

The Reality of Aid ASIA  
PACIFIC

# Weaponizing Aid

How aid dependency maintains  
colonialism in Palestine

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## Introduction

The world is witnessing protracted conflicts on various fronts, with the most prominent being the Russian-Ukraine war and the Israeli attacks on Palestine. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 60 contexts are considered fragile wherein 24% of the world's population live.<sup>1</sup> The OECD defines fragility as the “combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks.”<sup>2</sup> It measures fragility across six dimensions – economic, environmental, political, security, societal and human.

Given that fragile and conflict-affected contexts have limited domestic resources and capacities to address crucial development challenges and to make progress towards the sustainable development goals (SDGs), Official Development Assistance (ODA) is a very important public resource that can contribute to their resilience to

crises. Providing ODA is also donors' historical responsibility to countries that they have colonized and exploited. However, in several fragile contexts, ODA is seen as a tool that contributes to promoting aid dependency, hampering economic growth, worsening conflict, and criminalizing civil society.

For instance, in the decades of relentless attacks, aggression, and human rights violations of Israeli occupation forces against the Palestinian territories of West Bank and Gaza, aid is being instrumentalized by donor countries to forward their own political, economic, and security interests. Alaa Tartir, a Palestinian-Dutch scholar, mentions how the current aid system, which follows the process of “US decides, the World Bank leads, the EU pays, the UN feeds, and Israel destroys,” undermines Palestinians' right to self-determination, development, and lasting peace.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, West Bank and Gaza need ODA to provide basic goods and services to its people, amid persisting conflict and humanitarian crises, and to facilitate a ‘peace process’ with Israel. Aid remains as Palestine's lifeline, as it is “chronically dependent on donor funding for its fiscal survival.”<sup>4</sup>

This Deep Dive aims to expose how aid towards Palestine is being instrumentalized to pursue donor interests, impose damaging neoliberal policies, criminalize civil society, hinder CSO-led Triple Nexus initiatives, and undermine the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and liberation. The research also forwards a Triple Nexus approach that is people-centered, based

on solidarity and social justice, as a way to address the root causes of conflict and forward sustainable development for Palestine and other conflict-ridden contexts.



## The Israeli occupation of Palestine

In 1917, the British forces occupied Palestine in order to provide a homeland for Jewish people, as stated in the Balfour Declaration. As Palestinians asserted their right to their land, violence ensued, with Zionist forces attacking and displacing Palestinians from their homes. As a response, in 1947, the United Nations adopted Resolution 181 that effectively partitioned Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, with majority of the land going to the Jews, despite only being 30% of the total population. This also supported the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. In a series of events, Israeli forces continued to attack and displace Palestinians in order to occupy their land, resulting in the Nakba or catastrophe. Resisting the Israeli military occupation, the intifada or uprising was initiated and sustained by Palestinians.<sup>5</sup>

As an attempt to resolve the violent occupation, the Oslo Accords was signed in 1993. While the agreement facilitated peace negotiations and recognition of both states, Israel

continued occupying Palestine with the assistance of its allies such as the United States. The recent months saw this conflict come to a head, as Israeli occupation forces launched bombs, air strikes, and dangerous chemicals, detained civilians, and rendered 85% of the population internally displaced.<sup>6</sup> They also cut off humanitarian aid and access to essential services as a tactic. They blocked the entry of trucks bringing food, medicine, and fuel to victims, and refused to provide water and electricity.<sup>7</sup> As of January 2024, the war on Palestine has killed more than 25,000 people, with at least 9,600 children and 6,750 women, and injured more than 60,000 people.<sup>8</sup>

Several decades later, Palestinians have lost control over their land, resources, economy, and development. Over the past years, 80% of the Palestinian population became dependent on foreign aid for their basic needs and survival.<sup>9</sup>

## Dismal quantity and quality of aid to Palestine

From 1994 to 2020, Palestine received an accumulated USD 40 billion in aid from various donors, mostly from the European Union, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Germany. This financing has been coursed through the Palestinian Authority (PA), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and to civil society organizations.<sup>10</sup> In 2021, Palestine only received a total of USD 2.16 billion of aid channeled mostly to multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations, the Palestinian Authority, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>11</sup>

