



STATE OF PALESTINE

Evaluation of Family Centres as Community Level Service Delivery Mechanisms
Reaching Vulnerable Children in Gaza for the period June 2015 to October 2017

How can family centres in the State of Palestine improve their child protection services?

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EDITORIAL INSIGHT

This high-quality evaluation conducted under a complex political environment was commended by the panel for having contributed to significantly improving the design, management and quality of service delivery by family centres. The evaluation findings also contributed to an enhanced partnerships approach and to mobilization of resources for continuing a much-needed Family Centre programme.

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Girls enjoy a life skills education session in a family center in the Gaza Strip, State of Palestine.



Decades of occupation, conflict and economic constraints have led to hardship and suffering for the 1.9 million people who live in the Gaza Strip in the State of Palestine. Children are exposed to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation arising from the occupation and from within their own families and communities.

Family centres (FCs) were introduced in Gaza in 2009 with UNICEF support, following the Israel–Gaza conflict of 2008–2009. Designed as child-friendly spaces, and run by community-based organizations, FCs offered children and caregivers psychosocial, educational, health and protection services within their own neighbourhoods.

Since 2015, FCs have been increasingly employed for managing child protection cases, as part of a UNICEF-led strategy to meet the individual needs of conflict-affected children through a case management and referral service. This work has been guided by standard operating procedures on gender-based violence and child protection developed by the Palestinian Ministry of Social Development (MOSD) with support from UNICEF and other stakeholders in Gaza. By 2017, 51 FCs operated from fixed locations in Gaza and 5 from mobile centres near settlements of internally displaced people.

UNICEF State of Palestine commissioned an independent evaluation of FCs to assess their effectiveness in meeting child protection needs. The evaluation was timely, given declining support for FCs, and has led to a better understanding of their essential role in providing protection services to children in Gaza. The findings and recommendations have led to significant improvements in the design, management and quality of service delivery.

PURPOSE

The evaluation aimed to assess the effectiveness of FCs in identifying and responding to child protection needs, and consider how human rights, equity and gender are integrated into the response. It also set out to provide recommendations to strengthen child protection service delivery, and document good practices and lessons learned to inform future programming.

APPROACH

Twenty UNICEF-funded FCs operated by two civil society partners – MA'AN Development Center and the Tamer Institute for Community Education – participated in the evaluation. The evaluation covered the period from June 2015, when standard operating procedures for managing child protection cases were first piloted in FCs, to October 2017, when the existing partner cooperation agreements with MA'AN and the Tamer Institute came to an end. The evaluation selected eight FCs to visit, but a deteriorating security situation curtailed the fieldwork before the last centre could be visited.

A mixed methods approach was used for the evaluation, combining key informant stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions, and review and analysis of existing quantitative and qualitative secondary data. Eighteen key informant interviews were conducted with staff from UNICEF, implementing partners, the MOSD and non-governmental organizations associated with the FC programme. Additionally, 36 focus group discussions involving 315 participants were deployed. FC staff helped to identify the 172 children and 108 parents and caregivers who participated in the focus groups, as well as 35 members of the Child Protection Community Committees (CPCCs) that acted as a bridge between communities and FCs.

BOX 1 SERVICES OFFERED BY FAMILY CENTRES*

- Life skills education.
- Expressive art activities such as creative writing.
- Counselling services.
- Case management services for lower-risk child protection cases.
- Structured child protection sessions for parents and caregivers to raise awareness of issues and share key child protection messages.
- Facilitated parent–child interactions for parents and young children, with an emphasis on encouraging fathers to participate in their children's upbringing.

* Not all centres run every service.



Qualitative data were analysed using an inductive approach. Secondary quantitative data were analysed to calculate percentages related to cost per child/caregiver, the caseload handled by the FCs, the share of cases managed by each partner, male-to-female beneficiary ratios, UNICEF and partners, financial contributions, and other data that reflected the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the centres.

KEY FINDINGS

FCs bring many positive benefits to the communities they support, by providing essential child protection, prevention and early intervention services for children in Gaza. There are no other child protection stakeholders in Gaza able to take on this role should the FC programme be withdrawn.

