



Position Paper Issued by the Association of Palestinian Local Authorities (APLA)

Regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic

General Context

Palestine, like other countries, is at risk of an outbreak of the new (COVID-19), which has forced the world's governments to take unprecedented measures, namely, the near-total closure of economic facilities, public institutions, places of worship, educational institutions such as kindergartens, schools and universities, and the disruption of movement and travel between countries due to the near-total or complete closure of airports and border crossings. States have instructed their citizens to remain in their homes and not to move or roam around unless necessary. Various countries of the world have recorded rapid rising rates in the number of cases and deaths relevant to the virus. Moreover, the policies that some countries have taken to deal with this emerging virus, have caused the epidemic to spread exponentially which in effect have exhausted the health system to the point of collapse.

The Palestinian Context

Until the date of writing this paper (May 16th), official statistics indicated that 555 are confirmed to have contacted COVID-19 in the State of Palestine marking four deaths, while 452 cases have been recovered. The majority of the first cases were infected by contacting foreign infected tourists, then infection started spreading through contacting infected workers working in the 1948 lands, or through contacting infected students and returnees coming back home from abroad.

Palestine has assumed a leading role among the countries of the world to address the epidemic by taking preventive measures and procedures aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. Immediately after the detection of the first infected cases in Palestine, President Mahmoud Abbas issued a presidential decree on March 5, 2020 declaring a state of emergency in all Palestinian territories, for the purpose of countering the spread of the emerging COVID-19



pandemic in Palestine. This was followed by unprecedented measures taken by the Palestinian Government i.e. closing the crossings; imposing mandatory quarantine; closing government and private institutions; such as schools, universities and nurseries. The government also banned any movement between the governorates the on the one hand, and that inhabitants of villages and camps access city centers. They instructed places of worship to close, and prohibited any form of gatherings and demonstrations.

Impact of the Pandemic on the Economy in Palestine

The Palestinian Monetary Authority (PMA) has issued a position paper entitled "The Expected Economic Effects of the COVID-19 Crisis on the Palestinian Economy", in which it predicted that the epidemic would have economic and social implications, and will affect the various aspects of a Palestinian citizen's life. Some sectors and activities are also expected to have direct impacts by this pandemic, probably some more than others- such as tourism- due to the closure of crossings, the cessation of mobility and the suspension of all tourists delegations to Palestine. The same applies to the education sector whereby all the educational institutions have been closed. Likewise, the government's financing situation was directly impacted; its commitments to counter the virus have intensified, which consequently led to a decline in the volume of its revenues.

Economic forecasts implied that the economic growth will decline at a rate of 3.7 to 6% if the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the Palestinian economy extends until August, which is the most likely scenario. Thus, it is expected that the revenues inflowing to the state's treasury will decline, while expenditures of the government's consumption will escalate. The forecasts also indicated that most economic activities will relapse as a result of the extension of the imposed preventive measures to counter and prevent the spread of the virus, which in return, will have a negative lag on the local economic development, and will raise unemployment and poverty rates significantly.



The Prime Minister announced that the COVID-19 crisis had triggered economic, social, psychological and security repercussions; and had caused enormous losses in many sectors such as tourism, small workshops and others. However, the biggest setback was the blow to the National Authority's treasury, as domestic and clearance revenues declined due to the drop in the aggregate demand, subsequently impacting sales and production sectors, and the consequent decrease in the government's revenues.

Roles of Palestinian Local Authorities

Local authorities form the backbone of the Public Administration Sector and basic services in Palestine. They play an indispensable and essential role in the establishment of the Palestinian state, promote and interpret the Palestinian national project on the ground. Local authorities are often regarded as the first focal point which connects local communities with the government, and by law they are delegated to deliver 27 basic services, including the provision and management of water, sanitation, solid waste, electricity, street and city planning and regulating the public markets. Furthermore, law has granted local authorities the power to take all necessary precautions and measures that should support the public health state and prevent the spread of epidemics among people, in addition to taking precautions to handle natural disasters and relief for the afflicted, provided all is done in cooperation and coordination with all relevant governmental and civil entities.

