



BRINGING YOUNG PEOPLE INTO THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

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This case study was written by Nabila El-Ahmed and Nada Nabris. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email Mohammed.Sawafta@oxfam.org

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Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Cover photo: Abed working in the cucumber packing house in Ein Al Bedah, Jordan Valley. © Suhaib Jarrar /Oxfam OPTI.

Back cover photo: Dunia, quality control Officer, working on checking samples from the factory. © Suhaib Jarrar /Oxfam OPTI.

INTRODUCTION

There is a downward trend in the participation of young women and men in the agricultural sector in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). If this trend continues without being addressed, youth will potentially have limited opportunities to participate in this sector. Given that agriculture remains the main pillar of the economy, engaging young women and men in the sector and encouraging agribusiness is vital both for agriculture and economic growth as well as protecting and promoting Palestinian presence and control over their own land. There are untapped resources and skills that, if harnessed, could simultaneously address the gaps in the sector and the youth unemployment crisis. OPT has one of the highest rates of youth unemployment in the world, at 41% among young people aged 15–29 (33.7% males and 66.7% females) in 2017. Unemployment among youth graduates exceeded 55%.¹

Engaging young women and men in the sector and encouraging agribusiness is vital both for agriculture and economic growth as well as protecting and promoting Palestinian presence and control over their own land.

This paper examines Oxfam's work with young people in the OPT over the past two years as part of its Economic Justice Programme. It extrapolates learning and puts forward recommendations to inform future work with young people.

The case study identifies several gaps or barriers to young people's engagement in the sector: university graduates are not well equipped with the technical and practical skills required by the job market; recent graduates face significant barriers to entering the job market, due to a lack of job opportunities and work experience; access to credit for agribusinesses is extremely restricted for youth; and there are insufficient networking and mentoring opportunities. In addition, Oxfam qualitative research suggests that educated young women and men in particular are too proud or embarrassed to work in agriculture as it is perceived as a traditional industry mainly for the 'poor'.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Oxfam's Economic Justice Programme in the OPT is currently implementing two projects: 'Developing Equitable Agricultural Production and Market Systems for Resilient Economic Development in the Occupied Palestinian Territory', which is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida); and 'Improving Palestinian Small-Scale Producers' Access to and Power in Olive, High Value Fruit, Small Ruminant Value Chains-Takamol', which is funded by the Australian Government. Both projects focus on the agricultural sector and adopt a market system approach by designing and implementing interventions that engage market actors and various stakeholders.

Oxfam implements these projects with and through local partners, who work directly to engage beneficiaries. The Agricultural Development Association provides training for agronomists and extension agents to enable them to develop technical skills to farm specific varieties of seedless grapes. To date, four young people have participated in these trainings in the West Bank (see Maram's story, below).

MARAM'S ROAD TO AGRIBUSINESS

Maram is a 27-year-old agronomist living in the Meselyah district of Jenin. Coming from a region where agriculture is the main livelihood, she chose her educational path accordingly and studied agronomy. However, upon graduating, Maram struggled to find employment for over two years. Like many other young agronomy graduates in OPT, she found that her lack of hands-on experience was a major barrier to getting a job.

In an effort to gain experience and develop a network, Maram started volunteering in the agricultural sector. It was during this time that she was identified by Oxfam's partner, Agricultural Development Association (PARC) as a candidate to take part in extension service training on the cultivation of seedless grapes. Maram was so motivated by the training that she decided to start her own venture. Equipped with technical skills, practical support and the confidence to start her own business, Maram is now well on her way to becoming a successful grape farmer. 'I believe the experience I gained from the training qualifies me to start my own project'

Three other young people also participated in the extension service training, all of whom are currently employed in the agricultural sector. One received a part-time job opportunity as a quality-control officer at Janet Adan packing house, and is also hoping to start planting seedless grapes. For these young people, the training served as a springboard to develop their entrepreneurial ambitions.

Another Oxfam partner, the Rural Women's Development Society, coordinated agricultural training placements for 10 young women agronomy students from An-Najah University. Placements were in both the public and private sectors and aimed to develop the students' skills and give them practical experience. Following the internships, four out of the ten young agronomists were offered jobs. The project also funded the implementation of two innovative agribusiness ideas that were developed during the internship.

