WEHUBIT

Pays

Palestine

Implemented by

MERCY CORPS

Budget

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Duration

07/2021 - 03/2023

SDGs

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

Implemented by

Enabel

Financed by

Belgium partner in development

Learning from the
PAL Tech Growth Project: Breaking Through Barriers - Digital Community and Connectivity in Palestine

Can digital social innovation contribute to closing the digital divide for vulnerable groups (youth, women, unemployed, refugees and migrants) by improving digital literacy and skills through D4D initiatives in education, training and the world of work?

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Reason

Palestine has a well-educated youth population with around 42,500 people graduating every year and a 97.5% literacy rate among the adult population. Yet the potential of young people is stunted by **high unemployment rates** (73.9%)*****, lack of local job opportunities and a difficult security situation that **severely restricts movement**.

The harsh socioeconomic and political realities disproportionately affect women. Women make up only 21% of the active population and they earn, on average, **almost four times less than men**.

The digital economy – i.e. remote jobs and services that can be marketed online (for example, coding, translation, data analysis) – offers a lot of opportunities to young Palestinians. As the global tech sector continues to face a **skills shortage**, there is **high demand for tech talent and services**.

Even with limited electricity (eight hours per day in Gaza), **poor internet connectivity** and **tech infrastructure** are able to provide sufficient access to the global market. With the growing awareness of employment opportunities in on employment in tech and services, driven in part by Mercy Corps and similar projects, an increasing number of tech hubs and coworking spaces has created the enabling environment necessary to further support this by

* Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) - 2022
https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4312#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20United%20Nations,years%20and%20above)%20during%202021
https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=4421

providing safe, inclusive and reliable community and working spaces.

Offering adequate training to more young people can therefore be an important pathway to **sustainable** and **inclusive economic growth** in Palestine.

Digital social innovation

The PAL Tech Growth project aimed to increase the long-term income-generating capacity of young Palestinians (18-35 years of age) by developing **coding**, **digital marketing** and **business skills**. The project's objective was also to strengthen a self-supporting network of freelance and salaried tech sector employees.

This initiative built on Mercy Corps' established Gaza Sky Geeks tech education and community building experience.

PAL Tech Growth's learning path was divided into three phases:

1. Community outreach: events and bootcamps were organised to promote digital economy opportunities and to advertise planned training courses among young people. Community outreaches was done through in person, remotely and through mixed modalities.

2. Tech Education: training was organised to give learners the means to find jobs on the national and international market (English and 21st-century skills such as collaboration, creativity and problem solving).

PAL Tech Growth organised two kinds of training or "academy" courses to enable learners to acquire these skills:

- **Freelance academy:** a 10-week programme for groups of 50 to 100 learners (5 supported by Wehubit) to become successful online freelancers. Young people would acquire skills such as business, professional English, digital marketing, etc.

- **Code academy:** a 6-month, full-time programme, for groups of 16 learners (1 supported by Wehubit) to acquire specific cutting-edge ICT skills and professional skills, selected after a market analysis of the most in demand, emerging skills and presenting the greatest opportunities in Palestine to exploit. Each cohort of learners received 320 hours of lessons/ instruction for the core learning phase, 200 hours for advanced technical learning, and then

400 hours for the experience phase, working in teams on internal and remote projects. Each trainee received 90 hours of support and mentorship.

3. Market linkages and employment: Gaza Sky Geeks (GSG) would facilitate internships placement within local or international tech companies by partnering with said companies and matching them to graduates of training programmes. GSG develops and facilitates these placements throughout the selection and recruitment process, as well as during the internship itself: mentorship, facilitating contractual arrangements and financial payments, as well as providing access to commercial coworking space for individuals to work from.

474 people (including **63**% **women**) graduated from 4 cohorts of the Freelance Academy under the Wehubit programme for the year 21-22 and 22-23

66% of its freelancing and **50**% of its code academy graduates continue to earn sustainable incomes six to twelve months after programme graduation.

37 people (including **14** were females) graduated from 1 cohort of the Coding Academy under the Wehubit programme in May 2022.

> **"**
> Your mind is a gift. Use it, and things will work out for you. Employers abroad have access to a large pool of candidates within their own countries, but my work and efforts have convinced them to hire me to work for them instead
> **"**

Alaa Abu Taima, 26-year-old React JavaScript developer based in Gaza

> **"**
> Working a regular 9-5 job, doing the same thing every single day - without appreciation or a decent salary - was never motivating to me. "In the Freelancing Academy, I have learned to deal with clients, build a portfolio and bid for job offers"
> **"**

Aya Al Kafarna, a 24-year old Palestinian freelancer from Gaza

> **"**
> Winning first place at the UX challenge where I competed with other leaders in this field was a major milestone for me. It made me more aware of my abilities and what I can create.
> **"**

Ameera Hamada 22-years old, one of Gaza Sky Geeks' most active and passionate community members

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KEY MESSAGES

▶ Palestinian youth (18-35) acquired **digital**, **technical** and **life skills** to access economic opportunities on the **global market**. An important added value of the learning paths was the increased confidence of learners in their capacity and in the opportunities offered by the **digital economy**. Over 79% of participants improved their livelihoods thanks to training: either in ICT or in remote services.

