



Wafaa Abu Taima, co-founder of 'Hanging Peas' Agricultural Start-up in Gaza. Photo: UCAS Technology Incubator

AGRIPRENEURSHIP

Engaging young people in the agriculture sector in the Gaza Strip

This case study explores the new approach of 'agripreneurship'. The approach aims to address young women's and men's lack of interest in the agriculture sector, which is viewed as 'traditional and unattractive' by young agronomists. The model was tested for the first time in the Gaza Strip, a coastal enclave in the grip of a protracted conflict and suffering from a staggering 70% youth unemployment rate. The model provided space for youth to make business decisions, control assets and further their personal development.

1 INTRODUCTION

The World Economic Forum has highlighted youth unemployment as a ‘corrosive legacy’, which if not addressed will continue to amplify domestic and global risks such as social exclusion and mass migration, particularly in protracted conflict areas.¹ The Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) has endured decades of economic fragility and stagnation as a result of 51 years of Israeli occupation, including the unlawful blockade of Gaza, which has now lasted more than 11 years. The unemployment rate in the OPT has reached almost 32%, one of the highest in the region. In the Gaza Strip, the unemployment rate is extremely high, at 54.9%.²

Youth and women in the Gaza Strip are the most affected. Seventy percent of youth aged 20 to 29 years and 78% of women are jobless.³

Recurrent escalations of conflict and violence, along with the blockade, have paralyzed all economic sectors and their ability to absorb the growing population of young people in Gaza. However, the agriculture sector is an important source of food security, employment and export revenues. The size of the overall agriculture sector in the Gaza Strip has shrunk from 10% of GDP in 1990 to about 5% in 2015.⁴ However, it still serves as a source of employment for nearly 6.8% of the labour force in Gaza,⁵ providing permanent and temporary jobs for nearly 17,900 female and male workers and supporting the livelihoods of a quarter of the population. This percentage does not include unpaid family workers in addition to workers in the food processing sector, which is based on agriculture. The challenges of continuous Israeli military incursions, high input costs and weak markets hinder farmers’ ability to cultivate opportunities within the sector. That said, the sector could offer more and better opportunities to graduates and agronomists if new enabling factors were introduced, such as improvements in infrastructure.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Young women and men view agriculture as ‘traditional and unattractive’, particularly as an employment option.⁶ Furthermore, agriculture is not perceived as sufficiently financially rewarding in a context where young people lack access to assets and resources, decision making and ownership. Coupled with factors such as the slow uptake of new technology in agricultural practices, youth are discouraged from establishing start-ups in the sector.

Oxfam seeks to engage young women and men within its economic justice work, particularly in the Gaza Strip. Creating opportunities and supportive environments for youth employment is an integral part of Oxfam’s interventions. The project ‘Improving Palestinian Small-Scale Producers’ Access to and Power in Olive, High Value Fruit, and Small Ruminant Value Chains – Takamol’ aims to connect Palestinian farmers to markets by enhancing their readiness and engagement. The project focuses on creating opportunities for youth employment in agriculture and tapping into the opportunities within the sector.

Through participatory community and consultation meetings, value chain analysis, desk reviews of secondary data, focus groups and continuous meetings with market

actors, Oxfam and its partner investigated farmers' needs, challenges and the opportunities available, as well as the underlying reasons for the lack of interest from youth in the agriculture sector.

Field research conducted by Oxfam partner the University College of Applied Science (UCAS) highlighted farmers' inability to use their farms due to high costs and low returns, leaving about 45% of agricultural land untapped. Even though farmers often have a high number of unemployed family members, especially younger family members, their role is limited to helping their parents during high seasons and the sector remains unattractive to youth in terms of formal employment and job opportunities.

UCAS has extensive experience incubating information and communications technology (ICT) entrepreneurs as well as working on an agricultural research through its Agricultural Research and Development Center (ARDC).⁷ The 'agriprenership' model aimed to merge these two areas of expertise to attract young women and men to engage in the agriculture sector. The participatory community consultation confirmed the importance of working with young agronomists who already have knowledge of the agriculture sector, and who have basic-level assets to build on in establishing a successful agricultural start-up – particularly the daughters and sons of farmers whose agricultural lands are not being utilized.

