Disempowered, disenfranchised, disengaged.

The Oslo Generation;
Young Palestinians bear the brunt of the failed peace process.

Summary
A quarter of a century since the signing of the first of the Oslo Accords, the “peace process” has seen a crippled Palestinian economy, a quadrupling of the number of settlers living in illegal Israeli settlements, entrenchment of the 51-year Occupation and no genuine prospects for peace for Palestinians, Israelis or the entire region.

Young Palestinians, who make up over half of the population of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), have shouldered much of the burden of insecurity and injustice. While the Accords were put in place to ensure a better life for the next generation, history has not served them well.
The Legacy of the Oslo Accords

Twenty-five years since the first of the Oslo Accords was signed, their legacy has become little more than a list of broken promises.

The Oslo Agreements carried huge expectations and hope and promised two major outcomes to be completed within five years: by May 1999, Israel would end the occupation of all Palestinian territory it had occupied since 1967, and the peace process would finally put an end to Israel's illegal settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip.

‘Final status issues’ negotiations, which included borders, refugees and the status of Jerusalem, never eventuated. This has had major implications on the infrastructure and living conditions of Palestinians even today.

The ‘temporary’ process has now lingered, unfinished, for a quarter of a century. Instead of an end to occupation, peaceful coexistence and progress toward peace, the failed process has brought immense suffering, inequality and hopelessness to a generation of young Palestinians.

The Oslo Generation

More than half of the population of the Occupied Palestinian Territory have grown up under the conditions set by the Accords, with no plan for a better way forward. For young Palestinians, the Oslo process effectively froze time, with no changes in leadership, strategy or vision in their lifetime.¹

The Oslo Generation has known only restrictions on freedoms and opportunities that have progressively worsened in the years following a cautious handshake in the United States a quarter of a century ago.

Palestinians under the age of 29 comprise more than half of the OPT population; those between the ages of 15 and 29 comprise 30 percent.² They frequently feel that their voices go unheard, with no impact on political decision-making at any level. Despite their considerable numbers, many feel under-represented politically and unable to bring change to their situation. Accordingly, they feel disenchanted, disempowered and disenfranchised.³

Energy from Ocean Waves: Innovation under Blockade

Haytham – 27 years old – Gaza City

Haytham is an electrical engineer from Gaza. Searching for a solution to the man-made electricity crisis and high rates of unemployment driven by the illegal Israeli blockade, Haytham, together with three other young engineers, developed a prototype to generate energy from ocean waves. All the parts of the prototype had to be found or built within Gaza because of import restrictions.

The 11-year land, sea and air blockade on Gaza separates almost two million Palestinians living there from the outside world. The blockade, as well as three wars over the course of the Oslo process, have impacted every facet of life in the coastal enclave and fragmented the Occupied Palestinian Territory and its economic and social fabric.

Unemployment rates in Gaza have soared from less than 10 percent in the early 1990s before Oslo to over 49 percent today - 71% among women – some of the highest rates in the world. A staggering 64 percent of young people between 15 and 29 are unemployed and job prospects and other opportunities are stifled by severe movement restrictions.

"Nowadays, after Oslo, we are under siege in all aspects of our lives, our minds, education, life, everything is under blockade. There are no similarities between life before and after Oslo, especially for young people."

"I, as a young Palestinian should be thinking about where the world is heading and developing, and think how I can be a part of this development through my scientific research and projects that can benefit the world and help with the development process. Instead, I'm forced to listen and worry about news everyday, live through what is happening, and constantly read about the political situation in order to understand where life is taking us. This is not the life I want. For me nothing came out of Oslo, no development, no nothing. The world is developing constantly; we might be getting a little bit of this development but nothing really evolves or develops here in Gaza."
Political Participation: Decades of Exclusion & Disappointment

Young people between the ages of 18 and 25, whether in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, have not participated in any presidential or parliamentary elections. The vast majority of Palestinian youth are not registered to vote. The last such elections took place in 2005 and 2006 respectively, while the last PLO elections took place in 1996, more than 22 years ago.

More than a decade of unresolved political divisions have further fuelled disillusionment and many young Palestinians have withdrawn from political participation. A recent survey reported that only 40 percent of young Palestinians expressed interest in participating in an election (29 percent in the West Bank versus 57 percent in the Gaza Strip).iv

In the Oslo process itself, here too young people have been excluded since the last round of informal negotiations took place nearly a decade ago and the last round of substantive negotiations took place in 2001.

