jordan Valley and in E1 area, affecting 62 adults and 142 children. They conducted 21 interventions: 14 in the community, and 7 by phone.

- Most of the adult cases assessed showed emotional disturbance (anxiety disorder) and sleeping disorders.
- Children presented cases of nightmares and enuresis, particularly on the days following the incident.
- 9 cases presented severe signs and symptoms of common mental disorders (anxiety, depression, stress, PTSD) and 4 cases showed moderate symptoms of common mental disorders.

However, 45% of the affected persons are still in need of an assessment that could not be conducted because of the difficulties to intervene.

THE CASE OF JIFTLIK (QARZELIA)

Jiftlik is a village of the Jericho governorate, in the Jordan Valley. According to the Oslo agreement, it is considered as Area C, which means that the Israeli authorities have kept control on the security and land-management, including for the granting of building permits. Qarzelia is located approximately 6 kilometers away from the center of Jiftlik, and 3 families have been living there for 20 years.

The harassment of the Israeli soldiers against these people has increased in the recent years. The area was said to be a military zone, and as a result, their houses and animals' shelters have been demolished up to 12 times. Given the repetition of the critical incidents, the families have developed a high tolerance to frustration and seek to reorganize with the help of their relatives and organizations that provide basic protection services.

Following the last incident on February 10, MdM team conducted an MHPSS assessment. One adult and two children were referred to mental health specialized services and two children for medical assistance.

The testimonies of the affected communities reflect continuous stress and feelings of despair:

«I have lost my appetite; our life is a constant worry. I get angry fast and lose interest and I have a lot of thoughts coming and going, I feel desperation and keep thinking about the demolition” (Male, 17 years old)

“I get angry organizing after each demolition. Before, after each demolition, I used to put everything back like it was, once we had a new place. But this time I got bored and hopeless from doing that. What for?” (Female 41 years old)

“Every morning, when the kids hear anything they get terrified that it could be Israelis coming to them again” (Female 28 years old)

“I feel pressured most of the time and I talk with the kids and sometimes there's no one to talk to. I also feel tense especially when I'm sleeping, I squeeze my hand” (female 20 years old)

“I'm very worried about my 10 year old son. After the last demolition he started to pee on himself and also during the night. He was fine before” (Female 35 years old)

In February 2016, MdM France intervened in 8 cases of demolitions or delivery of stop working orders in Tubas, Nablus and Qalqilya governorates. The team visited 68 persons including 12 children.

In most of the cases, no PFA could be implemented during the first visit: the beneficiaries were facing a crisis situation in which their priority was to meet their basic needs and protect their family, leaving no space to take time for psychological support.

In March, MdM team managed to start the PFA, later than in the usual cases of intervention (where the PFA should happen within 72 hours after the critical incident).

THE CASE OF EIN AR RASHASH

Ein Ar Rashash is a village in the South of Nablus, near Duma, with about a hundred inhabitants, half of them children, who have lived in the area for more than 25 years. It is close to the settlement of Shiloh and to the Habayit Ha 'adom, Kida and Adie Ad outposts, which are considered as a continuation of Shiloh settlement and are all under expansion.

In 2009, the inhabitants received a stop working order that they challenged in court. In November 2015, demolition orders were left under stones around the houses of the villages, stating that the community is located within a closed military zone. The residents also noted that the surrounding settlements started to build structures closer to their village, and suspected that they will be evacuated to allow the settlements expansion. Again, they went to Court to oppose the orders but they lost the case. On 28 January 2016, they were informed that the Israeli High Court had issued an order to evacuate them from the area within the following seven days. On February 15, bulldozers entered the villages and demolished 32 structures, including 10 homes, leaving dozens homeless. The demolitions also impact the families' main source of income by affecting their livestock shelters.

On February 17, a team of MdM France social worker visited the area for the first time, but it was not possible to conduct a proper assessment of the psychosocial needs, considering that the affected families were busy gathering their belongings and trying to find ways to meet their basic needs. Twelve days later, during a second visit, they were more available to talk and share their feelings.

"When I am anxious and afraid I have problems in the stomach"

"The demolition broke our lifestyle"

"One of our children escaped from the area when he saw the bulldozers, we found him hidden under a rock later."

