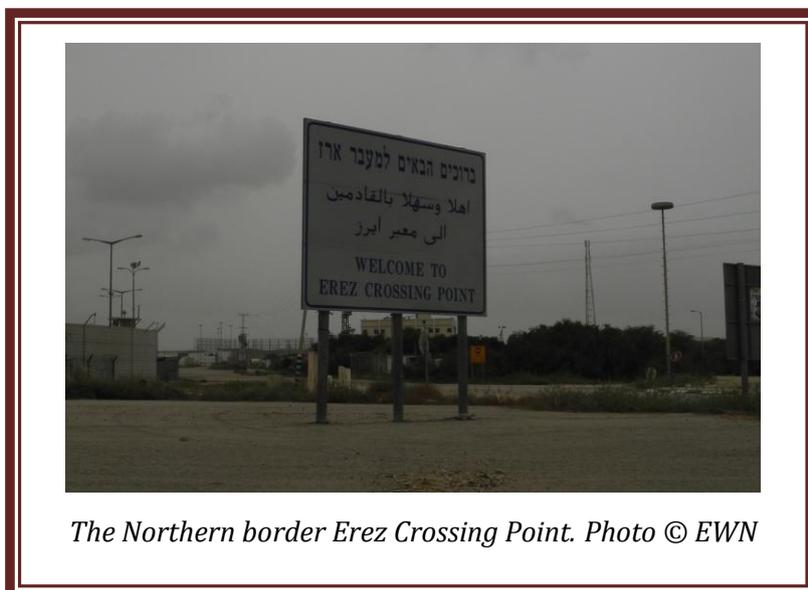


Exposure to the water situation in Gaza.

During the meeting of the International Reference Group (IRG) of the Ecumenical Water Network of the World Council of Churches in Jerusalem in early June 2014, the IRG members embarked on a fact-finding mission to Gaza to assess the situation of water and sanitation there. What they witnessed and experienced in Gaza is reported here by some of the IRG members.

1. Crossing the border

While we were in Jerusalem, we did not have to go through any security checks, despite spotting many armed security personnel on the streets. However, our experience in Gaza was very different. We got a taste of what an average Palestinian has to go through on a daily basis, while crossing one of the northern borders to Gaza, called the **Erez Crossing**. Many of us were from Europe, but while crossing the border, we felt so small, powerless and irrelevant vis-à-vis the all-powerful Israeli authorities, the giant walls and the long, caged gangway through the “no-man’s-land”. There was literally nobody else present (not even security personnel) during this few hundred meters of walk through the gangway. As it is hard to cross from Israel to Gaza, you encounter only UN staff, police forces or the elderly who come to Israel for medical treatment with valid permits. It is difficult to get a permit to go to Gaza, even for the foreigners. There, at the immigration control line, one member of the EWN team was denied entry due to the severe visa restrictions that apply mostly to people from southern countries, even after one has secured a permit for Gaza.



The Northern border Erez Crossing Point. Photo © EWN

2. Inside “the wall”

Once inside Gaza, the ubiquitous wall of separation, not only is a constant reminder of the situation of the Palestinians, but it further worsens the water situation in Gaza. As Dr Monther Shoblak from the Palestinian Water Authority, Gaza explained, “Israel Authorities control all incoming goods to Gaza. It is difficult for them to import spare parts of the water treatment machineries that urgently need maintenance and materials for the construction of new infrastructure. It is also very difficult to import chemicals that are needed for water treatment. The reluctance of Israel comes from the fear that metal parts or chemicals could be used to build weapons and could be used against Israel.” Sometimes they have to wait for years, and the construction of a wastewater treatment plant, for example, gets stuck. Furthermore, the strict control over people’s movement in and out of Gaza affects the water situation in Gaza. You cannot send out people for training as water engineers, and it is difficult to get support from the outside in hiring people for their skills. It is impossible to know

when a requested spare part will arrive. Imagine how far the control goes: “Each piece imported is controlled once it enters Gaza till the use in the workshop. Scores of high resolution cameras monitor the workshops and document each part to ensure they are really used for the planned purpose. Some projects just go on for years”, Dr Shoblak told us.



