



Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS)

Social Capital and Public Health in Palestinian Territory

Aqel Abu-Qare

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- ♦ Promoting knowledge-based policy formulation by conducting economic and social policy research in accordance with the expressed priorities and needs of decision-makers.
- ♦ Evaluating economic and social policies and their impact at different levels for correction and review of existing policies.
- ♦ Providing a forum for free, open and democratic public debate among all stakeholders on the socio-economic policy-making process.
- ♦ Disseminating up-to-date socio-economic information and research results.
- ♦ Providing technical support and expert advice to PNA bodies, the private sector, and NGOs to enhance their engagement and participation in policy formulation.
- ♦ Strengthening economic and social policy research capabilities and resources in Palestine.

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Foreword

This study comprises part of a research program on the impact of social capital on different aspects of life in the Palestinian Occupied Territory. Specifically, the study explores the function of social capital in relation to public health in the Palestinian community. MAS chose to examine this topic due to the important role that trust, networking, and participation have in the efficient implementation and success of public health programs in Palestinian communities.

Data was collected for this project by conducting focused interviews with experts and specialists, including government and non-government officials, private sector leaders, and staff members involved in relevant health programs and community work. The study includes a summary of the impact of social capital on the most important health programs to date, as well as those still under development.

The study also demonstrates the vital impact of social capital on the health of Palestinian communities. Among the key elements shown to make health programs a success are community engagement and cooperation, community leader and activist participation in identifying priorities, and health program follow-up and continuity.

Included in the study are a number of practical recommendations to enhance the impact of social capital on community-based public health programs. The study calls for incorporating the concept of social capital in the formulation of all governmental health policies. Moreover, it highlights the vehicles of social capital that are involved in all stages of planning, implementation and monitoring of health programs. Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of investing in and strengthening community groups so as to maintain their strategic importance to service-oriented health programs.

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development for financing this study and for their continued institutional support to MAS. We also thank all the

individuals and public officials, including discussants and commentators, who met with the researcher and who contributed to the enrichment of the study. Finally, we are grateful for the researcher, for his dedicated effort in conducting this study.

Dr. Samir Abdullah
Director General

Executive Summary

The study has been carried out during an important era, when the Palestinians are laying the grounds and building the institutions for a potential Palestinian state. Such study would be able to provide data and recommendations on issues stem from and concern the Palestinian society. Therefore, results of such study may be incorporated in economic, social, educational or health strategies and policies.

Objective of this preliminary study was to explore a possible relationship between social capital and public health in the Palestinian territories. In particular, the study assessed effects of social capital, represented by networks among individuals and between individuals and institutions or among institution, such networks which based on trust and civic participation, and the tendency to volunteer and help, on public health programs carried out or they are in progress, and what potential role social capital may plays in its success.

As public health philosophy focuses on health of society rather than health of individuals, particularly on the collective preventive measures, in areas such as chronic diseases, access to health facility, environmental health, therefore, it was worth studying the impact of social capital on the success of public health programs in the Palestinian territories.

Population of the study was selected to represent social health body working in the Palestinian Territories. This included the public sector (ministries of health and education), UNRWA, Non-government organizations (NGOs), media, universities and the municipalities. Other criteria used to select sample of the study, such as experience, type of health-social programs and extension of their work to cover most of the Palestinian Territories. Focus of the interviews was on specific health programs and what role the social capital may play in its success.

The overall preliminary conclusion of the study is that social capital has a major impact on people health, and one of the major reason of success of some NGOs working in the social-health sector in the Palestinian territories, is the effective use of social capital.

The study showed that family ties in the Palestinian society form a major part of social capital that could be positively used in public health

programs. In addition, political affiliation such as popular committees in refugee camps and even religious forums could be used in the implementation of health programs. However, the study noted that the family networks in the Palestinian territories are in decline, due to a decrease in the family size and to the ongoing immigration from the north to the middle and from rural to urban areas in the Palestinian Territories.

The study concluded that social networks should be used from the initial stages of the project, especially in the needs assessment phase, and such conclusion needs to be incorporated in a systematic manner in the government health policy.

In addition, the study recommends to invest in the social capital through strengthen social networks and to promote its work, particularly in prevention against chronic diseases, and to encourage the role of media as part of social capital.

Another recommendation is to form a coordinated forum consists of all parties working in the health sector in the Palestinian territories. Such body may examine factors relate to the successful use of social capital in public health and to learn from experience of NGOs working in the field.

Finally, the study called for conducting more specific studies, on the effect of social capital on specific health areas and health behaviors. Example are effect of social capital on improving water quality and water use, its effect on occupational health of workers, particularly working women, its effect on the health aspects of agricultural practices and on the culture of disposal of solid wastes including medical wastes.