

Under Siege and Rubble; Can Fair Trade Survive Gaza's Compound Fracture?

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Some would argue that fair trade never really existed in the Gaza Strip – at least not in the “certified” way. Needing to meet certain standards for present-day international export is reasonable enough, but fair trade can also exist domestically or internationally, without all the fuss and formalities, no? If we understand fair trade to be about dignity, empowerment, sustainability, justice, and social responsibility, then any form of exchange that meets those criteria should be recognized as just that, should it not?

Before the days of Israel's crippling siege of the Gaza Strip, six women's couscous processing cooperatives were in operation in Gaza, built on the foundation of the above criteria. Their products, however, did not bear a fair trade certification mark that made the product instantly and internationally recognized as being fair trade. They were, however, exported by the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC), who is a member of the International Federation for Alternative Trade (IFAT, recently renamed the World Fair Trade Organization), so there is no question as to whether or not the products were actually fair trade. With the help of the Fair Trade department of PARC who also provided their founding infrastructure, these co-ops exported over 100 tons of couscous in 2006 to fair trade organizations all over Europe. That initiative had so much potential and seemed like a viable and promising avenue for economic development; *had* being the pivotal word.

Following the January 2006 Palestinian parliament elections, which saw Hamas come to power, Israel's immoral and illegal collective punishment of Gaza's 1.5 million people began. It has been two and a half years now since the siege began, and ever since then Gaza has been described as the world's largest prison, its borders hermetically sealed, the free movement of people and essential goods and services severely restricted, and its economy and society stunted by a prohibition on partaking in any kind of trade, never mind *fair* trade.

Around this time last year PARC wrote a release outlining its concerns regarding the effects of the blockade on the agricultural sector in general, but more specifically on the six women's couscous processing cooperatives operating there. It seemed as though the situation could not get any worse; production requirements were not allowed *into* the Gaza Strip, and all agricultural products were not allowed *out* of the Gaza Strip. The results were visibly devastating. The ban on exports led the deterioration of the agricultural sector, which led to the closure of many farms and all six couscous co-ops, which had a direct impact on hundreds of people whose lives depended on their continued existence. Additionally, with the incapacity to produce and the inability to purchase or sell came a surge of food insecurity not yet known to the people of Gaza.

The likelihood of the situation deteriorating seemed impossible at the time but, obviously, it just got worse – much worse. Gaza's initial break just became a compound fracture.

January 18th, 2009, marked the ‘last day’ of Israel’s deadly 22-day assault – ironically dubbed “Operation Cast Lead” – which killed over 1,300 people, 895 of which were civilians, and left nearly 5,000 injured. The damage caused to public and private infrastructure was unprecedented, and the agricultural sector suffered a near insurmountable amount of devastation. On January 19th, the agriculture minister of Gaza declared that 60 percent of the Strip’s agricultural land was destroyed, along with 80 percent of all agricultural products for this season, with a total economic loss for the sector alone estimated at 170,000,000 USD (Palestine News Network, January 24, 2009; PARC/Gaza, January 12, 2009). The fair trade sector, which had already been rendered inept by the siege, has endured an even greater setback. According to PARC’s Gaza branch, one of the couscous co-ops in Sheikh Radwan was completely destroyed, leaving five co-ops (barely) standing and in a condition so fragile their future has become even more tenuous than it was just one month ago. Clearly, the Israeli war machine has systematically left in its wake a mess so colossal that it has been estimated that the Gaza Strip has just been set back at least twenty years.

Whatever hope Gaza was holding onto for the possibility of fair trade ever catching on again has now been thoughtlessly thwarted by the Israeli Occupation Forces. Understandably, the focus is no longer on fair trade, or even on trade for that matter, but on survival and other immediate needs that generally need tending to after an atrocity of this sort, such as mourning those you’ve lost, healing your wounded children and trying to rebuild your home. Gaza’s compound fracture needs to be nurtured before it can think of joining the global playing field again – we can only hope that next time it is an equal playing field.

For the moment, Gaza desperately requires immediate humanitarian aid in order to offer some instant relief to the civilian population – there is no question about that. PARC, however, firmly believes that aid is indisputably unsustainable and is urging the international community to foster an environment and humanity of fair trade, rather than one of aid. Israel’s siege of the Gaza Strip needs to be lifted immediately in order to help put an end to the humanitarian catastrophe that is occurring, before it’s too late, and before we regret our inaction once again.

**** Since 1983 PARC has been a leading Palestinian NGO working in the field of rural development, environment protection, and women empowerment. They offer superior technical assistance and support, along with extension services, to individuals and organizations working in similar fields. For more information please visit their websites <http://www.parc.ps/> and <http://www.palestinianfairtrade.ps/> ****

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