



**Evaluation of the  
Gaza emergency response**

Silva Ferretti – July 2010

## Acronyms

AA	ActionAid
AA Opt	ActionAid (occupied Palestinian territories)
AAAus	ActionAid (Australia)
AAI	ActionAid (international)
ALPS	Accountability, Learning and Planning System
CBO	Community Based Organizations
CWF	Creative Women Forum
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
GCMHP	Gaza Community Mental Health Programme
IASL	Impact Assessment Shared Learning
IECT	International Emergency and Conflict Team
MS	Mellemfolkeligt Samvirke (MS denmark / ActionAid)
NGO	Non Governmental Organizations
OPT	Occupied Palestinian territories

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# This evaluation

This evaluation was conducted by Silva Ferretti (independent consultant) from 20<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> June 2010. A detailed timetable of the evaluation is in Appendix 1.

## Purpose and scope

As per TORs the purpose and scope of the evaluation is *“To assess the role of ActionAid in contributing to the humanitarian response and early recovery in Gaza and determine the efficacy of the programme’s distinct focus and approach. Specifically this evaluation will:*

- *Assess the impact of the humanitarian response*
- *Evaluate internal processes and capacity of AAI and AAU in implementing the Gaza programme*
- *Identify and assess opportunities for the future, possible methods of operation and scaling up in Gaza”*

## Approach

This evaluation emphasized **learning** and a **forward looking approach**. It asked - to the people consulted - not only to give an account of what had happened, but also to derive lessons from experience and to propose a way forward. The evaluation also sought to derive a **strategic overview** of the intervention in Gaza rather than focusing on a detailed analysis at output / outcome level. This is important because - as this evaluation will point out - no explicit **strategy** for engagement was formulated / shared amongst key stakeholders, and reporting was focused mainly on deliverables. Hence the relevance to provide an account of the work done in Gaza by AA looking at outcomes / the strategic implications.

This evaluation built on:

- Desk review of project reports (DEC reports / activity reports produced by partners)

- Interviews with AA’s staff, in different locations (in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, /Australia / international) and active at different phases of the response (initial set up and response, ongoing programmes)
- Interviews with partners’ staff (mainly management / programme officers)
- representatives of the CBO supported by the partners
- visits to a limited number of beneficiaries (selected by the partners / CBO).
- Interviews to staff from international NGOs active in Gaza

Limitations of the approach are:

- This evaluation was not built to “audit” the system in place, and does not seek to assess the work done in detail, for example by employing statistical samples (looking at coverage, outreach, outputs and beneficiary satisfaction). The evaluation focuses on processes and systems in place, and on strategic direction.
- Field visits and interviews only targeted *implementing* partners. In the course of the evaluation it became apparent that AA had also done interesting advocacy and network building work around issues of protection, which should have been explored more in detail. However it was not possible to readjust the evaluation schedule to deepen this aspect.



**THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE**

## The humanitarian crisis

“Operation cast lead”, was a three-week offensive started on the 27th of December 2008 in Gaza. The offensive claimed 14 Israeli and approximately 1,400 Palestinian lives, including over 300 children [Goldstone report]. More than 5,380 were injured, of whom 1,872 were children, and 800 women. Between 40-70% of the wounded suffered severe traumatic injuries, and eleven percent among the injured have become permanently disabled [UNDP. *One year After. Gaza: early recovery and needs assessment*]. The nature of the offensive - 3 weeks of continuous bombing on a very narrow territory - where no safe haven and no way for escaping was provided to the civilian population - had also obviously resulted in acute ordeal and trauma for the population. Operation cast lead also provoked large scale destructions. According to Amnesty International, more 3,000 homes and hundreds of other properties, including factories, workshops, animal farms and orchards, as well as government buildings, police stations and prisons, were destroyed and more than 20,000 were damaged [Amnesty International. *Israel/Gaza. Operation cast lead: 22 days of death and destruction*. 2009]. The scale of destruction affected and is affecting an already fragile economy and the potential for recovery.

As per the Goldstone Report, “the military hostilities were a culmination of the long process of economic and political isolation imposed on the Gaza Strip by Israel, which is generally described as a blockade”. The blockade was maintained after the reconstruction, limiting the rights of Gazans to access to basic services, and impeding and hampering recovery and reconstruction. Internal conflict in Gaza is also radicalizing. The blockade and the underlying causes of the humanitarian crisis are still in place, and contribute to shape the complex humanitarian environment where INGOs and local NGOs/CBOs are operating.

## The response of ActionAid

When Operation cast lead took place, ActionAid had yet **no presence in Gaza**. It had, however, an office in the West Bank through its associate organization Austcare (now AA Australia) and a network of contacts and linkages with Palestinian organizations operating in the Gaza strip. When operation cast lead happened, AA resolved to respond to the humanitarian crisis, and derived the needed financial resources from the **DEC appeal** as well as from its own fundraising (**AA/UK Gaza Appeal**). Despite access challenges (during operation cast lead, access to Gaza for international NGOs / Media was curtailed by Israeli authorities for weeks) and the relatively small size of the OPT team, ActionAid/ Austcare managed to rapidly and effectively mount a response. The response was from the start, developed in strong partnership with a local NGO, Asala, an existing partner of AAOPT in the West Bank.

AA/Austcare maintained contact through local organizations in Gaza throughout the crisis to gather information about the humanitarian situation, and sought to share it with other interested parties (e.g. DEC). As soon as entry was granted to international staff, AA international /Austcare staff, in connection with Asala, conducted a **rapid needs assessment** and co-operated in planning the initial response. The existing women’s network - supported by Asala - provided a direct entry channel to affected communities.

The initial proposal detailed the modalities for immediate response, and **identified key areas for future engagement** (which included restoring livelihoods, psycho-social work, protection). This was intended as a skeleton to be then improved with the input of specialized staff (e.g. protection staff). AA also worked towards improving and better targeting its response with information deriving from **participatory assessments**. Since the start of their engagement, AA/Austcare invested considerable efforts in engaging with partners in training and mentoring work on conducting protection need assessments.

In addition to working with Asala (supported with the DEC funding), AA/Austcare also engaged in **partnership** with other local NGOs

(supported with AA/UK appeal funding), in order to ensure a better coverage and to also reach out to communities in central / southern Gaza.

Overall the response in Gaza can be divided into three broad stages:

- **initial rapid response** (assessment / distribution of emergency kits),
- **phase 1** (May-Dec 2009): a first set of projects, mainly oriented to recover livelihoods and to provide psychosocial support
- **phase 2** (due Jan-June 2010 – but affected by delays). Most partnerships were continued. New partnerships were set for activities with youth, focusing on media/animation.

In addition to support and coach its partners, AA/Austcare invested considerable time and energy in the organizational set up and also in creating capacity to work around protection, as illustrated in the following timeline. Selection of partners was based on the Austcare checklist and was a time consuming engagement. The initial assessment also was a time consuming activity, so AA was only truly operational (apart from its emergency response with Asala) only in July. By that time considerable pressure was put on local staff for implementing and “showing results”.

	(Feb-June 2009)	(May 09 /Dec 10)	(Jan / June 2010)
<b>Phase</b>	emergency response	1 <sup>st</sup> round of projects	2 <sup>nd</sup> round of projects
<b>Partners</b>	Asala ⇔	Asala ⇔ CWF ⇔ GCMHP ⇔ Al Mustaqbal	Asala CWF GCMHP - Fikra Sharek
<b>Work on protection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• protection assessment training (april)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protection assessment by NGO with AA support (jun / jul)</li> <li>• Voices from Gaza</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation towards “reaching beyond the wall” (a proposal for future engagement in Gaza)</li> </ul>
<b>Organization set up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AA Office established and local staff recruited</li> <li>• Capacity assessment of potential partners</li> <li>• Signed MOU with selected local NGOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Projects established and proposal finalized</li> <li>• New MOU (june)</li> <li>• Day to day support to partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project review</li> <li>• Support of finalizations of reports for phase 1</li> <li>• Finalization of new project proposals</li> </ul>

The Gaza programme, whilst responding to the emergency, created a good basis for longer-term work. Linking response to longer-term impact was a suitable approach in a context where the humanitarian emergency was only the tip of the iceberg of a long-term crisis. However, AA work in Gaza is now minimal: the office closed at the end of the response, only some project extensions are ongoing, presence is only ensured through an “inspirator” from another AA affiliate, MS Denmark.

Contributing factors for this state of things are:

- **lack of strong fundraising capacity** (aggravated by the fact that Gaza was a very competitive environment, where long established NGOs had an advantage and by the inhibitory funding restrictions placed by many donor governments due to home-country terrorist legislation).
- **lack of an explicit and shared strategy** for the programme which might have created more “buy in” within AA, and **fading support for sustaining the programme by the international organization**

One of the casualties of the lack of an agreed strategy linking local response to the regional / international level was **communication / policy work**. AA as a whole does not have a clear stance / position on Gaza and OPT. This limits the potential of some of the initiatives undertaken in Gaza “to start local but go global”. The *Voices from Gaza* for example, had lot of potential for opening up dialogue with donors and other international agencies on the modalities of aid delivery in Gaza (a theme that would fall squarely into the desire of ActionAid to be a critical voice). However Field staff noticed that **communication was mostly oriented to “supporting the brand”** (focusing on deliverables) rather than effectively communicating the root causes of the crisis and its long-term effects through the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalized people.