Four in 10 students were offered jobs following internships with the Rural Women's Development Society

TAKING A NEW APPROACH: THE GO PROFESSIONAL INITIATIVE

Oxfam in the OPT is also supporting 'Go Professional', an initiative in partnership with the University College for Applied Science (UCAS), which was launched in Gaza in June 2018. This has enhanced young people's engagement in agriculture by giving them a voice in business decision making and a chance to develop their own enterprises, in a sector dominated by older people. The project has helped to connect aspiring 'agripreneurs' with the market, by brokering relations with private sector suppliers and traders in their value chains.

UCAS is currently operating two units established in partnership with Oxfam: an agricultural research and development centre and a job advisory centre; both were used to recruit young people and to implement the initiative. In order to ensure flexibility and inclusiveness, agricultural graduates and entrepreneurs were invited from all agricultural activities (i.e. whether or not they were involved in the specific value chains targeted by Oxfam's programme). A media campaign advertising the programme attracted 162 applications with a wide range of agribusiness ideas including plant production, animal and poultry, food processing, and agricultural services.

Thirty-eight applicants were shortlisted and invited to participate in an agripreneurs' bootcamp. At this two-day event, participants were able to learn about entrepreneurship, innovative agricultural technologies and practices, extension services, and how to market their own products and put forward their business plans. Using these newly gained skills, the young entrepreneurs then pitched their own ideas, 21 of which were selected by a UCAS panel for further development. Following a second interview of the candidates, 12 ideas were chosen for 'incubation' – a process designed to accelerate the growth of start-up companies through a range of support, resources and services.

The majority of agripreneurs involved in Go Professional are recent graduates who are ambitious and equipped with knowledge about the most recent/innovative agricultural practices. This intervention gave them a safe space to put their know-how into practice. It also enabled young people to forge connections with market actors in their value chains and more importantly with each other.

21 ideas proposed at the agripreneurs bootcamp were selected by a UCAS panel for further development

Based on the initial success of Go Professional in Gaza, a project was recently launched in the West Bank in partnership with AMENCA,² Oxfam, CARE and Birzeit University, which also works to support and foster youth-led agribusiness start-ups. This aims to train 400 youth to develop their business ideas, 15 of which will be funded for incubation following a competitive process. The West Bank project is in its early stages and will run over 2019.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Oxfam has been working to engage and empower youth in the agricultural sector through traditional interventions such as skills trainings and job placements. While this has been successful to a certain extent, new innovative approaches such as the Go Professional can have a more far-reaching impact.

The key piece of learning from this case study is that young women and men's engagement and empowerment requires a more innovative approach that incorporates the following:

- Youth should be engaged and included at all phases of the programme, from design to implementation, to ensure that their specific needs and challenges are effectively recognized, incorporated

and addressed.

- Sharing risks and costs with youth enables us to provide them with a safe space to practice new, innovative agricultural skills attained from their education, improve their engagement in agriculture and to have more influence over business decision making.
- There is untapped potential for the mutual benefit for youth and the agricultural sector. Opportunities for young women and men's employment in agriculture and agribusiness do exist; however, not enough effort or resources are dedicated to engage youth through a systematic approach.
- Providing young people with technical training is important, but it must be accompanied by comprehensive support mechanisms that equip youth with the capacity to engage in the agricultural sector in new and innovative ways such as; access to internship opportunities, soft skills development (communication, leadership, etc.), and awareness raising on new technologies
- Interventions have more impact when they are coupled with incentives – whether these are monetary or technical, connecting youth to networks, or provide opportunities for them to gain experience.
- Local partners need more support to strengthen their capacity in the area of youth engagement and empowerment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended to support the development of meaningful opportunities for young women and men in the agricultural sector:

- Link needs and/or gaps in the agriculture sector with existing skills, knowledge and expertise of young women and men. For example, enable young people to: adopt or pilot new technologies or innovative marketing tools; access new markets, including virtual or international markets; or develop new products.
- Further develop entrepreneurial skills through participatory trainings and link to global youth entrepreneurs.
- Broaden the scope of Oxfam's work with youth across all its programmes and move more towards active engagement of youth.
- Document examples of successful young agripreneurs to inform future project planning, and use to engage and motivate other young people (e.g. by changing their perceptions of agriculture as an old-fashioned or limited sector) and also to garner support from local partners, institutions and international donors.
- Collect more evidence-based data specifically on youth integration into the agriculture sector; this is key to developing well-tailored and effective programmes.

NOTES

¹ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *International Youth Day, Press Release* Retrieved January 2019 from http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_12-8-2018-youth-en.pdf

² AMENCA: Australian Middle East NGO Cooperation Agreement



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