Lack of Hope, Leaving Home

Young Palestinians have little hope for their future under the current circumstances.

Polls indicate that over one-third of young Palestinians want to leave their homeland to migrate abroad permanently (37 percent in the Gaza Strip, 15 percent in the West Bank), although for many this freedom to leave would be impossible, and 67 percent believe that the OPT is heading in the wrong direction.v Seventy-three percent say they view their future as bleak.

Their greatest concerns are securing employment, obtaining an education, attaining personal freedom and ending corruption in public life.vi

Wasted Potential: Educated yet Unemployed

Thirty-eight percent of young Palestinians (aged 15-29) are enrolled in some form of education. However, the unemployment rate for recent graduates is 53 percent, underlining that education does not correlate with economic prosperity in the OPT.vii

The OPT has the region’s highest youth unemployment rate at 43.3 percent in 2017 (30.1 percent in the West Bank and 64.6 percent in the Gaza Strip).viii

Nearly two-thirds of young people no longer seek employment and 1.44 million, or nearly one-third of these young Palestinians, no longer seek work at all or attend school (39 percent of young women and 28 percent of young men).ix

An extraordinarily high proportion of young Palestinians are only employed informally – for example in agriculture and household work - while more than half of young workers earn less than the OPT’s minimum wage.x

The vast numbers of idle youth represent an enormous, and potentially destabilizing, waste of potential.xi This “lost generation” desperately seek employment but reach very limited success. Disenfranchised young people lack opportunities to build key skills as they ordinarily would during their first years in the workforce.

Plummeting skill levels threaten to create long-term unemployability and economic marginalization. A 2015 survey found the average period of unemployment for young people was more than two years.xii
Leaving for Good. “If I was given a chance to change anything I would stay”

Rahaf - 19 years old – Student, West Bank

Rahaf majored in English literature at Al Quds Open University in Jerusalem. Because she feels unheard and sees no possibility for change, she is looking for an opportunity to leave her country and live abroad.

“I’m one of the people who are constantly thinking about leaving Palestine for good, because there isn’t anything for me here”.

“I would like to leave because the situation here is so bad that no one listens and because I cannot change anything, if I was given a chance to change anything I would stay.”

“Oslo was one of the worst things that happened to Palestinians, it divided and disconnected people from their families, a lot of people need permits to visit relatives and family, and this is all caused by the terms of the Oslo agreement dividing the Palestinian land.”

The Costs of Failure

The costs of the failure of the Oslo Accords are immeasurable. For the Oslo generation, they set in motion a series of events, which over time entrenched the now 51-year Israeli occupation and brought catastrophic impacts to their lives and enjoyment of rights.

The non-existence of final status negotiations and the decades long delays have caused irreversible damage. Today, the separation between Israelis and Palestinians has caused deeply rooted inequality, which is not conducive to peaceful coexistence between the two.

The Impact of Oslo’s Failure on Women

Women too continue to endure the worst impacts of the occupation. Despite their higher educational levels, they fare worse than men in the labor market, political participation and leadership.

Women’s unemployment in the OPT rose by 3.1 percent in 2017, reaching 47.4 percent, the world’s highest. This contributed to the overall employment rate remaining one of the world’s highest in 2017. Fewer than 20 per cent of women joined the labor market last year, compared with more than 70 percent of men. Moreover, those women who do work earn significantly lower wages than men and work fewer hours, averaging 31 hours per week compared to 41 hours for men.

With the political process stagnated, the scope for women to enter political leadership has remained virtually non-existent. Only one woman is a member of the PLO’s elected 18-member Executive Committee and only one woman is a member of the 18-member elected Fatah Central Committee. The very low presence of women at this level attests to a wider and severe under-representation of women in Palestinian politics.

Research tells us that when women are able to participate in peace processes, the resulting agreements are 64 per cent less likely to fail. By helping women take control and action, Oxfam believes they can be one of the most critical drivers to end conflict and poverty for entire communities.
An Economy Strangled by Occupation

Israel’s 51-year occupation has inflicted enormous economic costs on Palestinians, including during the past 25 years of the Oslo process. The IMF conservatively estimated in 2016 that real per capita OPT GDP would have been 37 percent higher without the occupation, while a more liberal estimate is that real GDP per capita would have been 83 per cent higher.

