



# SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH IN THE OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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# Social and Political Determinants of Health in the Occupied Palestinian Territory During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The occupied Palestinian territory has faced specific challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic due to the existing political, economic and social instability. Dr Weeam Hammoudeh and Professor Rita Giacaman from Birzeit University, and Dr Hanna Kienzler and Ms Kristen Meagher from King's College London, have recently examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this complex situation. They propose that the pandemic should now be taken as an opportunity to work towards securing justice and freedom for Palestinians.

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Israeli military occupation of the West Bank of the Palestinian territory has lasted over 50 years, bringing with it a legacy of violence and political, economic and social instability. One particularly detrimental impact has been the impaired development (or dedevelopment) of the region, and in particular, the provision of only weak and underfunded health and social services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, targeted blockades and attacks by Israel have increased against the Palestinian population, leading to the demolition of homes and infrastructure, including healthcare facilities.

The authors of the article note that the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst presenting a challenge in its own right, has critically worsened the already insufficient health infrastructure. The researchers note that understanding the complexity of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory requires acknowledgement of the broader context of settler colonialism and the logic of colonisation.



Despite these enormous challenges, the Palestinian Authority reacted quickly in response to COVID-19 by introducing strict lockdown measures. However, since the easing of restrictions in May 2020, there has been a large spike in confirmed cases. Over 9,000 cases had been observed by July 18 2020 compared with fewer than 400 cases at the end of the lockdown. In response to this, the Palestinian Authority implemented shorter lockdown measures but these have been met with protest given the economic and social impacts on individuals and their families.

The occupied Palestinian territory is currently functioning in 'emergency mode', with only limited resources and inadequate supplies of personal protective equipment and tests. With only weak control over its borders, the Palestinian Authority



has been unable to suitably manage the COVID-19 crisis, and particularly, the implementation of prevention guidelines. These factors, together with the rise in attacks by Israeli settlers and military forces, most likely contributed to the recent spike in cases since May 2020.

For Palestinians, the pandemic has led to increased economic uncertainty as there are no social protection measures to support individuals or families. The need to physically distance from social networks has had further negative impacts.

Whilst the pandemic impacts on everyone in Palestine, specific groups have been acutely disadvantaged and marginalised as a result of lockdown restrictions. Women, for example, have had to take on additional home and caring responsibilities and potentially face an increase in domestic violence. Young people have been unable to plan for the future given the climate of uncertainty while those working in the informal sector have been unable to provide for themselves or their families. Finally, those with disabilities and their caretakers are impacted by the lack of adequate health and support services.

During lockdown, these stressors increased and adverse effects on mental health have been confirmed, arising additionally from an increase in Israeli military occupation-related violence, increased unemployment and poverty, overcrowding in homes, and in some areas, a lack of clean water and sanitation. However, little mental health or psychosocial support is currently available.

The authors note that, unfortunately, no research has been conducted on the impact of the lockdown restrictions on individuals with existing, severe mental health difficulties. However, their own research has already shown that even in non-pandemic times, individuals with severe mental health difficulties face significant challenges in their day to day lives in Palestine.

Returning to the issue of lack of long-term development in the occupied Palestinian territory, the authors point to the question of humanitarian and development aid. Although such interventions play a key and beneficial role in war-affected regions, they can also have a negative impact due to their inherently short-term and project-specific nature.



A key issue for the authors is how the pandemic and the response to it opens the possibility of progressing humanitarian aid efforts such that sustainable, responsive and locally focused systems can be developed that include and can provide for the most vulnerable.

This raises the need to directly question the root causes of why the health system is so weak and fragmented. We are then led to the more challenging and broader question of identifying who is responsible for Palestinians during COVID-19, and from this, the authors raise the overarching question of who is responsible for the justice and freedom of all Palestinians.

In this way, the authors demonstrate that the challenge at hand is not simply identifying who is responsible for the health care of Palestinians during the COVID-19

pandemic, but rather, who can account for their injustices and freedom. To date, this critical issue has been overlooked not only by the Israeli occupying power but the international community at large.

The difficulty is that, if efforts continue to focus solely on targeting disadvantage and the distribution of aid, unjust advantage remains unquestioned and the underlying causes of unjust advantage remain unchallenged.

Dr Weeam Hammoudeh, Professor Rita Giacaman, Dr Hanna Kienzler and Ms Kristen Meagher now call for the COVID-19 pandemic to be framed as an opportunity for justice and freedom for Palestinians, to make global powers accountable, and to give a voice to the Palestinian people on asserting Palestinian rights.

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This SciPod is a summary of the paper '**Social and political determinants of health in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) during the COVID-19 pandemic: who is responsible?**', from the journal *BMJ Public Health*. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2020-003683.

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