**Key points for consideration:**

- **AA managed to rapidly mount a very effective response in Gaza**, despite the challenging circumstances. The commitment of all the staff involved, and the availability and close support of the AA/IECT

was key in pushing Gaza emergency on the agenda of AA and in rallying support. However, **international support seems to have dwindled in the later stages of the program**, aggravating existing management challenges. AA/IECT should seek to ensure that its support to a country can be sustained in the long term, and an agreed roadmap should be established to this end at the inception of the response.

- AA staff in the field sought to **position the relief programme from the start in AA's distinctive niche of work** (focus on most marginalized / psychosocial work / protection work), all areas that can be – because of their nature – hard to quantify and which impose to look at the *outcome* rather than at the *output* level. However they felt that there was too much pressure on them – from HQs - to put “big numbers” and focus mostly on outputs in their proposal. This had an impact on the quality of the proposal. AA should seek to convince the donors with the quality and distinctive focus of its approaches rather than “by numbers”.
- AA international needs to further sharpen its distinctive approach. It should increase its capacity to build initial proposals that can advance it more strongly from the start. **It should be clearer, from the start how concepts like accountability / protection can be operationalized.** AA / IECT need to invest in further sharpening the capacity of its advisory staff to this end.
- Rather than diving into the response, AA Gaza chose to take the time to do a more thorough assessment. There were, however, concerns about the “slow start” and pressure was put on field staff to deliver results. For future emergencies AA should decide if it wants to be amongst the agencies capable to deliver quickly (but at the risk of basing response on shallow assessments) or if it wants to be an agency that might start later to deliver to the fullest, but will do so having identified the pockets of real need, the areas left out. There are of course pros and cons on both options, and surely a middle ground need to be found. However, **AA should agree more strategically what its stance will be (immediate response vs. humanitarian programmes which genuinely aim for 'recovery' and can target the most vulnerable and marginalized people, “left out” by the overall humanitarian response).** This will also help to avoid having contrasting priorities and pressures, which results in excessive pressure on field staff.

- Organizations working in Gaza with a genuine focus on protection should operate with a clear strategy / stance for their international policy / advocacy work. AA should have linked its response with **clear engagement for policy / advocacy / communication work** across all AA.
- It is challenging to find the time to formulate strategic lines during an emergency response, in a situation when time is scarce and pressure heavy. However lack of a shared strategy might reduce visibility of an emergency programme and its synergies with the rest of the organization. **AA Int / IECT should have a policy to demand (and support, e.g. through its advisors) a strategy outline as a programme exits from the acute emergency phase.** An explicit strategy should not necessarily result in a long report and undergo laborious approval processes. It should be intended as an agile and minimal framework highlighting the key concerns / areas of intervention of the organization.

## Projects and partners

AA worked with several local NGOs to implement the response.

- Partner supported with DEC funding: Asala
- Other implementing partners of Phase 1, funded by AA/UK appeal. All of them – except Al Mustaqbal (due to reasons of having its bank accounts frozen by the de-facto government) - continued their engagement with AA for a second round of projects.
- New implementing partners for Phase 2 funded by AA/UK appeal and focusing on advocacy / media / animation work.

This section will provide a quick overview of their work.

### Partner supported with DEC funding: Asala

Asala (Palestinian Businesswomen's Association) is a micro-credit organization active in Palestine. It was contacted by AA shortly after the inception of operation cast lead, and became a partner for the immediate response as soon as the relief operation started. Asala promptly conducted a questionnaire-based assessment amongst its existing

beneficiaries in order to assess their immediate need. Asala also used the information derived from the questionnaire for fact-based media work, through its own national communication structure. In the aftermath of the emergency, AA and Asala delivered kitchen kits to affected families. Asala then started providing grants for women who had their assets damaged by operation cast lead.

AA has been weary, in other countries, to engage around microcredit, and it should be questioned if a partnership with a microcredit organization allowed AA to really reach the most vulnerable (it reached women who already gained access to microcredit to set their business). However the capacity of Asala to conduct thorough need assessment ensured that clear criteria could be set to identify these most in need *amongst these served by the NGO* (it is worth noting that Asala assessment did not only include clients who successfully repaid the loan, but also these who defaulted). The selection criteria / modality of disbursement of the grant were thought in detail by Asala with the support of ActionAid staff, and were then also adopted by other international organizations that also chose to support Asala. It is suggested that AA document this approach as it is an **interesting middle-ground amongst direct provision of cash / delivery in kind:**

- Asala identified clear criteria to shortlist women who had suffered the most damage
- Rather than disbursing directly cash to them (which could have been taken away from them by other family members / used for other priorities), Asala assessed – discussing with each of the affected women – what items were needed to restore her livelihood. The grant amount was not set, it was defined based on need / type of business.
- When an agreement was reached about what items to acquire, and from what shop, Asala procured them and delivered to the beneficiary (this was often challenging, as availability of goods in the local market varied by the day)

The reasons behind variable grants were illustrated to the beneficiaries (which had mixed feeling about the idea of unequal assistance). The amount of individual grants was not made public. This was justified with the desire to protect the privacy of the beneficiaries, however it was

quite evident – when talking with beneficiaries – that lack of transparency created gossips and suspicion. This evaluation argues that whilst secrecy is justified when *loans* are disbursed through the traditional microcredit programme, (some women explained that when they took the loan they did not even inform their husband / relatives!), *grants* should be awarded in a more transparent way. A commitment to transparency around grants would have been the best demonstration of the soundness of the grant disbursement process.



*The owner of a beauty center could restart her activities after obtaining material to fix the ceiling, shattered windows and a generator through an Asala Grant.*

### Other implementing partners engaged in phase 1

AA also engaged with other partners in relief programmes, funded through its AA/UK appeal fund. These organizations are based in different sectors of Gaza, and this ensured a fuller coverage of marginalized areas.

- **Al Mustaqbal.** Partner for *Rural Palestinian Women's Vocational Training and Income Generation Project* (July 1st, 2009 to December 31st, 2010). Provision and training for 250 poultry farms for vulnerable families in the Khan Younis district.
- **Creative women forum (CWF).** Partner for *Economic and Social Empowerment for Women affected by violence in Jabalya* (July 1st, 2009 to January 31st, 2010); "*Economic support for women in the north*" project in (1st March, 2010 to 31 July, 2010)
- Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP) – Rafah. (<http://www.gcmhp.net/>)- *Partner for the Empowerment of Families Affected by Violence in Eastern Rafah* (1st August 2009 to

31st January 2010 – 1st phase; 1st February, 2010 to 30 June, 2010 – 2nd Phase). Note: The organization was a branch of a larger national network, but in the process of gaining independence from it.



*A beneficiary from a GCMHP programme - who participated in a literacy class - proudly explained that being able to sign her name helped her to build confidence to deal with offices and authorities.*

This evaluation will not look at individual projects, but at the overall approach pursued by AA, trying to derive its key features:

- **Focus on community participation and involvement**. This was also recognized as a strong asset for AA work by the DEC monitoring mission (“Our field visit was highly impressed by the appreciation shown among beneficiaries for the methods adopted, and skills apparently being developed by CBO members, literate and illiterate alike”) This was realized by engaging with local organizations from the start, and in leading them / building their capacity to set participatory assessment processes.
- **Emphasis on partnership, and on strengthening linkages amongst local civil society organizations:** not only AA tried to achieve effective partnership with its implementing partners, but lead them to join forces with local CBOs. Working through CBOs was a novelty for some partners, and this new approach was valued by them. Overall the capacity of AA to engage with civil society actors was a strong asset of the programme.
- Focus on **women:** as leaders (choosing NGOs with female leaders) and as beneficiaries, with a range of activities designed to satisfy a

variety of needs, ranging from support to livelihoods such as embroidery, beauty salons to establishment of fitness clubs)

- **Project activities tended to focus on restoring livelihoods rather than on immediate relief** (e.g. distribution of chickens, support to home business). Such activities were **combined with training and workshops for addressing protection issues** (e.g. violence against women, literacy workshops).
- **Psychosocial focus** – intended as an approach that brings together rights, dignity, basic needs, protection and economic recovery. The AA work in Gaza certainly pulled together all these components in its approach, however somehow the economic recovery focus tended to predominate. The existing range of skills of the local staff/partners also meant that – whilst appreciating the psychosocial dimension – they were however more capable to work on the livelihoods side. The next section will discuss how the protection component, despite being weaved into the programme remained subdued. In addition, whilst initial design of the programme discussed a referral system to ensure linkages with organizations working on mental health, this aspect got lost in the subsequent phases of the project.