"These children are in need of services, they need motivation, they need to be happy and play"

Some expressed stress and anger towards organizations who visited them directly after the incident, since they do not respect the situation of the community: "We were not concentrated, busy looking for our children, sheep, clothes, food, and thinking where the women and children are going to sleep tonight, and they ask you how many meters the demolished tent was"

THE CHALLENGES OF MHPSS INTERVENTIONS AFTER A DEMOLITION

As in any MHPSS intervention, it is very important to take into account the culture and tradition of the communities and to earn their trust to be able to implement effective strategies. In the case of the Bedouins, for example, it is crucial to be particularly sensitive to the gender balance. Men are the decision makers so it is important that they understand and allow the intervention. They provide more information regarding the consequences of the demolitions on their economic situation (their livestock is their main source of income). They also talk more openly without women around. Among women, it should also be kept in mind that there is a strong hierarchical structure, the elder having more authority.

Yet, some difficulties are very specific to the demolitions:

- **The intervention is often difficult for MdM staff**, from the access to the community (bad roads) to the pressure of the Israeli authorities who sometimes follow the teams or interrogate them. Additionally, the state of poverty and despair of an entire community can be overwhelming and requires support for the social workers and psychologists.
- **There is a huge frustration due to the lack of accountability of the government of Israel**, which is condemned for violation of international laws but continues with its relocation plans without real accountability.
- **In certain cases, the families lack basic services such as shelters, food or hygiene.** In that case, the psychosocial support does not appear as a priority, even though people affected are likely to suffer from stress and anxiety at that precise moment and the days following the incident, especially children and adolescents (we see for example school absenteeism and regression in academic achievements).
- **It can be difficult to access the affected families when they are displaced.** It can be a challenge to identify all the affected people, to follow up in the long term and to ensure a sustainable intervention with a group at risk of displacement when families do not have a stable housing, when sometimes the children are sent to relatives.
- **The repetition of incidents can contribute to worsening the psychological impacts of the affected families**, notably when the shelters are destroyed several times and/or when tents provided by humanitarian organizations are confiscated. We are facing series of critical incidents, each new one making it more complicated to maintain the emotional balance and the sense of safety and belonging of the affected communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO NGOs AND DONORS

While demolitions and displacement present a high risk of negative psychosocial impacts, the MHPSS interventions are challenging. Although the international community has finally begun to acknowledge the serious mental health consequences of political violence and armed conflict, there is no clear 'mental health recovery approach' in chronic conflict reconstruction projects in Palestine, and consequently programming and funding fall short of the great need to attend to this pressing problem. Within most chronic and post-conflict countries, mental health policy is essentially non-existent. Moreover, there is no global and collaborative approach to the mental health and physical healing of affected people.

To respond to this crisis situation, NGOs and donors should:

- Ensure coordinated efforts and sufficient capacities to respond to the basic needs of affected communities;
- Make sure that the provision of services is completed with a sensitivity to the psychosocial needs and the level of discomfort, stress and hopelessness that the communities are facing following a critical incident;
- Include MHPSS in the protection response to demolitions in order to mitigate the psychosocial impacts of these events on affected families.

TO THIRD STATES, NOTABLY EUROPEAN MEMBER STATES

The displacement of Bedouin communities is a violation of the Geneva Convention that prohibits the displacement of civilians from an occupied territory. It is also a violation of basic human rights starting with the right to housing, guaranteed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

Demolitions are intrinsically linked to the expansion of settlements. It is also a violation of international law that prohibits the transfer of the population from an occupying power into the occupied territory. Additionally, it jeopardizes the possibility to create a Palestinian State by fractioning the territory of the West Bank, compromising the prospects for a durable resolution of the conflict.

Despite significant international attention and repeated condemnation by several diplomats and international bodies, no effective measures have been taken to put an end to it, allowing the continuation and acceleration of international law and human rights violations.

Third States are responsible for the respect of international law and human rights, and the European Union and its member States are privileged partners of Israel, notably through the EU-Israel Association Agreement that specifically require partners to respect human rights and democratic principles [article 2].

Therefore, the EU should immediately take effective steps to ensure the compliance with these provisions and end the demolitions and displacement of Bedouin communities, the legalization of outposts and the expansion of settlements by the government of Israel.



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