In 2022, the Palestinian Authority received a total of only USD 550 million – USD 250 million in donor budget support and USD 300 million for development initiatives. This amount will not be able to provide adequate food, shelter, medical assistance, educational services, and other programs to 2.1 million people in need.<sup>12</sup> With deepening conflict and increasing needs brought about by other development challenges, it has been

estimated that Palestine is currently in need of USD 1.2 billion, but this is only for humanitarian relief. Donors have not mobilized enough assistance, as they were only able to allot for only about half of the needed funds.<sup>13</sup> The aid promised to Palestine is extremely lacking to address the impacts of onerous impositions of the occupation, brewing humanitarian crisis and worsening social conditions. Furthermore, starting 2013, there has been a sharp decline in the provision of ODA and a growing trend of providing aid in loans, rather than grants.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, from 1946 to 2022, Israel received a total of USD 317.90 billion of US foreign assistance, its largest donor.<sup>15</sup> This has been used mainly to finance its armed forces, construct the Iron Dome, and purchase weapons of war. Israel continues to be the United States' major accomplice in achieving its economic and security interests in the West Asia and North Africa region. Aside from providing a strong military foothold in the region, Israel also hosts large American technology firms and is considered an important business partner for the superpower. The United States is also one of the largest donors to Palestine, but this assistance is being used to support its military interests and the Israeli occupation. Between 2012 and 2017, US aid to Palestine amounted to USD 1.8 billion, which can be seen as additional financial support to Israel.<sup>16</sup> The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has provided, and will continue to provide over USD 500 million until 2024 to multiple programs in order to set the “conditions viable for a two-state solution”. This amount includes

a USD 250 million project supporting peace between Israelis and Palestinians to advance the two-state solution.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, during the current aggression, the US was able to simultaneously provide humanitarian aid to Gaza,<sup>18</sup> while also subsequently providing arms to "Israel",<sup>19</sup> and veto-ing the UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.<sup>20</sup> Under Israeli occupation, aid meant for the Palestinian people is also subject to restrictions, serves to legitimize colonial rule, and fails to forward Palestinians' interests.<sup>21</sup>

In the Palestinian context, international aid has been criticized extensively for its disregard for political realities, which is rooted in the colonization and aggression by Israeli forces. This entails that "the provision of military aid, military trade, and other forms of economic, cultural and political exchange strengthens Israel's ability to occupy, colonize, and dispossess Palestinians."<sup>22</sup> With this, aid is not being used to forward structural changes or to address the root causes of conflict, but a tool to legitimize Israel occupation and rule over occupied territories and the Palestinian people.<sup>23</sup> Continued military attacks and imposition of restrictions on the entry of certain goods to the West Bank and Gaza in the name of security have worsened prospects of economic growth and development.<sup>24</sup> Aid has also been used to pursue a "peace process" forwarded by donors, which does not genuinely reflect the aspirations and the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people.<sup>25</sup> As Tartir puts it, dependency on aid has "stripped Palestinian people of power to resist colonialism, apartheid and oppression."<sup>26</sup>

## Israel's economic stronghold over Palestine

Israel's continued occupation has not only resulted in Palestine's dependence on aid, but also ushered in what Palestinian scholars call "economic neo-colonialism".<sup>27</sup> Israel's imposition of a series of economic agreements and restrictions, particularly the Protocol on Economic Relations or Paris Protocol, led to its control over the Palestinian economy, tying it with Israel's production, importation, and trade. These economic policies are considered "equally damaging" as military occupations, as these "undermine the capacity of occupied people to access and utilize their resources."<sup>28</sup>

Development financing was also utilized to impose neoliberal reforms that reinforced Israel's occupation. Development financing coursed through the Palestinian Authority have contributed to further debt distress, deregulation, privatization of public sectors, and an imposition of a free market economy leading to import and monetary dependency. Palestine is considered



a 'captive market' of Israel, as critical resources are being controlled by Israeli forces.<sup>29</sup> In fact, 70% of the aid being given to the PA is used to pay for imports from Israel. Furthermore, Israel pockets 45 cents from every dollar produced in the occupied territories.<sup>30</sup> With this, the Israeli occupation ensures the "continuous leakage of Palestinian fiscal resources to the treasury of the occupying power through several channels."<sup>31</sup>

The policies imposed by Israel led to high costs of basic necessities, weakness of Palestinian exports, increasing debt and a myriad of austerity measures. These further translate to a humanitarian crisis, with chronic hunger, worsening poverty, rising unemployment, and lack of access to essential social services for the Palestinian people. With these policies, it can be seen that the economy of Palestine has been deteriorating and unable to mobilize public resources to provide for people's basic needs and services.