Office of Palestinian Water Authority, Gaza. Photo © EWN

We were sorry to learn that they had only 5 mobile pumps to pump out the water from the flooded houses in December 2013. As it was raining heavily and Israel also opened the dam, polluted water mixed with sewage gushed into the houses. Even today they are waiting for the permit to import more mobile pumps, and apparently there was no emergency help from the outside world at short notice.

3. Poverty

The first impression that hits you when you travel from Israel to Gaza, is the poverty compared to the neat world you have seen outside the walled city - Gaza. Suddenly you realize that the traffic is very thin, donkeys and horses are all over the street as means of transportation, roads are in a bad state, the houses are unfinished and mostly look old, the fields are dry, rubbish is littered everywhere and people work with simple machinery. “The population of Gaza is poor. 41% are unemployed, 39% are living below the poverty line and 57% are food insecure”, said Shoblak. Gaza has 1.8 million inhabitants, half children, within an area of 360 km². It has one of the highest population densities in the world. What hit us most was that 80% of the population was living from food aid.



Streets of Gaza Photo © EWN

Interestingly, almost all people receive water through the tap to their homes. But it is not safe to drink or for other domestic use. The water of the municipality is salty and mostly contaminated by the intrusion of wastewater. So people have to buy desalinated and treated water. This is being sold to them by private traders who bring it to homes by truck. Mostly this is desalinated ground water. We have also visited a desalination plant for sea water treatment. The amount of desalinated water is not enough for everyone.

Drinking water can be bought for 50 shekels (US\$ 15) per cubic meter. This is a lot for families depending on social security schemes. They receive 750 shekels per family for 3 months. (An average employee earns around 1000 shekels (US \$290)

per month and only those working for international organizations such as the UN can earn up to 3000 shekels per month). Some families, we learned, spend up to 2/3 of their income on water.

Poverty is also a major impediment for the Palestinian Water Authority in terms of effective water distribution. We were shown the official figures as to how much money would be needed to realize the water and sanitation projects, but much less is pledged and even less is really received. In this grim situation, to know that the only aquifer-sources of fresh water will be rendered useless in only 6 years is very depressing.

4. Health & Nutrition:

We visited a primary healthcare centre run by the Near East Council of Churches. Young, veiled women and their children were waiting for their treatment. Water-borne disease is one of the major threats to their health. "It is not only a question of money, it is also a question of education", said the young programme officer who guided us. In the centre the women receive different kinds of healthcare training. It was explained by the programme officer that nutrition is at the core of a healthy life and that safe water is key to good nutrition. They encourage students to boil water for at least 5 minutes, to prevent water-related diseases such as diarrhea, skin diseases and parasitic infections. They advise the women to do breastfeeding and teach them to cook an affordable meal which is nutritious. But often they meet dehydrated children and women suffering from anemia which has long-term effects on the health and the intellectual capacities of the people. Some babies are born dead. Inadequate, unsafe water supply and sanitation paired with extreme poverty makes the situation in Gaza bad to worse amidst its ongoing conflict with Israel.