▶ The project contributed to a **shift in mentality**. Through outreach (before), advocacy and sharing of success stories (after), by the project and participants themselves, the stakeholders increased their **understanding** and **appreciation** of the **digital economy**, freelancing and non-traditional sectors as 'real' and viable employment opportunities that provide meaningful and sustainable incomes.

▶ The project and the shift in mentality reinforced the **local tech ecosystem**, from individuals to institutions, that increasingly adopted a **collaborative approach** and **mindset**. There is, for example, a growing number of multi-partner projects, events and activities. Learners who were part of the same group initiated the creation of **safe, open, collaborative** and **supportive** coworking spaces where knowledge and resources are shared.

▶ Local authorities, through advocacy and specific advisory efforts of the project, introduced **policy changes** and **practices** such as definitions of digital jobs under labour laws and access to specific financial tools and resources. For example, FA graduates have now access to bank accounts with the Bank of Palestine, which would not normally be available or hard to access.

▶ Acquiring **soft** and **hard skills** and being part of an increasingly dynamic community empowered young people economically, but also strengthened social inclusion, political awareness and dialogue. Through shared virtual and real-life spaces dedicated to tech, young people were exposed to a cross-cultural and international environment.

LESSONS LEARNED

Inclusion and equity

▶ In the framework of the outreach and communication of the calls for applications, **strong advocacy** has been developed regarding the participation of women. Gaza Sky Geeks (GSG) has used success stories and role models to highlight the opportunities for Palestinian women to work in tech.

▶ While women's participation and training outcomes were high, women face additional barriers (lack of confidence in bidding and negotiation, dealing with clients, putting forward proposals, selling one's profile, launching activities). GSG has several strategies to overcome this: **providing supplementary and targeted training** (specific "she-rises" bootcamp for example), access to international (women) coaches and mentors, as well as connecting with successful local women freelancers who share their experiences and ways to overcome challenges (such as family obligations, cultural stigma).

Users and stakeholders responsiveness

▶ Gaza Sky Geeks (GSG) actively partnered with **local** and **international tech**, finance and corporate partners such as PalTel, Bank of Palestine, Google For Startups, UpWork, Payoneer, AWS, etc. It gave learners access to tools, resources and connections, such as privileged access to accounts (UpWork, Payoneer, BoP), free 'credits' (AWS, UpWork), and mentorship (GFS).

▶ PAL Tech Growth organised **open days** for families and **community members**, to share success stories of former trainees being active on the job market. Open days appeared to be **powerful communication** tools within communities, who work as a web. They strongly encouraged a mindset shift regarding the value of digital jobs.

▶ GSG's approach aligns with the **Palestinian Authority's national strategy***, which includes fostering job creation in the private sector. The Ministry of Economy, Labour, Education/Higher

***** National Policy Agenda 2017-2022: Putting Citizens First

Education, Women's Affairs, Telecommunications and IT are engaged with and support Mercy Corps' tech-enabled employment programming. This is completed during a sharing of the challenges faced and ways to overcome barriers seen in the tech-ecosystem during biannual stakeholder meetings with the Ministries, where GSG and its partners review progress of the project, development of the ecosystem and provide feedback to each other.

Use of digital tools beyond project's end

There is a need for the project not only to focus on trainings and skills but also to give learners the key to **develop their pathways to employment**. As it is not easy for young people with limited experience and sometimes no formal academic background to find a job due to reluctancy on employer's side, GSG has considered internships as a stepping stone in young talents' careers, to increase hard and soft skills, expand networks and boost credibility. For all GSG programmes, around 40% of young graduates stay in the same company after the internships.

Such a project needs to closely follow the market evolution and the **trends in the ICT** and **Tech sector to adapt the curriculum**. Training must take high-value niches and in-demand skills into account to effectively link with employment.

The project is relying on a strong network of local and international tech companies: as part of the Google for Startups network, GSG shares best practices with and learns from other tech ecosystems. GSG's international partnerships include Optimum Partners, a global IT services provider that sources interns from GSG, and Upwork, the largest global freelancing platform that supports GSG's Freelance Academy graduates as part of their Social Impact Programme. Local tech companies also play a **critical role in hiring graduates**, including GGateway, Asal Technologies, Progineer, Exalt, and iConnect Technologies by providing graduates with their initial placement opportunities.

PERSPECTIVES

- Although the project triggered a **shift in mentality, awareness on digital work opportunities, especially for women,** will have to be continued. These basic awareness outreaches (usually 2-4hrs) will be coupled or replaced by short training sessions (1-2 days) on basic digital skills. This approach provides added incentive for people to embrace digital economy as an opportunity, but also means that individuals benefit with a real learning experience from their attendance.

- Competition within the digital economy, particularly in a post-COVID environment, is ever increasing as more and more countries and individuals invest in tech-education to seek out remote work for both economic opportunities and/or lifestyle reasons. To differentiate themselves, Gaza Sky Geeks (GSG) will even more focus on **increasing technical skills**, progressing towards in-demand specialisations and niche areas rather than general coding and development so as to enable young Palestinians to compete on quality rather than price alone.

- A supportive and enabling local ecosystem remains critical to successfully partake in the global digital economy. GSG will continue **build meaningful relationships** with stakeholders across institutional levels and types. This is necessary for, but not limited to, available infrastructure, tax policies, laws and regulations as well as financial systems which create a conducive environment for remote workers and companies to compete on an international scale.