Given the economic, political and security implications of the Israeli occupation, donors must mobilize sufficient assistance for the Palestinian people. However, in recent years, aid towards Palestine has been decreasing while humanitarian needs continue to increase in light of the continued aggression of Israeli forces.

## Countering terrorism or criminalizing civil society?

In addition to decreasing aid, donors have been imposing additional conditions for development actors to receive the assistance and implement life-saving initiatives for the Palestinian people. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the US-led "War on Terror", states have adopted stringent measures and policies in the name of counterterrorism. These have been abused to pursue military interests of superpowers like the United States and its allies, while also giving governments leniency towards their human rights commitments and further crackdown on civic space to "maintain" peace and security. Moreover, the branding of entities as "terrorist" is used as a tactic by the US and other superpowers to legitimize their attacks on social movements and organizations fighting for people's sovereignty and development.<sup>32</sup>

In Palestine, counterterrorism measures translated to a decrease in aid, criminalization of its liberation and self-determination movement,

increased attacks on the people, and additional barriers for CSOs to receive aid for humanitarian, development and peace projects. In the name of security, conditional funding criteria has been forwarded by donor countries in order to ensure that financing is not coursed through 'terrorist' organizations and activities.

From the period following the Oslo Accords until 2002, the USAID was the leading aid donor. In 2002, it passed its anti-terror clause which required organizations an anti-terrorism certificate and go through a vetting process, in order to ensure that they are not connected to any 'terrorist' group. While this move was replicated by other donor countries, the European Union chose to highlight an organization's accountability, transparency and effectiveness as their main criteria in providing funding,<sup>33</sup> which is why after 2002, the European Union surpassed USAID as the largest donor, with funds going to the Palestinian Authority and CSOs. From 2014 to 2020, the EU provided EUR 2.2 billion to Palestine, with a considerable amount earmarked for supporting civil society.<sup>34</sup> In fact, 49% of funding to Palestinian CSOs come from the EU.<sup>35</sup>

While the funds from the EU increased, it still imposed new conditions and requirements for Palestinian CSOs in 2020 under its "counter-terror" clauses such as the imposition of conditional funding contracts and restrictive measures list. Prior to this, EU grant proposals were not conditional by said clauses.<sup>36</sup> This decision was influenced

by Israeli forces who called out the donor community on several occasions "to prevent terrorism, money laundering and terrorist financing, to immediately halt any further transfers of funds and any other support to these designated institutions."<sup>37</sup> This move effectively hampered the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, tie development financing to donors' security and economic interests, further exclude Palestinian people and civil society from development processes, and hinder humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) efforts of CSOs tagged as terrorists by the Israeli government. Correspondingly, imposing conditionalities received a warm welcome from Israel, according to former Strategic Affairs Minister Orit Farkash-Hacohen.<sup>38</sup>

## Aid conditionalities hampering Triple Nexus initiatives

Last October 2021, the Israeli government accused six development, humanitarian and human rights organizations of doing terrorist activities without providing any concrete evidence. The organizations include the Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, Al-Haq, Bisan Center for Research and Development, Defense for Children International-Palestine, Union of Agricultural Work Committees, and Union of Palestinian Women Committees. These organizations were then subjected to attacks from the Israeli government, with the foreclosure and searches of their offices and arrest of development workers, on top of investigations and suspension of funding from the EU and other donor countries. With these allegations by Israeli colonial forces, programs to address development, humanitarian and peace needs of the Palestinian people halted.