As typically the case is with local authorities; i.e. Municipalities, Village Councils and Joint Service Councils in fulfilling their duties towards the citizens, they immediately responded to the President's decision and the directives of the Prime Minister. APLA contacted the different local authorities to check their readiness in handling the emergency state we are undergoing, and has conducted a quick survey to assess the needs of these authorities in order to enable them to respond effectively to the current situation and better plan for the post-emergency phase.

State of Palestine

Association of Palestinian
Local Authorities



الاتحاد الفلسطيني للهيئات المحلية
Association of Palestinian Local Authorities

دولة فلسطين

الاتحاد الفلسطيني
للهيئات المحلية

Despite that local authorities were surprisingly ousted at the beginning of the crisis from taking part in the emergency committees in Palestinian cities and towns, nevertheless, they were able to step in and handle this emerging situation with utmost responsibility and national commitment to their citizens; they never ceased to offer all their capacities, potentials and equipment to support the relevant ministries, governors, medical teams and emergency committees, despite the shortage in resources and the growing needs.

Moreover, after declaring the state of emergency in Palestine, and the subsequent reduction and disruption of most public and private institutions' functionality, local authorities were among the few institutions that remained diligent to their work, due to the vitality of the services they provide. Hence, in addition to carrying out their day-to-day work and providing public services to citizens, they have set contingency plans and programs to contain the outbreak of COVID-19, and have formed emergency committees which comprised of Councils members, their executive staff, and volunteers who poured in from nearby villages, towns and cities. Through their teams and committees, local authorities and committees supported and followed up the needs of citizens to ensure their safety, and delivered optimal services through a series of strict precautionary measures. In addition, the emergency committees, governors and competent ministries have approached local Authorities to assist them in implementing the government's procedures and instructions, i.e. to identify the workers returning from the 1948 lands, and those who were most affected and impoverished by the crisis so as to provide them with emergency aid kits, to support medical teams, to help out with mechanisms and equipment, and to carry out other interventions that would not have materialized without the support and eagerness of local authorities in serving the citizens.

Local authorities have also worked on a high level of readiness under the existing capacities in order to counter the spread of this pandemic and have managed the existing situation with all efficacy to ensure reliability in delivering the basic services to citizens like water, electricity, sanitation, public hygiene, public health and others. They have developed emergency



operational plans to guarantee that these services were delivered unremittingly, the thing that has contributed positively in the management of this crisis, thus ensuring the prevalence of civil and societal peace, which has supported the government and governors in maintaining security and controlling the health status in Palestinian communities.

APLA has monitored a number of distinguished initiatives the local authorities had implemented since the beginning of the crisis. Following are some examples :

- **Providing Support to Medical Teams:** Through pioneering initiatives, local authorities provided support to medical teams at various levels; starting with equipping quarantine centres, to forming health committees within the local authorities units in cooperation with volunteers, to setting up clinics and health centres capable to take in the new infected cases, to setting up tents, rooms and centers that will deal with the suspected infected cases and prevent them from accessing the emergency units in hospitals to guarantee the safety of the medical staff and patients.
- **Sanitizing Public Areas and Institutions:** Since the announcement of the first infected cases in Palestine, local authorities across the country started to sanitize the streets and public facilities; this came as the first precautionary measure to mitigate the spread of the epidemic that has captured the world. The frequency of sterilization and disinfection amplified after the rise in the number of infected cases in the different governorates. Consequently, this process covered a wide spectrum of facilities; public and health places, and even areas that are close to Israeli checkpoints, the apartheid wall and areas that have house quarantines.
- **Intensifying the Efforts to Collect Waste and Preserve the Public Hygiene:** Due to the increase in the amount of household waste in light of the declared state of emergency and the lockdown at homes, local authorities have intensified their efforts to maintain the cleanliness of the cities, villages and towns, and have stepped up their procedures to keep streets and public facilities clean. This was achieved through



collecting and transporting solid waste from all neighbourhoods, streets and markets and removing hygienic remains that have piled up. In addition, they safely transported- according to approved health standards- the solid waste and medical from quarantine centers.