*A beneficiary of a CWF project got support in marketing her embroidery work. Several family members were killed in the bombing of her house, and she suffered bad injuries at her legs. The interaction with CWF helped to restore her hopes and dignity, by allowing her to engage in productive work. She was also invited to share her experience at AA learning workshop, and felt empowered by the experience.*

Partners pointed out – and this evaluation agrees with them - that what distinguished the work done by AA with them was not so much the type of programmes - *what* was done - but *how* it was done: i.e. its focus on participation, protection, dignity, partnership. The evaluation will look at these aspects more in detail in subsequent session.

## New partners in phase 2 (media / animation work)

Most partners active in phase 1 continued their engagement in phase 2, with the exception of Al Mustaqbal: the organization received threats and had a bank account frozen by the government (note: in June 2010 the organization came out clear from all checks and started operating again). The involvement of new partners in phase 2 allowed AA to expand its focus to include:

- **Youth**, seen not only as a target group but as an investment in the future, an attempt to address causes of conflict in the community, by promoting dialogue and understanding children belonging to different factions. Work with youth was also meant to open a space for discovering their own identity despite a closing space for expression / development of citizenship. External stakeholders had also appreciated the active participation of AA in coordination groups on youth.
- Psychosocial work where protection work was linked to **communication / media work**. Rather than emphasizing the livelihood component AA increasingly focused on giving voice to people from Gaza.
- **Innovation**. AA invested in organizations keen to innovate the way in which their work. It provided them the space and the opportunity to try new approaches, and also provided opportunities to evaluate their work and to showcase it to other local organizations. AA – through the “inspirator” deployed by its associate organization MS – is still well positioned to support innovation within one of its partners.



*A boy who participated to a workshop with Fekra demonstrates a technique he developed to produce animations using its mobile phone.*

**Fekra**, a creative NGO active in theatre and animation, partnered with AA to run *animation workshops with children in schools* (1<sup>st</sup> April, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2010). The participating children were chosen in connection with the school itself, through school councilors. The workshops were designed to teach children also how to collaborate together, and to break existing barriers (boy/girls, political factions): the underlying intent of the workshops was to tackle root causes of conflict by creating trust and mutual understanding amongst children. The animations produced by the children were then shown in the schools, in community halls, in the course of summer games. In addition to support the project, AA worked with the organization management to improve their organizational systems. An in depth evaluation of Fekra work is now ongoing. AA providing to Fekra a local evaluation consultant, who will consult focus groups of Fekra beneficiaries. Fekra staff sees this as a unique opportunity to scrutinize their work and to document its impact.



*“Voices from Gaza”, realized in collaboration with Sharek, highlight concerns of the local NGOs in Gaza on the current modalities of relief.*  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su9JTNMnFMg>

**Sharek** (<http://sharek.ps/>) started its partnership with AA with the production of “Voices from Gaza”, a documentary denouncing the impact of current modalities of humanitarian relief on the civil society in Gaza. The collaboration was then continued with the project “*We Are Here: Gaza Youth Speak Out*”, for training youth on blogging and documentary production (1<sup>st</sup> March 2010 to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2010). Sharek is currently hosting an “innovator” from the associate organization MS / ActionAid Denmark, to support organization capacity, and this will help to ensure that the work and engagement started with

the Gaza programme can be sustained beyond the end of the Gaza response.

AA allowed Sharek to pilot courses on blogging / video documentary that were valued by participants interviewed. Participant stressed the benefit of a “hands on”, very practical course – which set is apart from other existing training / academic curricula, perceived as too focused on theory. The topics were relevant for students, but there would be of course space for further improving the curriculum of the training. Possible way forward could include: more emphasis on dissemination rather than on the production side only (e.g. identification of potential audiences, social networking, tools and practices for dissemination), linkages with new trends in communication (e.g. citizen journalism) At this point in time it is hard to judge the long-term impact of the training and also if its intent to spread knowledge was realized. (an assumption behind the training was that trainees will share their knowledge with their peers). Several of the blogs developed by participants were only occasionally updated, but a possible explanation for this is the poor timing of the training (held close to examination time). One of the main challenges for the project was – in fact - the timeframe. As it happened for all the projects of phase 2, the project start date was delayed due to administrative issues on the AA side and – given the short timeframe. Sharek had no room for maneuver in choosing the most suitable timing. Reporting on the programme was a missed opportunity to generate learning around it. Existing reporting is a poor attempt to show progress around some “quantitative indicators” (in the absence of baselines and clear criteria, what is the meaning of “*The capacities and skills of the target group increased by 80%* “ with reference to “*Shots and photography angles, sizes and colors*”?). One wonders if AA should have spared Sharek from the misery of having to fabricate a logframe type report. AA could have rather invested in assisting the organization to produce a convincing account of the training playing on its strengths (e.g. use of journalistic reporting, recording participants views through video) that could be used also for “advertising” the approach.

#### Key points for consideration:

- By engaging with a variety of partners AA managed to cover needs in all Gaza (also outside Gaza town), therefore reaching more

marginalized communities, and through varied approaches. AA also managed to ensure adequate follow up of activities with all partners.

- The intervention in Gaza confirmed the capacity of AA to set responses centered on **participation / community involvement**.
- The procedures set by Asala / AA for their grant programme are an interesting middle ground in between cash and in-kind delivery of aid. **They should be documented and shared**.
- Lack of information to beneficiaries/local communities about the grant disbursed meant that Asala / AA failed to advance a culture of transparency. **AA should more vigorously demand full transparency to beneficiaries by its partners**, and should equip itself with convincing models and examples on how this can be done in challenging contexts.
- AA championed a **psychosocial approach** in its humanitarian interventions, as a model of work that brings together rights, dignity, basic needs, protection and economic recovery. All these components were present in AA programmes, but economic recovery was the predominant aspect. AA should ensure that the wholeness of the psychosocial approach is better understood by its staff.
- *The brief engagements had by the consultant with children and youth to discuss Fekra and Sharek activities is far from sufficient to judge their impact. However it strongly showed the importance, for the children and youth consulted, to have creative spaces, where to reflect on and learn how to communicate the issues they experience. It also illustrated the power that **art/media work** – when also supported with trained educators with psychosocial expertise – can have in helping children and young people to express their issues in novel ways, putting aside the factionalism and the political barriers that so heavily impact on their lives. In the unique context of Gaza, these are strong and needed assets.*
- The presence of an “**inspirator**” within Sharek is providing a needed space for innovation and is supporting capacity building within the organization. It is valued by staff members but also by some of the some external NGOs consulted.

## Safety with dignity: Community-based Protection

AA human security work in emergency and conflict seeks to advance rights, always putting people at the center as active actors. Austcare also had a strong commitment and experience on protection work. Its merger with ActionAid became an opportunity for the two organizations to join forces in developing their “**community-based protection approach**”. Gaza was one of the countries where the approach was developed and tested – with the support of a protection advisor. Lessons from the experience fed into *Safety with Dignity: a Field Manual for Integrating Community-based Protection Across Humanitarian Programs*.

**Protection was built in the early phases of the response.** The staff deployed by AA appeared to have the rare capacity to make practical response go hand-in-hand with promotion of apparently abstract ideas - as protection can be. A methodology for a **participatory needs assessment incorporating protection aspects** was developed. Partners were trained and coached in it. This initial work showed that it is indeed possible to link assessment of material needs with right awareness and protection work in the earliest phases of the response. Incorporation of protection aspects helped to broaden the scope of the response, creating linkages amongst livelihood and awareness work (e.g. on violence against women).

However, as the response progressed, the **integration of protection work and programme implementation lost momentum**. Changes in staffing impacted on the modalities of support to partners. The staff who continued to support implementation had not yet sufficiently interiorized the protection work: they were not prepared to pilot modalities to incorporate the fledging ideas of “community-based protection” in the implementation of a relief programme. The protection assessment remained a one-off activity, it did not feed into a *process* to increase understanding and awareness of the concept of community-based protection, whilst linking it to practical implementation of more conventional programming.

Protection work and implementation of relief programmes started to diverge. The investment in protection work within AA Gaza by the

protection advisor become more directed to the **sensitization of a network of civil society organizations**. Most implementing partners chose not to be involved in the network. And as their perception of protection remained quite abstract, the concept was sidelined in the practice.

The idea of community-based protection might have remained an abstract one for implementing partners, but they were committed to the spirit of it. Community involvement, focus on dignity, desire to give more voice and more agency to the communities and their local organizations are evident in the response. The **focus on dignity**, for example, was a driver for the work of AA/Austcare and its partners in Gaza. Beneficiaries met in the course of the evaluation reported small – but telling examples, indicating that they felt respected and dignified by the response, and that partners had done their best to ensure this. Some reported they felt valued when they were consulted in the assessment. Other appreciated the fact that distributions were well organized, and that they could wait in shaded areas, with availability of water, tea and access to toilets. Some beneficiaries were invited to be part of the learning forum organized by AA, to share their experience, and reported that this was important in building their confidence.