The work of these organizations varies, with some implementing programs to empower marginalized communities

to secure their rights and pursue their development. The Union of Agricultural Workers Committee (UAWC) is the largest agricultural development organization, focusing on the development of the agricultural sector through the empowerment of farmers. Established in 1986, UAWC has implemented 42 projects to deliver agricultural services to farmers and fisherfolk in West Bank and Gaza. From these initiatives, a total of 21,000 farmers have benefited from their income-generating and agricultural production programs.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, the Union of Palestinian Women Committees (UPWC) focuses on the improvement of Palestinian women's status and empowerment, with the implementation of economic empowerment, psychological and legal support, capacity building, and political participation activities for women and children.<sup>40</sup> Bisan Center for Research and Development works on the application of critical development knowledge and developing community development programs and supporting marginalized communities' struggles and their quest for socio-economic rights.<sup>41</sup>

The other organizations are human rights institutions that monitor violations, and provide protection and humanitarian assistance to victims and political prisoners. Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association help Palestinian political prisoners by documenting violations in prisons, providing legal support, and organizing advocacy campaigns to garner

international support and solidarity towards ending torture and arbitrary arrest.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Al-Haq works on exacting accountability for the violations of Israeli forces towards Palestinians at the individual and collective level. They advocate for and ensure that international human rights standards and norms are reflected and implemented in Palestine.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, Defense for Children - Palestine (DCI-P) is considered as the sole children's rights organization in Palestine. They work on defending arrested children who are prosecuted in Israeli military court systems, attend to arrested or injured children, and document violations inflicted against children in Palestine. The DCI-P has helped thousands of children in the West Bank and Gaza in their various programs and in different activities. DCI-P conducts field visits to rehabilitation centers, collects data and records from detention centers, which they use to lobby government and judicial entities to end violence against children.<sup>44</sup>

However, these were all stopped when the organizations were forced to close their offices after being accused as terrorists by the Israeli defense minister, with no strong evidence to support these claims. Due to these accusations, donors retracted their funding and pursued their own investigations. As they are subjected to increased scrutiny, cuts in funding, and attacks from Israeli forces, their contributions to bridge humanitarian, peace, and development are hampered, further marginalizing conflict-affected communities.

While donors are expected to work towards addressing conflict and its root causes, it can be seen that the disbursement of aid is heavily driven by donors' political, security, and economic interests. As they defund the important work of CSOs in Palestine, it only proves that donors lack the political will to address the root causes of conflict, and their assistance even aids Israel's occupation of Palestine.<sup>45</sup> In its current character, foreign aid does not wholly uphold and support the development, self-determination movement, and human rights of Palestine. Instead, it even helps Israeli forces and their allies to continue their occupation and attacks.

## Intifada and solidarity beyond borders

Despite accusations and threats to their work, CSOs in Palestine have continued to organize and mobilize communities to call for donors to stop securitizing aid for their own interests; to provide support for humanitarian-development-peace (HDP or triple nexus) initiatives that could help address root causes of conflict; and to garner solidarity and support from organizations around the world towards their struggle for self-determination and liberation.

In fact, 230 civil society organizations formed the Palestinian National Campaign to Reject Conditional Funding. They united in calling on the EU to revoke its anti-terrorism clause and the vetting process that criminalizes the Palestinian struggle for liberation and violates their right to self-determination and development. They also highlighted that the conditions set forth by the EU was a response to increased pressure from Israeli forces as they continue to occupy areas in Palestine.<sup>46</sup> These CSOs also attracted support from UN human

rights experts who condemned the Israeli government in accusing human rights and development organizations as terrorists.<sup>47</sup>

The Palestinian struggle for liberation has found solidarity with the rest of the world as mobilizations continue for months in different cities and countries. Several social movements have condemned the Israeli attacks and occupation, urged for an immediate ceasefire, called for the urgent deployment of humanitarian aid and assistance, and demanded states to stand up for human rights. Civil society also continues to stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine and their fellow CSOs in exacting accountability from donor countries and their role in financing the military attacks towards Palestine and in calling for the ramped up assistance to respond to triple nexus challenges. These movements further call for the decolonization of systems, including the financial architecture that pursues donor and corporate interests over people's needs and development priorities.<sup>48</sup> For aid to serve its intended purpose, it must be aligned with the Palestinian goals of liberation and development, founded on their right to self-determination, as well as address root causes of conflict, and forward just peace.