- **Social Responsibility:** As leading national institutions in the service of citizens, the role of local authorities in such circumstances was not limited to delivering services, but rather they played a leading role in providing assistance and support to citizens at various levels, and social responsibility was indeed on their agenda under this emergency situation. They have formed specialized committees to recruit humanitarian and relief aid to be provided to those affected and needy in order to help them overcome this crisis. Local authorities in Palestine have also launched several communal initiatives that targeted students, whereby they provided support to various educational groups, as well as initiatives that aimed at supporting the elderly and persons with special needs.
- **Emergency and Volunteer Teams:** Local authorities have formed voluntary support committees which comprised of individuals, institutions, and community and national forces to provide all means of societal support to citizens and to those who exerted efforts nationwide. The Emergency Committees of local authorities have been working tirelessly to conserve the environment and public health, provide social services to citizens; educate them and raise their awareness, assist families affected by the quarantine, provide assistance to the elderly and persons with special needs, and contribute to market monitoring and follow-up.
- **Awareness Counselling and Support for Citizens:** From the first moments of the emergence of COVID-19, even before the first infected case was recorded in Palestine, local authorities launched awareness and educational programs and activities which aimed at raising the level of awareness and knowledge among citizens about the risks of this virus, the means of protection from it, the methods of prevention and the determinants of house quarantine and others.



- **Resilience and Challenge in the So- called Area "C":** In areas beyond the Palestinian jurisdiction, where the Palestinian government is unable to practice its powers or deliver services to its citizens because of the control of the Israeli occupying forces, local authorities hold the heaviest burden upon their shoulders; they have to handle the most complex responsibilities and strive to manage the exceptional needs of this area, area C. Hence, local authorities assume the responsibility to control movement as much as possible, control the bordering areas, assist in managing the files of workers working in Israel, and provide health and preventive services. However, despite the Israeli restrictions and lack of resources, local authorities are exerting unwavering efforts to ensure the continued flow of basic services to support the steadfastness of citizens in such areas. Furthermore, local authorities carry out additional responsibilities in terms of coordinating with the various competent entities in this area.
- **Alleviating the Burdens of Citizens:** As part of the local authorities' adopted public policy that aims at facilitating the lives of citizens undergoing dire living conditions, a number of these authorities have suspended the due dates that citizens had to meet for paying their tax obligations and financial payment requests. They have also issued some decisions and procedures that were specifically designed to assist citizens to access effortlessly all basic services, like water, electricity and others.

Promoting the Role of Local Authorities

Despite the leading role of local authorities in responding to this crisis and in dealing with its consequences with the utmost national and professional responsibility, yet, this crisis has negatively impacted their ability to carry out their full responsibilities; i.e. delivering all basic services to citizens, the thing that called for a serious stand and intervention from all parties, notably the government, local and international partners. This crisis has led to a severe shortfall of at least half the revenues of many local authorities and, in some cases, their revenues have been completely cut off, while their expenses and liabilities have escalated due to the emerging needs relevant to COVID-19,

State of Palestine

Association of Palestinian
Local Authorities



الاتحاد الفلسطيني للهيئات المحلية
Association of Palestinian Local Authorities

دولة فلسطين

الاتحاد الفلسطيني
للهيئات المحلية

which in turn affected the ability of local authorities to pay the salaries of their employees, remunerate the suppliers and contractors, and conclude the projects that have already started. Not to mention that many local authorities were suffering from a deficit in their budgets and a shortage of resources prior to the start of the crisis.

