

In Gaza Blockade, Humanitarian Organizations Can No Longer Be Neutral

Aid organizations must speak out about the political roots of this humanitarian crisis or risk supporting the status quo.

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How would your life be affected if you didn't have electricity for at least 16 hours each day? That's the situation in Gaza where power is available for no more than eight hours per day, and residents live with rolling power cuts occurring on a constantly changing schedule.

Spend time with people in Gaza, and you see how they've shaped their lives around the availability of electricity. A student in Gaza told me that she wakes up at 3 a.m. to iron her clothes so that "the occupation doesn't determine what I wear." A colleague told me his family decides when and how much food they buy based on the availability of power, since eight hours of electricity doesn't keep food cold in a refrigerator. During a recent visit to Gaza, a friend delayed a meeting with me so that he could do laundry while his neighborhood had power.

Power cuts don't only impact individuals. Hospitals must run on expensive generators that drain already stretched funds, placing patients at risk. Schools also rely on generators or go without electricity, affecting students' learning. Water and sanitation systems can't operate properly, creating unhealthy living conditions. And many business and most industry cannot function, costing jobs and depressing the Gaza economy.

How did this situation develop?



The power crisis began in June 2006 when the Israeli military bombed the only power plant in Gaza after the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was captured by Hamas. Full repairs on the damaged power plant have never been possible because of the Israeli blockade.

Image: Ruins in Gaza | Photo: AFSC/Ilona Kassissieh

The blockade began in early 2006 with the Israeli and international boycott of the Palestinian Authority, which began after Hamas gained a Parliamentary majority during the elections held that year. After Shalit's capture, the restrictions put in place after the elections were tightened.

Under the blockade, materials needed to fully repair the infrastructure damaged during the 2006 attacks could not be imported and still cannot be imported today. Limited repairs made to the power plant in 2006 allowed it to continue to function, but [the power system](#)

[has been attacked several more times](#) and has steadily degraded over the past decade.

When I was in Gaza last month, I spent time with one of the key officials at the Gaza power plant. The official noted that even if the blockade was lifted, which would allow for full repairs to the power plant and unrestricted imports of fuel and power, Gaza would still only have power for eight hours per day.

Since 2006, demand for electricity has grown along with the population in Gaza. Building a needed new water and sewage treatment plant and restarting businesses and industry would also increase demand. And a desalination plant, which is needed to meet needs for drinking water, wouldn't be able to function unless there is increased power delivery.

In the best possible circumstances, it will take three to five years to upgrade infrastructure and build systems needed to supply power in Gaza round the clock. That time period will only grow as the siege continues and while infrastructure continues to degrade and demand grows.

If there is no change, the reality is that Gaza is facing a sustained power crisis for the foreseeable future and a possible complete collapse of its power infrastructure.

There must be change.

The limits of a humanitarian response to a political crisis



Image: Children play among rubble in Gaza. | Photo: AFSC/Ilona Kassissieh

Since 2006, [AFSC has called for an end to the Gaza blockade](#). We've called for action by both Israel and the international community, noting that both bear responsibility for the disaster in Gaza.

But these calls have not resulted in change.

My visit to Gaza in early March made me rethink what can be done to challenge the status quo in Gaza. Governments aren't the only parties with power. Humanitarian organizations working in Gaza must begin using the power they have to bring change.

While I made my first visit to Gaza 20 years ago, it wasn't until 2007 that I started spending significant periods of time there. That was when I began managing programs in Gaza and the West Bank for a large international nongovernmental organization (NGO).

Even in 2007, those of us working on humanitarian aid programs in Palestine were quietly discussing how aid programs in Gaza were in effect sustaining the siege by barely staving off crises. We recognized that our programs were band-aids that weren't addressing the roots of the problem. We understood that our work could not improve the long-term situation because we were implementing humanitarian responses to what was a political crisis.

We justified our work by focusing on the very real needs that we were addressing. Without aid programs, people would go hungry, medical care would not be provided, school services would stop, homelessness would increase, and people would likely die. How do you stop

providing aid when you know that doing so will immediately increase suffering?