## Articulating a people-centered Triple Nexus approach

In 2019, the OECD-DAC put forth the Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus as a means for donors to respond to increasing fragility. Recognizing that conflict impedes efforts towards sustainable development and lasting peace, the recommendation details 11 principles that aim to strengthen collaboration, coherence, and complementarity across the three pillars, in order to reduce overall vulnerability, respond to people's needs, strengthen risk management capacities, and address root causes of conflict. While CSOs continue to recognize the Triple Nexus framework as a possible approach to conflict, its novelty and unclear means of implementation serve as a barrier for it to translate to solving root causes of conflict, addressing humanitarian needs, fostering development, and making strides toward just peace. With this, CSOs continue to articulate and apply the approach in a manner that is people-centered, and promotes human dignity and sovereignty.

A people-centered Triple Nexus must be based on the principle of solidarity and social justice, striving for the common good to ensure that no one is left behind. This articulation also ensures the attainment of peoples' sovereignty and dignity, with people having the access to, control of, and benefit from resources that can address poverty and inequalities. Furthermore, a people-centered Triple Nexus rests on the need to decolonize the system and shift the power to local actors, without abandoning donors' historical commitment and responsibility in responding to humanitarian emergencies, preventing and resolving conflicts, and in addressing multiple fragilities.<sup>49</sup> In this manner, the Reality of Aid-Asia Pacific forwards the following recommendations to advance a people-centered Triple Nexus approach:

### **For donor countries and multilateral institutions to:**

- Stop supporting military interventions to end conflict and militarism. The international community should call for the immediate ceasefire in Palestine, denounce the genocidal and inhumane crimes committed against the Palestinian people, and ensure that international humanitarian law is upheld.
- Immediately mobilize and deliver humanitarian assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states, ensuring that humanitarian principles are upheld at all times. Aid and support should be deployed to humanitarian actors and civil society organizations on

the ground that are best placed to respond to people's needs.

- Development financing must be scaled up and allotted to context-based and locally-led conflict prevention initiatives, in sustainable, multi-year and flexible terms. Civil society should not be criminalized by donor countries providing aid in the guise of "counter-terror" measures. Furthermore, aid should be free from any type of conditionality, as aligned with the development effectiveness (DE) principle of democratic country ownership.
- Make steps towards promoting a common understanding of the Triple Nexus among actors in the humanitarian, development and peace pillars; among governments, the private sector and CSOs. Spaces and means of participation should be assured, empowering them to speak up and be involved in these issues.
- Ensure that Triple Nexus responses are context-based, taking into consideration the culture, political economy and geography of a country, gender-sensitive, as actors follow through general commitments to gender equality and women empowerment, and rights-based.
- Involve all stakeholders, especially CSOs, in the Triple Nexus processes. CSOs should not be subjected to conditional funding in implementing humanitarian, development and peace initiatives. This is essential in widening and deepening understanding of the framework and its objectives.

- Promote local leadership in designing, coordinating and implementing HDP initiatives. This means giving local actors responsibility over decision-making, fund management, and monitoring and evaluation. An effective locally-led response values partnerships among the national government, civil society, and the domestic private sector.
- In implementing Triple Nexus initiatives, uphold the development effectiveness principles of country leadership and ownership of development strategies, a focus on results with peoples' interests at the forefront, inclusive partnerships among development actors based on mutual trust, and transparency and accountability.

### **For CSOs to:**

- Remain critical of the Triple Nexus approach and how it can be driven by donor and corporate interests, which undermine the importance of accessible assistance that is grounded on social justice. In addition, call for the end of the securitization of aid that contributes to deepening conflict, and instead forward a people-centered Triple Nexus approach.
- Scale up monitoring and advocacy efforts in fragile, conflict-affected contexts, in order to pursue a people-centered, rights-based financing and programming of Triple Nexus initiatives that will allow for democratic ownership over outcomes and inclusive participation



of communities and local CSOs in contributing to lasting peace.

- Facilitate partnerships and engagement with humanitarian, development, and peace organizations in order to articulate and implement a Triple Nexus approach that will address the root causes of conflict, mobilize partnerships, and address impending development, climate, and economic crises.
- Engage and firmly follow through donor countries and institutions on their general commitments to human rights conventions and standards, to gender equality and women empowerment, and in addressing vulnerabilities of marginalized communities and sectors.
- Continue mobilizing solidarity and support towards Palestine and other fragile and conflict-affected contexts, and in denouncing how donors have instrumentalized aid to forward their own self-interests, at the expense of people's lives and development.



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