While the Government has worked on finding some solutions for the various sectors; i.e. deferring loans installments or cheque payments to individuals and institutions, providing easy-terms cash loans to the private sector, committing to public sector employees, and exerting efforts to help the affected workers, local authorities were sinking into the dungeons of a critical situation due to the dramatic decline or even the complete cessation in their revenues. In this regard, it is noteworthy to mention that the local authorities' resources are limited and controlled, and the specificity of their status; as they are neither regarded official governmental institutions nor private sector ones, makes them unable to profit from the government's proposed solutions. Consequently, they are neither entitled to borrow from banks, nor should they fail to pay the salaries of their workers. Add to this that some of them were forced to use the levied fees of electricity or water to cover some of their expenses, which in return will reflect seriously on the stability of their financial statuses due to the accumulating amounts of debts they pile up on their shoulders to serve the government's interest.

Therefore, it is an urgent obligation under all circumstances, to empower local authorities in order for them to fulfil their duties, especially in this exceptional situation we are going through. In the next phase, post COVID-19 phase, local authorities will evidently play a vital role in the progression of economy, either through stimulating local economic development projects, or through the resumption of ongoing development projects that shall contribute to pumping the cash flow to suppliers and contractors.

Since the start of the crisis, APLA has been providing support to local authorities to regulate their work during the emergency state. It has studied the effects of this crisis on them in order to identify the types of needed interventions and procedures required to enable the local authorities address



this crisis and pull out of it with the least damages possible. In addition, APLA has set preparations for the post-emergency situation and the return to normalcy in our cities, towns and villages; it has monitored a number of key interventions urgently required, as well as priorities to be undertaken in the next phase.

Accordingly, We Present the Following Required Needs and Interventions:

On the Short Term/ Urgent

- 1. Speeding up the transfer of local authorities' tax entitlements:** revenues from municipal property tax, fees levied on trades and industries licences and road transport taxes, form the most significant financial resources for local authorities.
- 2. Providing emergency operational budgets:** As a result of the decline in local economic activities and available revenues that come from the levied taxes and fees, on the one hand, and the enormous expenditures spent to cover the requirements of the current crisis like purchasing emergency supplies on the other hand, most local authorities found themselves facing deficits in their operational budgets that are vital to ensure their capability to deliver the basic services and maintain the management of their daily operations. Hence, it is of utmost importance in this regard, that the Government allocates an appropriate proportion of the aids offered by international partners, to support the local authorities and their operational and emergency budgets.
- 3. Some calls are rising to exempt individuals and institutions from certain duties:** calls are rising to exempt property owners from paying the property tax, or industry owners and craftsmen from paying the 2020 levies. These taxes and duties are the main source of revenues to a large number of local authorities, and any cutback in the value of these funds will lead to an inevitable collapse of many of these local authorities.



On the Long Term/ Aftermath of the Crisis

Perhaps one of the most important learnt lessons from the COVID-19 crisis is the importance of local level preparedness of Municipalities, Village Councils and joint service Councils in dealing with disasters and emergencies. These form the direct defense line and the first trench that enables governments and states to protect their citizens and secure their humanitarian and living needs. Moreover, the local level is the backbone of the national economy and the core of the development clusters. This is achieved through strengthening the concepts and practices of local economic development, and developing regulations and laws that contribute to the transition into a conscious and rational decentralized management system.

Local authorities are expected to play a key role in boosting the economy wheel so that it spins again. Local economic development projects that are adopted by local authorities are an important element in forwarding the economy, and the resumption of projects they had halted due to emergency conditions (like infrastructure projects, etc.), will certainly contribute to re-pumping the cash flow, increase employment opportunities for suppliers and contractors, and open new job opportunities for the unemployed.

Hence, based on the priorities and needs necessary to forward the reform process, as per the national priorities outlined in the National Policy Agenda (2017-2022), the Local Government Sector Strategy (2017-2022) and APLA's strategic plan (2019-2022), it is expected that the focus of the local government sector will be on the following trends once life gradually goes back to its normal cycle after the end of the COVID-19 crisis:

1. Provide support to Local Government Units, especially in the field of disaster management and response: The current crisis has revealed the importance of capacity building of local authorities; thus, providing them with knowledge, potentials and tools to enable them to deal with contingencies and human and natural disasters that local communities may experience. In this regard, the importance of enriching and promoting the national preparedness to deal with the different types of disasters; natural, epidemics,



wars or others, has evidently been underlined. Consequently, developing a comprehensive national framework to contain such conditions in the event of their occurrence is considered urgent. It is also necessary to work on institutionalizing the process of effective management for emergencies and disasters, and to develop a local strategy to address disasters which should be in line with the National Strategy.