Relevant at all levels

The evaluation found the FC programme relevant to the priorities of the partners involved, including UNICEF, MA'AN and the Tamer Institute, and to the implementation of the MOSD child protection response and case management in Gaza. Introducing the case management service enabled FCs to successfully identify and respond to the needs of individual children and their families. In fact, FCs managed 93 per cent of recorded child protection cases in Gaza from June 2015 to October 2017.

Expectations exceeded

In some areas, outcomes achieved by the programme were better than expected, particularly in terms of improved psychosocial well-being and protection of targeted children. Also, the numbers of children participating in structured FC activities often exceeded the targets set.

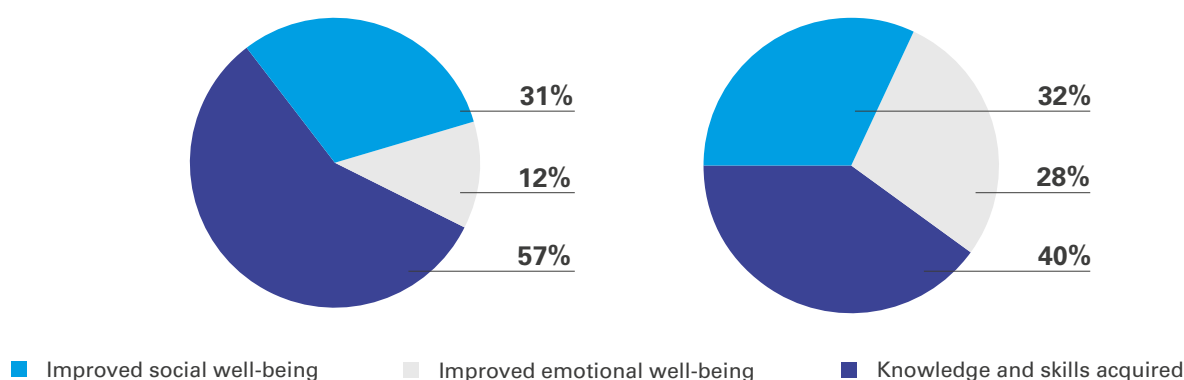
Positive change can be achieved

Remarks made during the focus group discussions provided evidence, albeit anecdotal, that FCs contribute to positive changes in the lives of children and their caregivers. Children in particular reported that they had learned new skills and observed positive changes in their emotional and social well-being. Caregivers also reported that they had gained knowledge and capabilities and felt their well-being had improved. This evidence suggests that the programme is having long-term impacts on participants.

Besides taking on cases, the Family Centres also provide services for children who have suffered from the wars, especially in the buffer zone areas.

- Key informant quoted in evaluation report

FIGURE 1
Positive change reported by children and by caregivers attending family centers



Source: Author's calculation.

Cost-effective, but affected by budgetary cuts

The evidence suggests that funding for the FC programme was disbursed responsibly and in a cost-effective way. When budget cuts were made, programme partners were initially able to achieve similar results (such as reaching a similar number of beneficiaries) at a lower cost. But further budget reductions affected staffing levels and the programme activities on offer. The evaluation identified the importance of diversified funding sources to ensure the financial stability of child protection and welfare services offered by civil society organizations.

Lack of inclusiveness, capacity or a plan for sustainability

There was limited evidence that children with disabilities participated in or benefited from the programme. The budget made no provision for FCs to make relevant improvements to their premises, including adaptations to improve accessibility for children with disabilities. More women than men took part in the FC programme, suggesting that more could be done to strengthen the programme's response to gender inequality.

The evaluation also found that the FC programme had no viable sustainability strategy or exit plan. Capacity building of the community-based organizations and CPCCs was lacking – despite the latter being the main mechanism for mobilizing communities to identify and respond to child protection concerns. This meant that FCs and their services could function only as long as the partnership agreement between implementing partner and community-based organization was in place.

Other gaps identified in the programme included the lack of baseline measurements for impact and outcome indicators, and the lack of both an underpinning theory of change and an overall monitoring and evaluation plan. A further constraint on programme efficacy was the limited capacity, in terms of financial and human resources, of child protection counsellors working for the MOSD to provide a timely response to more serious child protection cases transferred from FCs and to cases referred for financial support.

INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

The evaluation provides clear evidence of the importance and value of FCs to the social and emotional well-being of children in Gaza. This evidence has helped to build the overall confidence of the national community in FCs. A number of the evaluation's recommendations have been incorporated in the programme.

Improved programme design and management

Greater awareness of the value of the FC programme among UNICEF senior management and donors has led to renewed programmatic and donor support for FCs. Furthermore, UNICEF has taken steps to significantly improve both programme design and management.



Diversified prevention and early intervention responses

The evaluation recommends exploring the development of other community-level child protection service delivery models. In response, staff in schools and libraries have been trained to identify and refer vulnerable children for case management.

Heightened awareness and better case management

UNICEF has worked with two civil society organizations to raise awareness of child protection and to familiarize parents, caregivers and CPCC members with child protection referral pathways. UNICEF has also worked with CPCCs to raise awareness of the FC programme through radio campaigns, interviews and conferences. CPCCs are now better informed about children's rights and child protection concerns and have a greater understanding of vulnerable children's needs. They also value FCs and are more aware of how to raise concerns about child protection issues. Such insights are essential if child protection services are to continue, in the event that the FC programme encounters future financial constraints.

New standard operating procedures

The evaluation informed the revision of the standard operating procedures for child protection case management and referral in Gaza. Introduced in 2019, the new standard operating procedures are intended to be a user-friendly reference for case managers and supervisors directly involved in managing child protection cases. The procedures will build new partnerships to promote child and family programmes, improve the accessibility of FCs, establish equity-based programmes that mainstream disability, and strengthen outreach services to both women and men in a structured, standardized way. An enhanced case management system is now operating in FCs, strengthening their capacity to respond to the needs of vulnerable children.

Strengthened coordination with government

Engagement with MOSD officials and child protection counsellors has been strengthened, including by inviting these individuals to visit FCs and interact with staff. The possibility of supporting MOSD in case management is being explored.

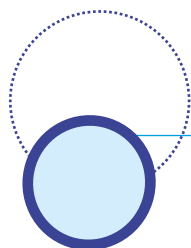
Standardized Child Protection Community Committees

A standardized approach to CPCCs, in the form of a manual, is now applied across all FCs. CPCCs are more formally represented within the programme, and FC staff are being trained to engage appropriately with them.

Improved measures for inclusion

National disability standards and the new standard operating procedures on child protection detection and referral pathways have been integrated into the national FC programme. Inclusive measures have been put in place to enable children with disabilities to benefit from FCs, and more men are being encouraged, through outreach activities, to be involved in the programme.





My daughter, who is 14 years old, was isolated and stayed at home. I encouraged her to come to the family centre. Now she has a lot of friends, her personality has changed totally.

– Mother, focus group discussion

Coherent theory of change

In response to another evaluation recommendation, a theory of change and logical framework are under development. These will guide partnership agreements and programme direction, and boost ownership and capacity of the organizations involved – particularly important if they are to take over from MA'AN and the Tamer Institute. A family strengthening approach, with a focus on improving the situation of children, will be considered. All partners will employ a monitoring, evaluation and learning system.

BOX 2

SUPPORTING FAMILY CENTRES AND INCLUSIVE CHILD PROTECTION

By demonstrating how FCs are supporting the well-being of children in Gaza, the evaluation has boosted confidence in the programme, leading to:

- improved national programming as well as improved quality of service delivery
- new partnerships to promote child and family programmes
- greater awareness of child protection issues among civil society organizations and CPCCs
- new standard operating procedures for case management
- strengthened coordination with the MOSD
- a standardized approach to CPCCs
- better approaches to including children with disabilities and involving more men in the programme.

LOOKING AHEAD

The evaluation recommends strengthening the FC programme and child protection system in Gaza, and considers how both could be more sustainable. Investments in community-level service providers such as FCs and CPCCs should be long term, creating an evidence base to help decision-makers allocate budgets accordingly. Longer-term investments would also support community ownership – crucial to the success of programmes. There is also a need for a better understanding of the protracted humanitarian crisis within which the programme must operate, and the specific circumstances faced by children and families in Gaza.



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A girl takes part in a life skills education activity in the Gaza Strip, State of Palestine.