Consequently, Oxfam designed a model that builds on how the 'modernization' of agriculture, through new technology applications, new approaches, good agricultural practices, new varieties and new forms of agriculture-based enterprises may attract young people to this sector, especially if accompanied by easier access to finance. Once tapped, youth can be a vital source of agricultural technology and innovation. In close collaboration with UCAS, Oxfam developed the 'agripreners' model: an approach (illustrated below) to building entrepreneurship opportunities in the sector using the expertise of young women and men in the Gaza Strip, and addressing the aforementioned obstacles hindering their participation, decision making and profitability.



Using social media and spaces where youth have a large presence, 'agripreneurs' reached young agronomists and encouraged them to submit innovative business ideas. 161 applications were received from over 469 individuals who teamed up to develop their ideas. The majority of the youth targeted within this model were aged 20 to 29, with young women constituting about one-third of the overall targeted group. Through a rigorous selection process and interviews, in which motivation and passion, access to basic assets and experience in working in agriculture were fundamental selection criteria, 38 ideas progressed to the next phase. During a two-day 'bootcamp' participants received coaching on developing their own ideas, training on doing financial calculations, and pitching.

'From nobody, I became a man of business'



Mustafa Abu Daqqa, in his Agricultural Nursery Start-up in Gaza. Photo: UCAS Technology Incubator.

Mustafa Abu Daqqa and Abdullah Hamed are passionate about having a nursery where they propagate, grow and sell plants. Mustafa joined the 'agripreneur' model where he used seed funding to establish a nursery in a greenhouse near his home. Over the past few months his nursery has been able to propagate about 5000 seedlings.

'Being part of the incubated business model changed my life from a nobody to a man who has his own business and source of income. I gained expertise in new approaches in propagation.'

Financial and emotional support, listening and encouragement from family helped Mustafa transform and better utilize his experience. Mustafa's mother supported him financially and his wife now works with him in the nursery.

After development, the ideas were reviewed and assessed. Twelve ideas, half of which are owned by young women, were selected for incubation (women are also part of the other teams). The incubation period encompasses seed funding of production inputs valued at \$2000 per idea, plus capacity building, mentoring and coaching in both technical agricultural practices and managerial skills. The selected ideas included innovative techniques for planting (i.e. hanging peas), processing agricultural

produce (drying herbs and fruit), and the provision of animal breeds and extension services through the establishment of an extension services company.

The 'agripreneurs' model has paved the way for the increased participation of young people in agriculture. The model focused on raising graduates' expertise in different agricultural disciplines by improving problem identification, opening their eyes to new opportunities, building confidence and encouraging risk-taking. Within a few months of incubation more than 80% of the start-ups had commenced production in operations as diverse as a quail production unit, a pickling unit, mushroom production, a flower nursery, hanging zucchini, and dried herbs. The young agripreneurs showed a strong sense of ownership, working hard to succeed in order to prove their ability to make successful business decisions.

Gender was a strong consideration during the incubation period. The incubation provided a safe environment, greenhouses, farms and food processing space for start-ups owned by women. This has been instrumental in building families' trust in their daughters' ability to establish a business, as well as motivating young women to participate in incubation. The fact that these businesses led by young women are incubated with UCAS, a well-established and respected institution, encouraged rural families to allow their daughters to work. Furthermore, working within an incubating body, where it is easier to access support, helped build and boost female agronomists' self-confidence, ambition and belief in their capacity to succeed.

The opportunity to pilot new agricultural practices, such as the 'hanging peas' method implemented by two female agronomists, enabled the young women and men to test business viability, market demand and potential for scale. One of the agronomists mentioned that her uncle, who is also a farmer, was not convinced that peas could be grown hanging. However, after visiting her businesses within UCAS, he proposed that they work together to pilot the idea in his greenhouses. This mentality shift in the minds of farmers and families who come from rural areas is very instrumental in building and encouraging more spaces for young people, and particularly young women's engagement in the agriculture sector.