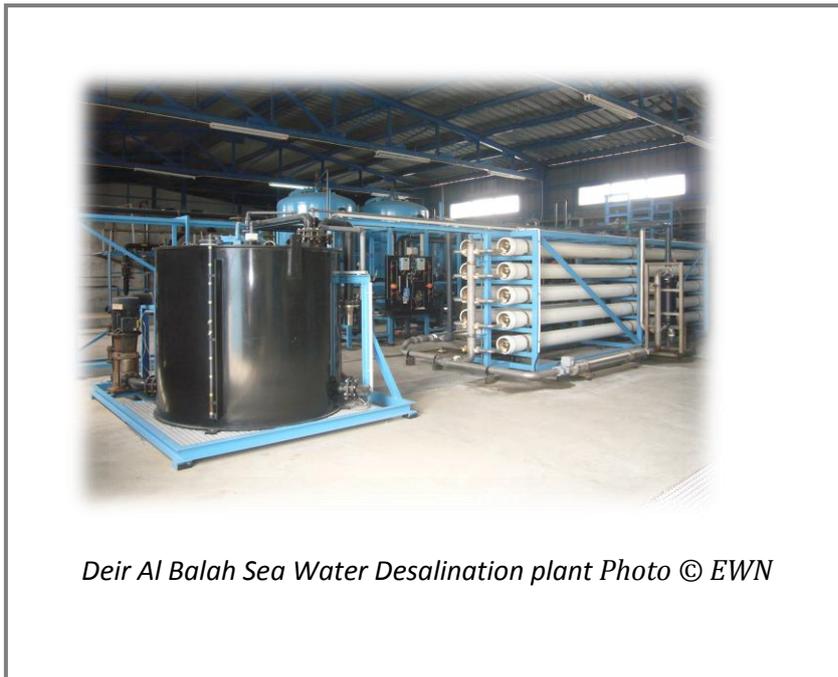
Children are carrying water on donkey after buying from private vendors. Photo © EWN



Untreated sewage is dumped into the sea. Photo © EWN

The Gaza population is exposed to more contamination. Bathing in the sea, at the wonderful beaches, is in fact dangerous. The sewage is allowed to flow untreated into the sea, right at the beach. It pollutes the sea and stinks awfully. 60% of the beaches are unsuitable for swimming. But the people of Gaza still throng to the beaches in large numbers, as going to the beaches the only

“affordable recreation” they have at the moment. So they swim in the contaminated sea. Those who are more aware of the peril, like Ibrahim, take a boat and swim one kilometer into the sea. He says, “This is as far as you are allowed to go for swimming without getting shot by the Israeli security.” We saw the outflow of raw sewage onto the beach and heard that the previous day two men were standing here fishing, because the fish



Deir Al Balah Sea Water Desalination plant Photo © EWN

come to feed on the sewage. The smell was awful, but the houses were just a few meters away. We made a second stop where the Palestinian Water Authority, Gaza is sending out treated wastewater into the sea, which is a little better but still far from good.

5. Water and electricity in Gaza

There is a deplorable lack of resources for the maintenance of the old infrastructure. Gaza also lacks sufficient electricity for running the desalination plants and the pumps. Shoblak explained that they

would need 400 megawatts of electricity to meet the demands for water, but the maximum capacity at which they could generate electricity (which they never reach) is only 205 megawatts.

So the water supply of the municipality comes in intervals of eight hours. Unfortunately, this is also irregular; sometimes in summer families do not have water for several days. The population even receives electric service in the same intervals of eight hours which creates problems for institutions such as hospitals. Everyone needs to pump the water they get from the municipality to tanks on the roof. This too is affected with frequent electricity outages.

6. Governance and development

The right to water and sanitation of the people is not realized. But whose obligation is it?

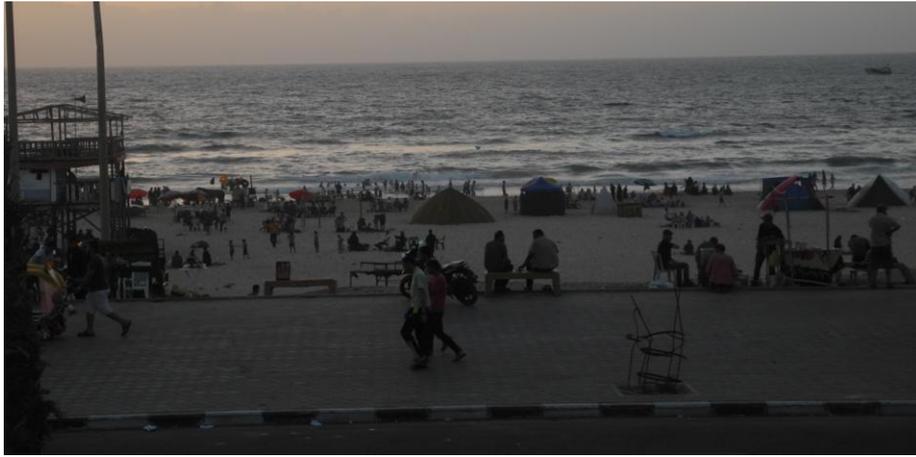
Reflecting the limited range of options that Palestinians have, one cannot say that they control their water management system. The aquifer is the only source of water. And this source is overused dramatically. It is irreversibly damaged. The demand is as high as 208 million m³ compared to the 61 million m³ that would be a safe yield. The two rivers which should recharge the aquifer are, as we have seen ourselves, dry riverbeds. The reason for this, we were told, is that Israelis have built dams for their agricultural use upstream. The high density and growth of the population also are part of the problem. Therefore, other solutions, which of course require much more resources, are needed; e.g., desalination plants, waste-water treatment, etc.)