The OPT has received over 30 billion USD in international assistance since the 1993 outset of the Oslo process xv, rendering it one of the world’s highest per capita recipients of international aid. xvi

Israel’s movement and access restrictions on goods and commerce have strangled the economy and intensified aid dependence and economic stagnation. xvii The illegal blockade on the Gaza Strip and its nearly 2 million inhabitants, coupled with de facto and de jure land annexation practices including the expansion of settlements in the West Bank, have only exacerbated this even further. xviii

The IMF notes that OPT per capita output grew just 0.1 percent annually between 1994–2014 while the performances of its nearest neighbours, Israel and Jordan have been relatively robust. xix The IMF calculates that had OPT per capita output continued to grow at the 4.4 percent trend rate observed between 1968 and 1987, real GDP per capita would have been 130 per cent higher by 2014. xx

Poverty

In May 2018, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics reported significantly increased poverty rates compared with 2011. Overall, 29.2 percent of Palestinians lived in poverty. xxi

By contrast, the World Bank reported that only 19.1 percent of the OPT population were poor at the end of 1995. xxii

Gaza Strip poverty rates rose from nearly 39 percent in 2011 to 53 percent, more than 1 million people, by the end of 2017, 400,000 of them are children. xxiii The UN’s World Food Programme reports that 1.3 million Palestinians, 22.5 percent of the population, don’t have enough food to eat; this includes at least 39 percent of the Gaza Strip’s population. xxiv
A Way Forward: Righting the Wrongs

The UN has described young people as the ‘missing peace’ of conflict resolution. Young people are often disproportionately involved in and affected by conflict and must therefore be recognised as both victims of the conflict and agents of change. They can add much weight to efforts for peaceful solutions.

Therefore, learning from the past and ensuring young Palestinians are included in any future peace negotiation is integral to a new way forward, and to a just and lasting peace.

The legacy of the Oslo process has been the entrenchment and even exacerbation of the occupation, as violations of international law have continued with impunity. Since Oslo, there have been three wars, the imposition of an illegal blockade, the construction of hundreds of kilometres of walls and the massive expansion of settlements, cutting people off from work, opportunities and family. This has led to more violence, with hundreds of suicide attacks and bombings and more Israeli control over Palestinian land and resources than ever before.

A just and lasting peace based on equal rights for everyone is vital for all Palestinians and Israelis. Lessons must be learned and a new direction must be forged. A generation of Palestinians and Israelis is counting on it.

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i See, e.g., Palestinians vote this week on PLO’s aging leaders, as Abbas tightens grip, Daily Star (Lebanon), 30 April 2018 (reporting that the average age of PLO Executive Committee Members is 70 years old).


iii See, e.g., Youth in Palestine: Policy and Program Recommendations to address demographic risks and opportunities, United Nations Population Fund, October 2017;

From 1993 to 2009, the volume of international aid to the oPt increased seventeen times to reach almost three billion dollars. The second intifada (especially between 2000 and 2003) led to a major shift towards humanitarian aid and more than tripled overall aid volumes, followed by a return to development aid from 2004–05 when the political fall-out of the uprising subsided. The 2006 election victory for Hamas caused a temporary loss of revenues to the PA, with Israel withholding taxes and major international donors imposing sanctions and boycotts. During 2007–09, the donors re-engaged aid transfers using new budget support mechanisms that aligned donor priorities with that of the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan.

According to World Bank data, in constant 2011 dollars, Israel’s per capita GDP rose from 20,673 in 1993 to 33,100 in 2017, a 60 percent increase. Jordan’s rose from USD 7,083 to 11,380 in the same period, a 61 percent increase.

The signing of the Declaration of Principles was accompanied by high hopes for improvement and reconstruction of the Palestinian economy. Some segments of the economy have experienced improvement, but in general, the WBGS has been a casualty of the peace process. Economic activity has stagnated, with a substantial decline of per capita incomes. Private investment has not materialized, trade has been interrupted, and Palestinian employment in Israel has been sharply cut. These conditions have been responsible for the prevalence of very high poverty and unemployment rates. Undoubtedly, these poor economic conditions would have been worse if it were not for the donor aid that cushioned their impact.