Whilst AA managed to inspire and sustain its partners in committing to values and modalities of work in line with community-based protection, it was not successful in making the concept catchy or simple enough to be internalised by them. This suggest that **the concept of community-based protection could still be a bit too abstract** to be efficiently conveyed amongst local implementing organizations, in its entirety and in its practical implications.

The **establishment of a protection network** – following an introductory training – lead to the “**Voices from Gaza**” project – intended to give voice to local civil society. It exposed issues around aid dependency and unequal partnership amongst local civil society and international response. The video was used to foster a debate on these issues, however its potential was not fully harvested. (Incidentally, some of AA partners did not see the video, so an opportunity to expose them to the protection debate was missed)

The video was shown in Australia and in Europe, and debates followed. However it could have been more strategically and vigorously utilized as part of protection work linking AA Gaza / AA international. Failure to do so exposes a gap between work in Gaza and international policy / communication / partnership development with donor (IPD) work. AA Gaza is now seeking support for further work on protection, tackling the issues highlighted in Voices from Gaza, which are still relevant. It seeks to build on the expertise and the network built so far. To date the concept has not yet been funded, so the protection work is at a stalemate.

#### Key points for consideration:

- The response in Gaza was a strong opportunity for AA to articulate and test its approach to protection, Learning from Gaza was documented and captured in the AA protection manual. **AA shall continue a practice of learning on protection across emergencies and ensure that its emerging approach is shared tested and debated within and outside the organization.**
  - When AA work started in Gaza, AA/Austcare did not yet have a consolidated approach on community-based protection, and some staff found it challenging to incorporate these ideas strongly and in detail in the initial proposal. Now that an approach is available, **AA must make sure that community-based protection is incorporated in future response**, and that programme management / advisory staff can operationalize it.
  - Whilst the idea of “community-based protection” was still felt as abstract jargon by many AA implementing partners, concepts such as “*dignity*” resonated strongly with them. AA should look at modalities to further **simplify the idea of community-based protection and modalities to communicate it**, so that – without losing substance - it can be more easily grasped, operationalized and appreciated by partners in its entirety.
  - Training alone did not persuade implementing partners - new to the protection concept - about its value. The experience of Gaza seems to indicate that coaching and mentoring are needed to truly incorporate the “community based protection” in the response of local partners. Training was, however, effective with the organizations already more exposed to advocacy and protection work. The Gaza experience might help AA in deriving a range of modalities for **dissemination of the concept of community-based protection**, to be adopted in future response. The risk, otherwise, is that the idea of protection will be grasped by the converted, rather than being internalised by a large number of organizations.
- **The focus on dignity** of AA and partners was commended by beneficiaries as well as by other external actors exposed to the work of AA. It was seen as a distinctive feature of the response, enhancing its quality.
  - Stepping up protection work to become a “sounding board” for civil society would require **closer connection amongst AA engagement in Gaza and international communication / policy / donor-partnership structures**, working bottom-up. AA should identify channels and modalities to make advocacy from the grassroots possible.
  - The limited linkages amongst implementing partners and the **protection network** put in place by AA was a missed opportunity to build more solid ground for AA protection work in Gaza. AA shall work towards setting modalities of engagement and practices - for future responses – to link more solidly protection with the work of its implementing partners.

# Managing the response

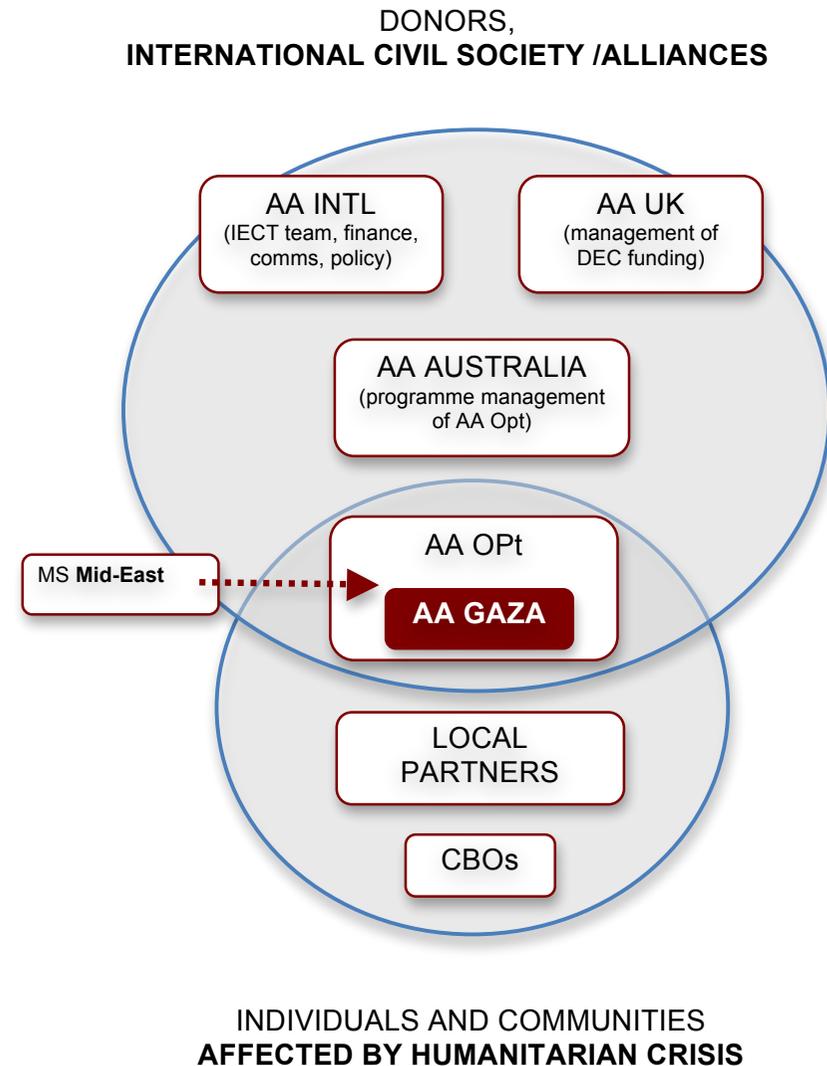
Previous to the response to “operation cast lead” ActionAid did not have an office in Gaza. It had, however a presence in the West Bank and a network of contacts in the Strip through its associate organization Austcare. Austcare merged with AA - in the course of the response – and became AA Australia.

So, aside from planning and implementing the response, setting up its office and its local partnerships, AAGaza had to link up with Austcare/AA within a changing organizational set up.

The following diagram summarizes the key units involved in *managing* the response. It is a long management chain: did it add value? Or did it mainly contributed to increasing bureaucracy and admin cost? This chapter will discuss the intricacies of managing the response looking at two circles

- 1) the circle of partnership with local NGOs: looking at the connections of AA with its partners and with the CBOs that worked with them;
- 2) the internal set up of AA: looking at the linkages of AAGaza with the main office of AA Opt (in Hebron), as well as at the linkages of the programme in Palestine with AAAustralia (AAA) AAUK and AAI (the international management)

Another associate organization of AA - MS Denmark - has also begun operating in Gaza at the suggestion of ActionAid Australia, through its “inspirators” programme (<http://www.actionaid.dk/sw141416.asp>). The “inspirator” currently sits with a partner organization of AA. He is building capacity by working on concrete activities, and promotes innovation. He is jointly supervised by ActionAid Australia and ActionAid MS and managed on a daily basis by Sharek Youth Forum (ActionAid partner in Gaza). As the emergency programme ceases, its presence will allow AA to maintain contact with partners and civil society. The inspirator is also intended to play a key role in the development of future joint ActionAid MS and ActionAid Australia programme in Gaza.



## Partnership with local organizations

AA Gaza worked through local NGOs to implement its programmes. The initial response was managed through a local partner (Asala). By the beginning of March AA had started to engage in a process of partner selection / capacity assessment, that resulted in establishing a partnership with 4 other organizations. The collaboration with most partners continued through the second phase of the project. Two new partners were then selected, to work on areas at the intersection of communication / protection / psychosocial work.

In addition to engaging with implementing partners, AA Gaza worked towards the creation of a network of organizations interested in protection. There was however a disconnect amongst the two groups of partners: the implementing partners and the protection network had little contact / opportunities for joint action. When the protection advisor left the country, the work was deprioritised by staff in Gaza. However the network was kept alive through a proposal development process responding to key dignity issues uncovered through the Sharek project 'Voices from Gaza'. The project proposal is titled 'Reaching Beyond the Wall' and has been submitted to the Danish government for 3 years funding. However, interviews with key network members were not included in the evaluation programme, so its influence and current strength could not be assessed.