2. Strengthen the Capacities of Local Government Units to deliver better services to citizens: work is needed to develop the regulatory framework (bylaws and procedures) and to create programs that should strengthen the capacities of Local Government Units in collecting and managing taxes, generating revenues, mobilizing resources, launching local economic development projects, adding a local print to achieving the sustainable development goals and others in order to deliver services with greater efficiency and effectiveness to citizens.

3. Accelerate the development and activation of the transferal mechanism between the government and the local authorities: which should contribute to the regularity in the flow of money transferred by the central government to local authorities.

4. Allocate part of the public budget to local authorities in Palestine: Local authorities in Palestine, similar to their counterparts in the different countries of the world, perform tasks and duties on behalf of the central government. Thus, it is necessary to consider allocating a fund of the state's budget to go directly to the local authorities treasuries, while a clear mechanism is being developed to calculate the right appropriations for each local authority, the transferal mechanisms, and fields of expenditure.

5. Strive to find creative solutions to solve the solid waste problems: it is no secret that solid waste problems are of the most substantial problems facing the local authorities in Palestine. The problem of classified waste, especially medical waste, requires innovative solutions to be tackled. The challenges associated with solid waste problems, namely the landfills and the occupation's impeding procedures that hinder the implementation of any



considered solutions proposed earlier, makes it imperative to intensify all efforts to come up with acceptable solutions.

6. Continue to amend the laws and legislations system that regulate the local government sector: this point refers specifically to the Palestinian Local Authorities Law No. 1 of 97. The burdens, responsibilities and tasks Palestinian local authorities perform are enormous, which in turn necessitates to continue and intensify the work on amending and updating the legal and legislative frameworks that govern these authorities' work, thus enable them to exercise their duties in full.

7. Address problems associated to the debt accumulation of local authorities "net lending": This is a serious problem that is ravaging the financial relations between the government and local authorities in Palestine. This dilemma arose as some local authority units whose services included the distribution of electricity and water supplies, had to spend the fees collected for these services, to finance part of their operational and development budgets rather than to pay these billing dues to the electricity and water suppliers. On the other hand, Ministry of Finance is trying to recover these funds from the local government authorities, through the acquisition of local revenues that are levied from the municipal property tax, fees collected from the crafts and industries licenses, and the transport tax that should be transferred to the local authorities. An agreed solution between the government and local authorities to resolve this dilemma is inevitable in order to properly re-establish the relationship between local authorities and the central government.

8. To direct funding towards local economic development projects and partnership projects between the private sector and the local authorities: this could be attained by working with partners and donors, which in the future will generate cash flow and contribute to addressing the economic and social impacts; i.e. creating job opportunities and improving the local investment environment. In previous years, local authorities have developed plans and programs for local economic development projects, while an extensive study had been conducted on the legal and policy requirements needed to advance

State of Palestine

Association of Palestinian
Local Authorities



الاتحاد الفلسطيني للهيئات المحلية
Association of Palestinian Local Authorities

دولة فلسطين

الاتحاد الفلسطيني
للهيئات المحلية

partnership between local authorities and the private sector. With these requests met, it is urgent to draw attention in the next phase, towards the implementation of these plans and projects on the ground.

9. Develop the dependence on technological means: in the provision of services and communication between citizens and local authorities, the **dissemination and support of the municipality's electronic initiatives**, and the automation of services and transactions, to be in line with the government's efforts to switch into becoming an e-government.

10. Launch community outreach programs and awareness campaigns targeting key and priority issues related to the work of local authorities: this refers to carrying out community outreach programs to raise awareness about specific issues of concern to both, the local authorities and citizens, and to focus on new policies and legislations that address citizens' rights, duties and interests.