'I gained new skills and knowledge. I became more confident in myself and able to better understand the market.'

– Nour Kareem,
producer of natural
vinegar.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following lessons were learned from implementing the 'agripreneurs' model.

- It was essential to partner with an organization that has a history of and expertise in working with the agriculture sector in terms of deploying applied science and new approaches and techniques. UCAS has continuously tested new approaches in agriculture, such as technology diffusion in greenhouse management, developing a curriculum to include safe agricultural practices, piloting aquaculture and organic farming, and developing plant and animal production laboratories. Furthermore, the UCAS vocational institution is a hub for young students, providing access opportunities and outreach to a large number of youth. These two elements combined led to better mentoring and increased creativity and innovation by start-ups.
- The flexibility of the incubation model, whereby the hosting of agricultural start-up is not limited to UCAS farms, was important. Start-ups can also be hosted near young people's homes depending on the business type. For example, the 'hanging peas' project was implemented within UCAS, while one male agronomist implemented a 'hanging zucchini' model near his home. This helps in testing the

best environment to undertake agricultural projects and build family trust in young people's abilities.

- As UCAS is also an educational facility in agricultural science, incubated start-ups led by women serve as role models for other women students attending UCAS, particularly in a sector dominated by men.
- The model incubation period was six months; a lesson learned was the benefit of extending the incubation period to 12 months to enable better pre-incubation and ongoing coaching and mentoring across two agricultural seasons instead of one. The year should include an acceleration phase to enhance market engagement and broker linkages with relevant market actors. Therefore, an acceleration phase is recommended to ensure more proper engagement in the market.
- The model addressed young people's inability to access finance by providing seed funding for each business idea. Nevertheless, there is a need for higher seed funding, as the \$2,000 was insufficient to support larger businesses.
- As only 12 business ideas were selected from 161 applications it was vital to analyse and make applicants aware of the problems associated with each application. An awareness day was held for those who were not selected, in which they were introduced to common mistakes in applications, how to properly identify and address problems, and present ideas. This highlights the necessity of more investment from agricultural organizations, incubators and universities, to work with youth regarding agricultural problem identification, idea generation and market analysis.
- Young people showed more interest in piloting new varieties and crops, particularly those of high value and quality, in comparison to working in traditional agriculture as waged labour.
- More intensive managerial and business training is needed, particularly in the areas of marketing and financial management. This advanced business training should address themes such as how they can connect to markets, negotiate agreement with suppliers and traders, and the use of marketing channels.
- Improved outreach efforts in terms of announcing the intended workshops across different areas in the Gaza Strip are needed before launching the application process, in order to cover larger geographical locations and communities.
- There is a need for a longer bootcamp that focuses not only on idea development, but what comes next – to highlight how entrepreneurship can provide practical solutions to help overcome some market constraints.

NOTES

- 1 World Economic Forum. (2018). *Global Risks 2018: Fears, Fractures and Failures*. Hindsight section: Youth Unemployment. <http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2018/youth-unemployment/>
- 2 State of Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *Labour Force Survey (July–September 2018) Round, (Q3/2018). Press Report on the Labour Force Survey Results*. Ramallah – Palestine. http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_8-11-2018-LF-en.pdf
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Paltrade (Palestinian Trade Centre). (n.d.) *The Agricultural Sector in Gaza Strip: Obstacles to Development*. Fact Sheet. <https://www.paltrade.org/upload/multimedia/admin/2017/09/59af8fe3e487b.pdf>
- 5 Labour Force Survey, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018. http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_8-5-2018-LF-en.PDF
- 6 This was highlighted by young people during Oxfam youth strategy and youth mapping exercises in 2017, as well as during consultation with young women and men in 2018.
- 7 ARDC “Agricultural Research and Development Center” was developed utilizing a previous intervention through Oxfam funded by the Danish International Development Agency (Danida).

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