The investment in creating strong *partnership* was one of the defining features of the programme in Gaza. All partnership forged by AAGaza appeared to be strong ones. Most partnership were done with relatively small organizations, but with a solid presence in their area of work. This was a good choice to engage in capacity building of their management. In some cases partners worked as local branches of national organizations, and this had created in few occasions some blockages and challenges. A lesson learned by staff in Gaza was the need to stipulate more carefully their MOU with local partners, clarifying better also the role and involvement of head offices.

All partners indicated that AA did not limit the relationship with them to “giving the money and asking for a report at the end of the programme” – as experienced with other donors, but offered valued support towards:

- **Improving targeting the vulnerable / quality of assessment:** AA invested considerable time and energy - at the beginning of the programme - to set training and to coach / mentor partners in their assessments. This enhanced the capacity of partners: they had a good grasp of the situation in an area, but not the tools to make their programmes more inclusive and more oriented to serve the most vulnerable. AA managed to effectively challenge the partner's assumption that “they knew everything about the people and the situation in their area” and lead to quality analysis and stronger criteria for beneficiary selection. The training on protection needs assessment (and the subsequent coaching) helped partners to better articulate the needs of their communities. They considered it an asset in a context where more advocacy should be done to large donors to show existing needs in marginalized communities.
- **Operations:** when partners encountered operational challenges AAGaza was able to step in and supported them. For example, it helped a partner in organizing / procure items for a distribution and it helped another one in choosing a new school when one dropped out. The willingness to engage, hands on – when needed – was appreciated by partners and considered an important component of capacity building.
- **Link up for common action:** AA helped partners to start collaborating with local CBOs (a first for some). Partners indicated that they intend to maintain their newly established linkages with local CBOs.
- **Financial systems / reporting:** AA provided continuous support to partners to set, maintain, monitor financial systems. It did also invest considerable time in helping them in their reporting process. Support in financial systems was needed and appreciated – even if partners lamented that AA requirements (e.g. re: number of quotations required) were higher than demanded by other donors / ministries, and cumbersome. The reporting process ended up to be a demanding process, more oriented to satisfy bureaucracy rather than learning.
- **Support to strategic planning / review:** partners have been supported in strategy development processes or programme evaluation through consultants paid by AA (e.g. CWF strategic plan /

Fekra evaluation). This helped partner to look beyond immediate outputs and outcomes, and focus on impact and critical reflection. This support was valued by partners, keen to have critical engagement and to get an honest analysis of the results of their work.

- **Creation of space for innovation.** AA – particularly in its engagement with Fekra and Sharek - allowed the organization to test new approaches. Having a space for innovation, accompanied by support in critically looking at their results was a strong asset for both organizations, and resulted in activities valued by their participants.
- **Learning / exchange** amongst partners. AA not only created opportunities for training, but helped partners to monitor their progresses and share their learning. The learning event organized at the end of the programme was a good opportunity for partners to exchange practices, and to start collaboration.

Implementing partners and CBOs felt that the chain linking them added value: it was not only an administrative one, but **interactions helped to build capacity**. It is important to stress that the model chosen for building capacity was not “training”: the defining investment was **continuous mentoring and coaching**, and this is what added value. The partnership was felt as one amongst equals. As a CBO member put it “often when we meet with the large organizations we see the secretary, not the management”. Partners also pointed out that they felt the “**passion**” of AA staff for the work and this was very important and inspirational. The genuine positive attitude of the AAGaza staff towards partners helped in pushing the programme forward also at times when – as discussed in the next chapter – administrative issue created considerable problems to the project.

The following are areas that could have been tackled by AA to further improve the quality / outcomes of its partnership in implementing projects.

- **Accountability to beneficiaries.** One weak area of support of AA was guidance towards creation of accountability systems for beneficiaries (e.g. transparency boards) / feedback mechanisms by partners (this point will be discussed more in detail in the next section)

- **Innovative processes:** most of the management capacity building was oriented toward the orthodox project management cycle rather than to flexible and innovative modalities of work, more in tune with a complex context and with AA own system, ALPS.
- **Innovative reporting:** to be true to its ALPS system, AA should have reduced the reporting burden for partners. It should have put in place light-weight systems to obtain information from them to feed into reporting for donors. AA should have fostered more creative ways to document their work. On the contrary, partners were asked to compile traditional reports, and quite considerable investment of time on this ended in relatively shallow result.
- **Coordination:** throughout the project there were limited coordination / collaboration / linkages amongst staff. However- as demonstrated by the very favorable reception of the final learning workshop - a stronger investment in these areas would have been a strong asset for the partners and for the project.
- **Fostering strategic linkages amongst Partners CBOs.** AA led its partners to start working together with local CBOs, but the engagement of partners with local CBOs was mainly limited to project implementation. Some partners pointed out that they had little knowledge of the long-term strategy of the new CBOs they engaged with. Stressing further the need for mutual understanding of strategic direction might have lead to stronger linkages. Linked to this, CBOs had little opportunities for sharing practices and learning throughout the programme. They have been invited to training events, but overall partners could have been encouraged to more actively promote shared learning.
- **Sharing learning, disseminating good practices:** AA could have helped the partners engaging in the most innovative work to consolidate it and present it. This could have helped them to disseminate their good practices and to show their potential to other likely supporters / donors. Partners would have appreciated such support. The presence of the MS/AA “innovator” in Sharek might be an opportunity to consolidate some of the learning / work done so far.
- **Stronger involvement of implementing partners / local CBOs in protection work.** Most implementing partners (and CBOs linked to them) had only a marginal involvement in the “Voices from Gaza”

programme. This was a missed opportunity to strengthen advocacy and the capacity of local organization to contribute to it.

### Key points for consideration

- The investment done in creating **solid and true partnerships** and to build the capacity of their partners was a strong and characterizing feature of the response. This partnership was built on continuous engagement, adopting a model of capacity building based on mentoring / coaching rather than one off training.
- AA in Gaza created a solid basis for **critical engagement and learning with partners, and for transforming their practices**. The engagement of AA and MS with Fekra and Sharek allowed both organizations to develop innovative activities. Both organization appreciated the freedom given as well as the support offered. AA seemed to have created a **“sandbox” space**, where innovative organizations can try and test new approaches, and be supported in this.
- The investment of AA in innovation and in promotion of new approaches (focusing on psychosocial interventions / protection) could be maximized if more energy was invested **capturing lessons and outcomes of such work, rather than investing in conventional reporting**.

## Management within AA

Managing the Gaza programme was a complicated business.

- AA Gaza was a **new office**, set up at the peak of an emergency. It was quickly established and was soon capable to operate at a good standard. Local staff were recruited rapidly, based on a solid track record of emergency management and then continued to work for the organization in the long term. They were complemented by an international programme manager and could benefit from the frequent presence in country of a protection advisor. As the programme started to change its focus – and sought to bring in more strongly protection / psychosocial work in the response, a new set of

competencies should have been developed / fostered within the staff to support the transition. However – contractual set up and challenges for staff capacity building work – meant that the team roles and composition were relatively inflexible. The needed competencies were available in the team but not shared by all. This reduced the synergies of AA work in Gaza.

- Gaza is under **blockade**. This limited the possibility for national and international staff to visit and support it, and hampered collaboration and learning. The limitation of movements for Palestinian citizens meant that even if Gaza has good road access and its only 50 km away from Hebron, - where the main AAOPt office is located - local staff in the two offices could not have direct contact. For example Israeli authorities denied permission to attend strategic meetings. Only one staff from Gaza could briefly visit Hebron. Travelling in and out of Gaza was limited to expatriate personnel, who needed to obtain a special permit. This reduced the possibility, for visitors to the AA OPt office, to also visit Gaza.
- Gaza programme developed as **ActionAid and Austcare merged** (in April 2009). This led to changes in the management set up for the AA Opt programme and in cumbersome decision making.

The AA OPt office in the West Bank was originally established by AustCare, an Australian organization that – after an association phase - merged with ActionAid and became ActionAid Australia. Prior to the merger, collaboration amongst ActionAid and Austcare had been on-going for several months in the OPt. Good working relationships were forged amongst staff. AA supported the OPT programme with some funds and with short-term deployments of its emergency staff. When the crisis hit, the AustCare representative and an advisor of the international emergency and conflict team (IECT) of ActionAid could rapidly start to work together to prepare a proposal, to set the response as demanded by the *“rights-holder policy”* of AA (committing AA to respond to emergencies in its areas of operation). Management challenges appeared from the start: putting the initial proposal together proved to be a complicated and time consuming exercise, due to the sheer number of people to be internally consulted (in AA international, where the Emergency team sits; AAUK, legally in-charge of DEC funding; Austcare). Communication and management challenges were never fully

solved in the lifetime of the programme and created considerable problems to its implementation.

A few months after the beginning of the response, management changes affected all layers: the Gaza programme, AA OPT and AA International (the IECT team). Management lines were also adjusted. Initially the IECT had managed the DEC programme (which is not the usual arrangement in AA). AAUK – the legal member of the DEC – then fully took over. As time passed, the initial support of AAI to Gaza work faded. A cumbersome systems of layers of consultation delayed decision-making. This state of affairs also limited the willingness and capacity to raise funds for the Gaza programme.