We were told that the government of Palestine is complying with its obligation and making the progressive realization of the human right to water and sanitation (we have not seen the figures of the national budget on how the government is spending their money, but we suppose the problem is big enough that they allocate a major share to it). But it is like *fighting the windmills*. What can Palestine do, when sufficient money is not available, and to add to that, Israel is curtailing their efforts? Palestine is completely dependent on the outside world and the help of donors – for example, on a desalination plant from Qatar, another from Austria, and freshwater-tanks from Japan, the sewage plant from Germany; and the list goes on.

We saw that the development of the country and the people cannot be achieved by their own goodwill and by self-help strategies. It needs the political attention of the world and a just and equitable distribution of resources – natural (such as water) as well as financial. But it also needs freedom of movement and the trading of goods. The solution is a political question between Israel and Palestine. This needs urgent international attention and much more proactive engagement by the United Nations. The case of Gaza shows clearly that the right to water also includes the obligations of neighbouring states. Israel needs to comply with “due diligence” criteria; the rest of the world cannot stay quiet without being held partially responsible for the mess in Gaza.

7. On the way out from Gaza.

Our time in Gaza was shocking. But we were surprised by the relaxed environment and joyful evening walk on the seashore we enjoyed with the people of Gaza. It is the best coping mechanism the Palestinians use against depression, and to distract themselves from the inhuman conditions they are met with. Even though it is a miserable situation, but the optimistic attitude people had for a solution was encouraging.



People throng to the beach in the evening. Photo © EWN

Our exit from Gaza was another life experience. We came to the Israeli immigration gate. We could not find any security personnel there. We sat there for about 15 minutes before a door suddenly opened. We went into one room where a cage gate was located, and one by one we went in upon the flashing of a green light. Then we had our bags checked by scanners. This is the first time we met a human being. Then we collected our bags and moved to the immigration area. We understood this was for security precaution, but it still gave us a feeling of powerlessness and being lesser humans. At times we were confused as to how we should react, and reacted with a sense of fear and intimidation. We knew only that we were under a strict immigration procedure.

8. Some expressions heard on our way...

This is how the people we met described their situation in Gaza.

- "We live in an open-air prison, like prisoners, controlled on everything and deprived of basic essentials of life. We are people of peace. We want to be free ..."

- "Even if you see someone smiling, there is sadness very deep in our souls"

- "I haven't seen my children for eight years. I don't know my grandchildren. I can't get out... outside I'm a Nobody, same as here"

- "We ask for the solidarity of the international community"

9. Conclusions

We wish to believe there is a solution to the situation in Gaza, particularly to the inhuman situation of water and sanitation. Based on the UN charter, every nation has the obligation to provide its people with basic safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. We believe the church in the region, with support of the global church, must play a leading role to solve the water & sanitation problem of Gaza. We would like to express our appreciation to the churches and the people of Gaza for sharing their daily struggle and their hope for the future. We are deeply touched and inspired by our visit to Gaza.

- Shared by Carolin Callenius (BfdW) and Veronica Flachier (CLAI) with inputs from Dinesh Suna, EWN-WCC