So instead of stopping programs, we spoke out. In early 2008, we released the report [“The Gaza Strip: A Humanitarian Implosion,”](#) which detailed the impacts of the siege on Gaza and demanded change. We issued a follow-up report one year later, and organizations have continued to call for change since.

But all of these calls have been limited. The international NGO community restricts what it will say based on the principle of humanitarian neutrality – the idea that humanitarian organizations must not take sides in conflicts or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature.

In Israel and Palestine, this means that major aid organizations will speak about the negative humanitarian impacts that political actions have on people’s lives, but they do not speak about the political actions at the roots of crises.

When I managed a large project responding to forced displacement in the West Bank, for instance, I could talk about how home demolitions hurt families but not the Israeli government policies that forced Palestinians from their homes.

And what’s the cumulative impact of a decade-long band-aid response to the siege in Gaza? Each band-aid project stops some immediate suffering but maintains an unsustainable situation. One band-aid replaces another while the wound they cover festers and rots.

A call for bold action from aid organizations



Image: AFSC/Ilona Kassissieh

The electrical crisis in Gaza is just one example of a situation where band-aid solutions are masking an imminent crisis. Temporary shelters, food aid, mobile clinics, cash-for-work projects, and other programs in Gaza are not solutions.

The truth is, the humanitarian neutrality that international NGOs cling to as they deliver aid in the occupied Palestinian territory is not neutral. It favors the status quo.

In a crisis caused and defined by politics there is no escaping politics. Humanitarian actors must admit this and openly recognize how they are sustaining injustice. The government aid they are accepting is coming from governments that refuse to condemn, and in some cases, support the Gaza siege. Access to Gaza and aid delivery are politicized through approval processes that require Israeli sign off.

I don’t point this out to completely reject the notion of humanitarian neutrality. AFSC was one of the organizations that helped develop the idea. Humanitarian neutrality guided our aid operations during World Wars I and II, during the Chinese Revolution, and in more recent conflicts. When we first provided assistance in Israel and Palestine in 1949, we agreed to the U.N.’s request to work in the region with the express stipulation that we must be allowed to provide aid to all in need, regardless of their identity. That commitment to working with all people regardless of identity continues to guide our work.

Humanitarian neutrality also continues to make sense as a guiding principle in many

situations of active conflict. In Syria, Yemen, and other places, humanitarian neutrality is what allows organizations access to provide aid to vulnerable communities. It's what provides safety to aid-givers in violent situations where they must cross political and geographic boundaries and where taking a political position could cost lives.

But this isn't the case in Gaza—a situation of sustained belligerent military occupation where one side holds power over another people. Under occupation, “neutrality” means siding with power. Recognizing all parties' actions and responsibilities is important, but humanitarian organizations must abandon the illusion of neutrality.

Humanitarian organizations should also carefully consider—through conversations with people in Gaza—going on strike and refusing to implement aid projects that sustain the status quo. This might mean placing on hold programs in fields such as health, education, water and sanitation, housing, and cash for work. Halting aid programs would add to immediate suffering in Gaza, but continuing aid programs is causing long term harm.

Ten years ago, when the blockade was new, those of us managing humanitarian work in Gaza could justify our band-aid programs by saying that we were meeting emergency needs in a temporary situation. But after a decade, the rot being masked by these band-aid programs can no longer be ignored.

Only change in the policies of the international community and Israel will bring sustainable change in Gaza. A strike by humanitarian actors might force action from governments that so far have not been willing to respond, despite acknowledging suffering in Gaza.

A strike by humanitarian actors must also be accompanied by demands to governments to immediately end the blockade. When governments change policy, then programs to sustainably rebuild Gaza could resume.

I can't predict how the international community might respond to a work stoppage by humanitarian organizations and an accompanying demand to end the blockade, but I don't think the international community would stand by and allow a complete breakdown in Gaza.

Taking this type of action is risky and will not come without cost, but the current situation cannot continue. Those responding to the crisis in Gaza must speak out not only about the humanitarian crisis in Gaza but also the politics that are at the roots of that crisis.

It is time for radical action.

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