The merger process further aggravated issues. A merger amongst organizations is of course a challenging business, which presents opportunities (e.g. a wider organizational network and of course more funding channels –such as the DEC funding that would not have been otherwise available to Austcare) as well as challenges (e.g. alignment of organizational systems and practices). AA Gaza seems, overall to have been hit by the challenges and have derived only little benefit of the merger, in terms of linkages, support and learning from the organization.

When the merger happened AA Opt did not become a fully-fledged country programme, i.e. a relatively independent unit with its own communication / management lines with an AA regional office. AAOPT is still considered as a “programme” managed by a sub-office of AA Australia. Its status within AA is therefore a unique (and unclear) one in the organization, and this caused considerable challenges and misunderstandings in the response. Different organizational culture also implied different assumptions about how a programme should be run. For example, AA tends to devolve more work to the country programmes. Austcare would tend to centralize reporting. In this context, getting to effective collaboration on reporting took time. Split of overheads was also a challenging business, leading to a feeling that “there were too many managers”.

Not sufficient effort was put in to establish, from the start, efficient communication and management lines. The human side of communication also mattered. As people from two different organization

were working together for the first time, more efforts should have gone in fostering stronger mutual understanding and relationships. Most communication – due also to time difference – happened through email, but in the absence of shared understanding/protocols this eventually lead to ineffective and strained relationships. Only late in the programme, teleconferences were set up to iron out issues and make the working across offices smoother. Without staff dedicated to Opt in the UK and AAI, staff in-country felt that their programme and communications about the programme were not sufficiently prioritized.

Staff on the ground were in an impossible position, having to set agreements with partners whilst simultaneously being exposed to uncertainties resulting from inefficiencies of the internal processes within AA. They had either to rely on a long communication chain (sometimes slow and offering limited feedback) or try to cut corners. But when AAUK staff and field staff bypassed AA Australia, this caused internal communication gaps and led to higher levels of frustration for all involved. Frustration levels, a sense of isolation and of being “lonely rangers” was high. Capable programme staff resigned due to dissatisfaction with the system. Staff frustration also was evident amongst staff in International / Australia offices, where some felt that “we were not the same organization”.

Inefficient communication lead to delays in a short-term emergency programme that was always running against the clock. Even apparently small delays summed up with devastating results. Delays in reconciling budgets of phase 1, concurring changes in the management of the programme in Gaza (new staff recruited) and in the approval of budget for phase 1 meant that money for phase 2 (due to start in January) came only in March, nearly halving implementation time. The situation was further worsened by a reduction of the agreed budget for implementation. Partners had already started working – and invested considerable time in preparing their proposals - based on the forecasted budget. AA Gaza had to cancel the collaboration with two partners and had to demand to the remaining partners to revise and reduce the scope of their projects. This of course caused major problems with partners, affected their trust in ActionAid and put AA local staff in a very difficult position. Credit shall go to AAGaza/OPT staff for having managed this

very difficult situation, maintaining strong relationship and trust of partners.

Another challenge in budgeting was that - whilst the currency in use in Gaza is the USD - AA maintained GBP as its operational currency, and exposed AA OPt / Gaza staff to currency fluctuations. Short term programmes, should not have to manage fluctuations within a short timeframe, in an emergency situation. This is particularly true for a programme run in collaboration with local partners who, as per the empowering approach of AA are put in charge of their own budget. Budgets become therefore more rigid. Partners whose capacity is being built as they implement a demanding emergency programmes, cannot be asked to also manage the risk of foreign currency fluctuation.

### Key points for consideration

- Major management challenges derived from the organizational setup within ActionAid: whilst AA was very quick and efficient in setting the programme, procedures and organizational setup became very **cumbersome** with time. This had a negative impact on the programme.
- AA Gaza did not engage in a **strategic reassessment of staff competencies / composition** when moving from acute emergency phase to longer term response. The work in Gaza would have benefitted from more synergies amongst staff and better shared understanding of the fledgling work on protection.
- **The position of the AA OPt office within AA (i.e. as a country programme of AA Australia) is an untenable one.** The communication / management lines need to be streamlined, and the anomaly of AA Opt as a programme under AA Australia - rather than as a conventional country programme of AA - need to be urgently addressed. The higher management of AA/Austcare (as well as MS - the other associate organization of AA in the Middle East) should learn from the challenges encountered by the Gaza programme. They should reassess the state of the art of the Gaza / Opt programme based also on feedback from middle management / field staff, to define the needed short to medium-term measures.

- Many management issues seemed to be aggravated by **lack of effective communication** (i.e. failing to give feedback / acknowledging issues; insisting to solve problems by exchanging mails rather than with face to face dialogue). When finally a teleconference was established, some differences were resolved. In future programmes, higher management should prevent such communication / relationship failures, by building opportunities for constructive dialogue - beyond email exchange - amongst those involved in the management of a programme, in particular when they had never collaborated before.
- A short-term, emergency programme, run in partnership with local organizations (and where partners are put in control of their own budget) cannot be asked to manage **currency fluctuations**. When budgets are approved - in the country operational currency - AA should be prepared to set aside the needed money in account of the operating currency or to absorb fluctuations.
- Overall the relationships of Gaza programme with the rest of AA was limited – apart from the inception phase – to management / admin relationship. An area where international support could have helped was **fundraising** for the programme (e.g. through deployment of an international advisor).
- There was also **little investment by AA in Gaza (and also in AA Opt) in building a solid organizational culture**, as well as awareness of AA systems, approaches, practices. AA Gaza/Opt did not have clear pointers of where to seek support beyond administrative matters, which – in a decentralized organization as AA is, strongly limits their possibility to seek further support. AA should help its new offices to establish relationships with its functions and themes focal points, by mapping opportunity and by more proactively supporting them through its emergency advisors.

### Practicing AA (ALPS) principles

All strategic processes, planning and revision of work in ActionAid must happen in accordance with the organization's **Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS)**, based on 5 key principles: accountability, learning, power sharing, women rights and transparency.

However **ALPS was neither known by the staff in the Gaza office or by the longstanding AA staff in the West Bank**. No formal training/ coaching/support, on ALPS had been provided by AA to the country programme - by the IASL or the IECT function. The only exposure for some staff to ALPS was a cursory mention of the system as part of the support provided by an *external* consultant to the organization. In the early phases of the response the merger of AA and Austcare had not yet happened, and this could explain lack of awareness on ALPS. However it is a reason for concern that an emergency response could then be left to operate without knowledge of the main organizational system (whilst other emergency management systems, such as the EAR-ARM were indeed presented to the staff). This was a lost opportunity in strengthening organizational culture around the ALPS principles.

Lack of knowledge about ALPS also meant that – when engaging with partners – Gaza staff built their capacity based on standard approaches to project cycle management, rather than on alternative practices to further advance accountability - which ALPS is meant to do. This evaluation acknowledges that the capacity building work on humanitarian management (e.g. admin / finance) done by AA staff with its partners was relevant, and contributed to accountability. However, **the drawback was to strengthen capacity and build buy-in only on the “usual way to do things” (and to relatively top-down models of accountability), rather than adopting innovative modalities** that might challenge the modus operandi of aid delivery and increase accountability to beneficiaries. This is a loss in a context where – as the protection work done by AA highlighted – ALPS principles such as accountability and power-sharing with local CBOs are highly relevant.

The ignorance around ALPS was mitigated by the fact that local AA staff believed in authentic **participation** of beneficiaries to programmes, and had a **strong personal commitment to accountability**. This evaluation argues that if ALPS was made more explicit from the start, the staff could have further strengthened their work towards such principles, and more consciously created practices that could have become good models for ALPS work in other emergency contexts and for other organizations / local bodies active in Gaza.

ALPS also asks to be innovative in reporting. It demands to move away from bureaucratic reporting towards creative ways to document aid that really help to increase accountability to key stakeholders (first and foremost beneficiaries) and support learning. The Gaza programme, however, ended up sticking to conventional reporting. The DEC reporting became a cumbersome process, where field staff firstly assisted partners in producing their own reports (in English, and on an agreed format), and then extracted information from these. This evaluation argues that slimmer information gathering activities, which would not necessarily involve the production of a chain of reports – should be adopted. More agile ways to link up to the monitoring and accountability systems of partners should be tested. Ultimately **opportunities to advance learning and sharing of practices were dumbed down by adopting conventional reporting**. For example, media oriented activities could have been documented by using video or more journalistic approaches to reporting. This could have helped in gathering solid facts and in disseminating results more effectively.

### **Accountability, transparency and Open information Policy**

AA worked transparently and strived to ensure accountability. This evaluation argues that it did so to a good standard, but that AA's commitment to advance accountability would have demanded that it raise the bar even further.

Since the start of its work, AA in Gaza sought to base projects on **strong assessments through participative methodologies**. It worked to build the capacity of partners to perform ranking and establish criteria for the identification of the most pressing issues and the more vulnerable beneficiaries. The NGO consulted mentioned that these skills were new to them and improved their capacity to assist their communities. However, the initial assessment took considerable time, and ended up to be perceived as a “one-off” by the partners. The investment on strong assessment / monitoring seems to have reduced as the programme progressed. The initial assessments were not deepened / updated, and reporting tended to be limited to project outputs, rather than building more strongly on the rich baseline information collected. In short, **AA Gaza built very solid foundation for fact based programming and reflection, but failed to transform this into a process owned by the partners**, and its final reporting was more shallow and less insightful

than it could have been, had the initial effort been sustained. Changes in staff, the short timeframe of the project, the contrasting priorities for staff had certainly contributed to this. A way forward could be to design the protection needs assessment as an *incremental process* rather than as a self-contained start-up activity. This of course would require a longer-term engagement with partners.

AA was **perceived by partners as a very transparent organization**. Agreements were prepared in Arabic and English, to enhance mutual understanding. It shared and discussed openly budget and financial aspects. In addition, it sought to build the capacity of partners to run strong financial systems. However, to be true to AA commitment - transparency should have stretched even further. The *Open Information Policy* of AA (which was not known by staff in Gaza) demands that the overall plan of work and budget should be disclosed publicly. However **AA Gaza was not fully compliant to its Open Information Policy**: not even the partners of AA knew what the overall budget was and how it was allocated.

Accountability and transparency towards beneficiaries was also limited. **No “transparency boards” were set** to inform beneficiaries of plans and budget of programmes implemented in their communities. Some attempts to set community notice boards were done at the inception of the programme. They had little success and were not followed up. **No clear “complaints mechanism” was put in place**. Partners interviewed were quite opposed to the idea of creating such mechanisms for stronger accountability. Their understanding - which AA did not sufficiently challenge, and which actually sometimes also partially endorsed – was that high levels of transparency were not appropriate in the sensitive setting of Gaza. However, AA has experience of practicing accountability and transparency in equally challenging environments. If Gaza staff had the know-how and more support to work on accountability, some progress could have been done on the issue. There are of course obvious **challenges** in promoting transparency and accountability in an environment that tends to be quite secretive when it comes to sharing financial information. At the same time, **the environment in Gaza is increasingly demanding high accountability**: local and international NGOs are increasingly under scrutiny by the de-facto government, Hamas, and must demonstrate that

their books are in order. The evaluation argues that as NGOs disclose information to those in power, they should also be prepared to share it with the citizens. This attitude shall lead to convey the idea that demanding accountability is a right for citizens, not only a privilege for the party in power.

It was suggested that AA should be **more accountable to its beneficiaries about the use of the information that is extracted from them**. This is particularly important when beneficiaries are asked to provide information about their personal situation as “case studies” for the organization. In the Gaza context people would go a long way to fulfill their commitment to “witness” the effect of occupation, and are prepared to recall very painful memories, but should then have the right to know what use was made of their contribution. Local staff were committed to provide such feedback - “I would have wanted to show them how stories were used” - but signaled their embarrassment in not being able to tell them if and how their lifestories were used as no feedback was ever received on this from AA International / UK.

### Learning

When looking at learning in the context of a response in Gaza, it is important to consider the impact of the blockade on the information flow, which had obviously curtailed also the potential for exposure to and dissemination of new ideas. Movement of people - in and out - is limited, if not impossible. This state of things made the desire and willingness of Gazans to learn and to have exchanges with the world beyond the wall even stronger. The desire for learning and for exchanges was strong amongst all staff members of AA, of the partners organization met in the course of the evaluation, as well as amongst many beneficiaries of the project, in particular the youth. It could be argued that supporting people in sharing learning - within and outside Gaza - is not only a key component of programme support, but it is a powerful outcome in helping to reduce the sense of isolation they experience. All this enhances the importance of the investment in learning.

Overall the Gaza programme found it challenging to exchange learning within AA offices, but was committed to and succeeded to enhancing learning amongst partners.

- **Shared learning across AA offices in Opt / Middle East** was limited. Exchanges were mostly focused on administrative issues, rather than having learning oriented exchanges amongst programme managers active in Palestine.
- **Learning and capacity building amongst AAGaza and the broader Austcare/AA international** were fostered on **protection**, with the deployment of a protection advisor. Other areas of engagement – such as Violence Against Women and accountability work would have benefitted from bringing in more effectively the expertise accumulated internationally in Gaza. Deployment of international staff, budding system for on-going coaching / mentoring, use of internet for learning teleconferences with AA staff could have been considered.
- AA in Gaza made considerable investments in **building partners capacity**. Several training were organized (e.g assessment / management of response / protection training) for local partners as well as member of CBOs working with them, but it is the long term engagement on learning, the **coaching / mentoring process** that made the difference, and was appreciated by partners.
- **Learning across partners** was also fostered. A learning event was organized at the end of the programme. It helped organization gauge what they had achieved, and share experiences. All partners interviewed commended the initiative. They suggested that these exchanges should have started earlier in the programme, to stimulate cross-fertilization of ideas and collaboration. Follow up meetings amongst partners are now being organized, by their own initiative, to further share experiences and explore possibilities for collaboration.

### Women rights

All programmes implemented by AA had a strong focus on women, and most of them selected women as their primary beneficiaries, with a view to empower them (by giving them control of economic assets, by providing forums for discussions).

AA Gaza also was successful in engaging with organizations with female leadership, and in supporting capacity and action of local women's leaders.

Some of the programmes explicitly integrated protection components, towards increasing awareness of and advancing women's rights. However it was usually the livelihood aspect that took the limelight rather than the work on women rights. AA Gaza should have more proactively and explicitly helped partners to focus on women rights, but local staff capacity to do this was limited. As pointed out in the “emerging strategy” section, staffing strengths should have been reassessed at the end of the initial acute emergency response, and catered for. This might have lead to actions conducive to further strengthen the capacity of AA to work on women rights. The programme in Gaza would also have benefitted from closer ties with gender experts within AA, particularly around Violence Against Women issues, to share learning and practices.

### Power sharing

AA Gaza keenly **promoted power sharing** in its partnership. (however, power relations between local NGOs / beneficiaries and partner NGOs / CBOs could not be assessed in the time available for the evaluation).

However, **power imbalances remained**, as evidently demonstrated by the modalities of engagement of AA / partners in the second phase of the programme (when the work done by partners in defining budgets and target population had to be redone). AAGaza staff were fully aware of this, and commented that “partners in the end had to accept how the money was delivered to them because they needed it, but their dignity was compromised”

The focus on protection also helped AA to **critically look at the power imbalances in the way humanitarian aid is delivered**, and to expose them. The “voices from Gaza” has been a powerful attempt to bring in the “power” discourse in the debate around Gaza response. The engagement of AA around this fundamental issue should continue.

### Key points

- Overall, AA has been accountable to its partners, but **did not push the boundaries of its work on accountability at it has done in other emergencies**. This was a missed opportunity: field staff had the willingness and the capacity to work as per ALPS, but they were

not exposed to the system. There is a need in Gaza to challenge the current modus operandi of the humanitarian sector. Aid dependency, bureaucratization of aid, the power gap between local civil society and international donors (in control of the funding and of the agenda) all ask for well-articulated alternatives, as the model of accountability as presented in ALPS could be. The programme lost an opportunity to demonstrate the value of accountability to citizens, and to create demand for a practice of accountability by local institutions (local government / other civil society organizations).

- **AA management (and – in particular – the IECT team) should make sure that its staff and offices are aware of ALPS**, of the principles underpinning it, of related policies (e.g. the Open Information Policy) - and confident to apply them in all phases of the emergency response. Lack of knowledge of ALPS exposed AA to the risk of doing “business like everyone else”, rather than committing to demonstrate that accountability, learning, power sharing, transparency, women rights must also be advanced in an emergency response. It is suggested that AA more strongly commit to make sure that also newly established programmes receive **a clear induction and reference package of the key policies of the organization**, in a format that can also be shared to partners and key stakeholders. The IECT in particular – which promoted its own systems in AAOPT (e.g. EAR-ARM) should be made accountable to ensure that ALPS and the *open information policy* is promoted and practiced in emergency response.
- AA (and the IECT team in particular) should increase its capacity to **share its good practices on accountability** so that they can serve as a model in other responses. Local field staff, for example, found the idea of transparency very challenging. Practical case studies could have helped in persuading them to try new approaches and to equip them with the needed know-how.
- More awareness of ALPS should also be fostered in the **fundraising/communication departments of AA/Austcare**, as they have an important role in shaping the reporting activity demanded. The Gaza program experienced considerable top-down pressure for extractive reporting according to existing frameworks to donors and supporters, but was not supported / stimulated in fostering accountability to beneficiaries or to share learning in more innovative

ways as per ALPS. In addition, demands have been focusing on “deliverables” rather than deeper outcomes.

- Fundraising / communications departments (national and international) should also ensure that they are accountable to AA beneficiaries – as demanded by ALPS – by providing more feedback about their own activities. AA Gaza staff – even if willing to do so to enhance trust and transparency and its relationships with beneficiaries - was not in a position to account back on the use of the case studies they collected, for example, as no feedback to this end was provided by head offices. In order to comply with its ALPS system, **AA should commit to advance accountability of its support functions and of its international work to beneficiaries** by establishing better feedback systems and by monitoring them.
- The demand for conventional reporting / top-down accountability had a cascading effect in that partners were asked to report to AA Gaza with conventional reporting formats. **AA needs to be true to ALPS and to the commitment of moving away from bureaucratic reporting** towards modalities to document response for accountability and learning: more creatively and, at the same time, more thoroughly. This would involve working with partners in developing innovative approaches rather than promoting “logframe style” reporting only. An added value of this, when done in connection with innovative process would be the increased capacity of partners to use quality documentation to prove the value of their approach to potential funders and donors (which is particularly challenging especially for organizations engaging in “soft” work – e.g. oriented to psychosocial / communication) .
- The investment of AA in supporting the evaluation of Fekra and the strategic planning of CWF is to be commended. Staff itself felt that it is a unique opportunity to **critically revise their work** based on objective, external feedback.
- AA should look at how to capitalize on his expertise **and increase its capacity to share learning** and experiences, and shall become more proactive in making its staff aware of what methodologies / expertise exist in AA. AA/Austcare made a considerable investment in promoting awareness of protection issues, but other relevant areas of work were not known to AA local staff (e.g. on WAV / accountability). In the case of Gaza – where staff movement was limited –

teleconferences amongst local staff / AA practitioners might have been an option to create awareness about methodologies in use.

- The **learning event** was very much appreciated by partners. When operating with multiple partners AA should continue to seek opportunities to foster linkages and shared learning.
- AA Gaza invested in women and **was strongly committed to advancing women's rights** in an environment where the space for women's rights are being continuously eroded. They chose to partner with local NGOs with strong female leadership, and to further build their capacity. **However women's rights ultimately did not become an explicit theme for the response.** AA international could have invested more in sharing relevant practices to AA Gaza (e.g. on gender based violence) to help the programme to further develop capacity and innovative solutions. Stronger linkages of the protection work with international work could have created opportunities for international advocacy on women rights in Gaza.
- AAGaza was keen to share decision-making power with its partners, and overall did so very effectively, creating a true sense of partnership. However their dignity was compromised when they had to pay the price of AA poor management practices and revise their own programmes. As one staff member put it “**AA abused the power deriving from giving money** to make partners swallow an unprofessional way of working”
- AA Gaza highlighted **power imbalances in the overall humanitarian response in country.** AA should build on the work done through the “Voices from Gaza” project in its national / international advocacy.

## Conclusions (and looking ahead)

ActionAid managed to run programmes – through both the DEC and the UK appeal fund – that covered the needs of people affected by the Gaza crisis. It was observed - by several partners and other external stakeholders – that the peculiarity of AA was not so much WHAT it did but HOW it did it. ActionAid Gaza managed to:

- Focus on **women and children / youth**, as beneficiaries but also as leaders of civil society organizations;
- **Reach vulnerable people** and strengthen the capacity of local organization to engage in participatory approaches to this end;
- **Link relief to longer term recovery**, focusing in particular on livelihoods, to enhance the psychosocial wellbeing of affected community members;
- Enable some local organizations to try and test projects to **give a voice to children / youth** (e.g. media / animations), to enhance their psychosocial wellbeing and to create opportunities for linkages and dialogue;
- Promote approaches safeguarding the **dignity** of its beneficiaries. AA also sought to incorporate **community-based protection** in the programme and document learning around this;
- **Work in effective partnership with local organizations** (and promoting partnerships amongst them and local CBOs), seeking to build their capacity to engage in more sound participatory approaches;
- Engage with civil society in further community-based protection work, leading to advocacy – local and international – to denouncing issues of **aid dependency and of unequal power relations** amongst local and international humanitarian actors.

In addition to the obvious challenges due to operating in post-conflict setting and in a community affected by a blockade, key challenges to the work of ActionAid in Gaza were:

- The **short term nature of the funding, vis-à-vis modalities of interventions that would benefit from longer timeframes** (e.g. capacity building of local partners, embedding of new concepts – such as community based protection)
- **Management challenges** (due to the large number of units involved in the response within AA and to the poor linkages amongst them). These heavily affected the response. They overstretched the staff in Palestine, created considerable delays in delivering the second phase of the project, and affected the work and relationship with partners.

Overall the response of AA was **carefully targeted and covered the needs expressed by beneficiaries**. Some of the practices developed and tested in Gaza (e.g. the delivery of in-kind grants to allow women to promptly restart their business) **should be documented** as they offer interesting learning for future response.

ActionAid work **could have been more strategically directed to cover a distinctive niche** which is highly relevant for a response in Gaza and for the current context and would be fully in line with the efforts of AA to promote a distinctive approach to emergency: by modeling and strengthening key principles such as **transparency and accountability**. Despite the commitment of the local staff to transparency, the bar on accountability was not raised as high as in other emergency responses. This could also be due to the **lack of investment by AA international in promoting its own system, ALPS, and practices of accountability**. The principles of ActionAid spelled out in ALPS would actually be the seeds for work on citizenship / strengthening of civil society and strengthening the foundation of governance within local institutions.

AA in Gaza did a short-term programme with a long-term potential. AA harvested the short-term outcomes of its work on the emergency response, but it is falling short of harvesting the potential impact in the longer term. The office in Gaza is currently closed, but AA forged linkages that would allow them to continue the work.

- AA still has a presence in the region (office in West Bank as well as programmes in the middle east region)

- AA has maintained a presence in the area through an “inspirator” working with MS Denmark
- has a network of partners and contacts (direct implementers of the programmes but also organizations interested in the advocacy work) who are very keen to continue their collaboration with ActionAid based on the positive approach to partnership that ActionAid has demonstrated in Gaza.

This evaluation argues that **AA should consider if and how to build on and further develop the capacities and the alliances developed through its emergency response**, and consider how to follow up its emergency response with strategic longer term work which could cover an important niche in Gaza. There are spaces for intervention in Gaza that play to the strengths of Actionaid, in particular the work oriented to **community based protection**, on giving voices to the marginalized people in Gaza and in challenging modalities of aid that increase dependency and reduce local capacities.

**However a prerequisite for any further action in Gaza should be a clear, long term commitment to the programme within the organization** (also involving the associate organization MS, operating in the region and with a presence in Gaza). Management and communication lines must be streamlined, and a clear strategy for engagement in country should be defined.



# Appendix 1

## Evaluation TORs

### 1. Purpose:

To assess the role of ActionAid in contributing to the humanitarian response and early recovery in Gaza and determine the efficacy of the programme's distinct focus and approach.

### 2. Objectives:

- To assess the impact of the humanitarian response
- To evaluate internal processes and capacity of AAI and AAAu in implementing the Gaza programme
- To identify and assess opportunities for the future, possible methods of operation and scaling up in Gaza

### 3. Areas to measure:

#### a. Project's Objectives:

a.1. Supported by DEC

b.2. Supported by AA UK Appeal Funds

- Project Achievements

- Project Relevance

- Project Effectiveness and Efficiency

- Sustainability

- Impact and Change

Key areas that need to be looked at linking with the above categories:

- Focus and impact on most vulnerable people
- Focus on most important needs of the most vulnerable
- Integration of Women Rights
- Community Participation
- Capacity – building of communities and partners
- Transparency and accountability – downward and upward!

- Technical standards
- Impact on root causes
- Sustainability
- Advocacy and policy work integration
- Coordination with other agencies
- Coordination with and support from within AA
- Conflict sensitivity
- Quality of project management
- Grant and donor relationship management

### b. The Partners and the Partnership

#### c. Opening Gaza Office

- Objective and its achievements

- Effectiveness and Efficiency

#### d. Relationship with AAUK/AAAu/AA oPt/Gaza

- Management

- Support

### 4. The Approach and methodology

The approach of the evaluation will be participatory using ActionAid's Participatory Review and Reflection Process (PRRP). This process will involve the community representatives and leaders, partner agencies, other NGOs / INGOs and ActionAid.

Methodology -

- Conduct review of programme documents (proposals; log frame; budget; contracts; performance reports – both narrative and financial; visibility materials; communication)
- Discussions with community members, Gaza programme staff, IECT and partner staff members and other stakeholders.
- Field visits to discuss with partner staff, community members, I/NGOs and other stakeholders;

- Meetings with right holders (beneficiaries)

### **5. Moving On**

- a. Analysis of the current context
- b. Outcome of the Evaluation:
  - Program Focus
  - Presence in Gaza
  - Management
  - Funding

### **6. Relevant Documents**

- a. Draft Strategic Plan
- b. DEC Proposal
- c. DEC Reports
- d. Project Reviews
- e. Gaza Program Summary
- f. Partners Monthly Reports