



EMPOWERING THE SCHOOL FOR MENTAL HEALTH PROTECTION OF CHILDREN IN THE GAZA STRIP

THE SITUATION IN THE GAZA STRIP

The Gaza Strip is a region in which all children are experiencing life-lasting adversities related to armed conflicts, poverty, imprisonment in a closed region and, recently, the epidemic of coronavirus. It is one of the most densely populated places in the world with approximately 1.9 million people residing in an area of 365 square kilometres. It is estimated that children represent almost half of the region's total population.

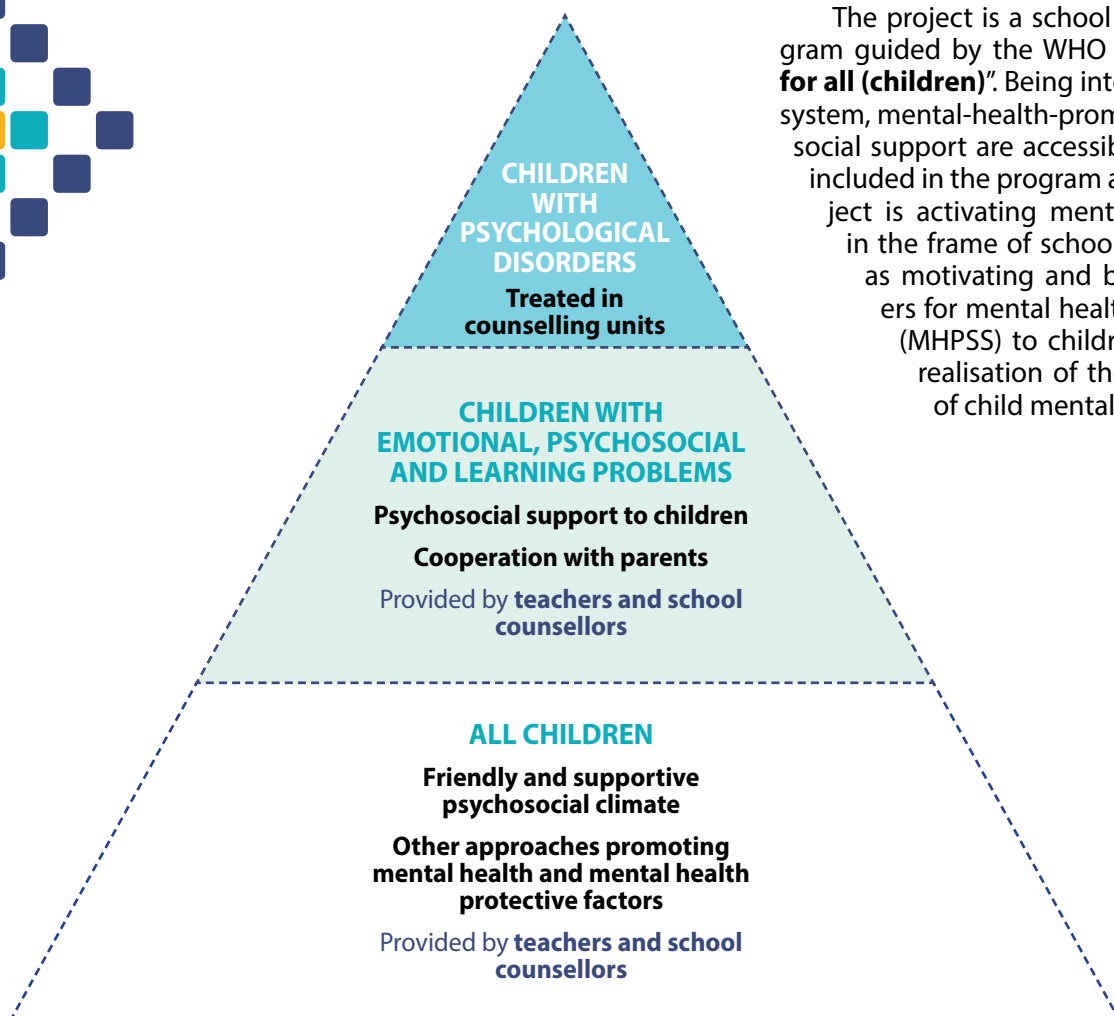
Since 1948, generations of Palestinians in Gaza have been subjected to repeated conflicts, displacement, and violence. This has left thousands of children traumatized due to the scenes of violence, bombings and bloodshed they have had to witness. Many have experienced the loss of a family member or friend, leaving a tremendous impact on their mental health and emotional well-being.

The overall performance of the Palestinian economy remains poor, with persistently high unemployment and poverty rates, which are the highest in the Gaza Strip. The situation has been made even worse by the coronavirus pandemic, which has strongly affected the region and had a major impact on the psychosocial well-being of many families and children.

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To address these issues, the Slovenian humanitarian organisation ITF Enhancing Human Security and its local partner, the NGO Mental Health Promotion & Capacity Building Center (MHPC), have implemented the project "Empowering the School for Mental Health Protection in Gaza." The work started in August 2015 and concluded in December 2020.

The project is a school and community-based program guided by the WHO principles "**(mental) health for all (children)**". Being integrated into the educational system, mental-health-promoting activities and psychosocial support are accessible to all children of schools included in the program and to their parents. The project is activating mental health protective factors in the frame of schools and kindergartens as well as motivating and building capacities of teachers for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to children. It is a good practice for realisation of the multilayer pyramid model of child mental health protection.



**MULTI-LAYERED
SCHEME OF
MHPSS IN THE
FRAME OF
SCHOOLS AND
KINDERGARTENS**

PROJECT GOALS

The goal of the project was to prevent mental health problems in school children, to increase their resiliency, improve their psychosocial well-being and provide accessible assistance to children with difficulties and to their parents. These goals were achieved through the:

- **Education and empowerment of school workers** for implementation of MHPSS for all children and particularly for children with emotional and psychosocial problems;
- **Creation of school-based counselling units** that can provide accessible treatment for children with serious mental health problems and counselling to their parents;
- **Establishment of regular cooperation between schools and mental health professionals;**
- **Help teachers cope with their own losses, traumas and job-related burdens and stress;**
- **Development of a model of school-based mental health protection.**

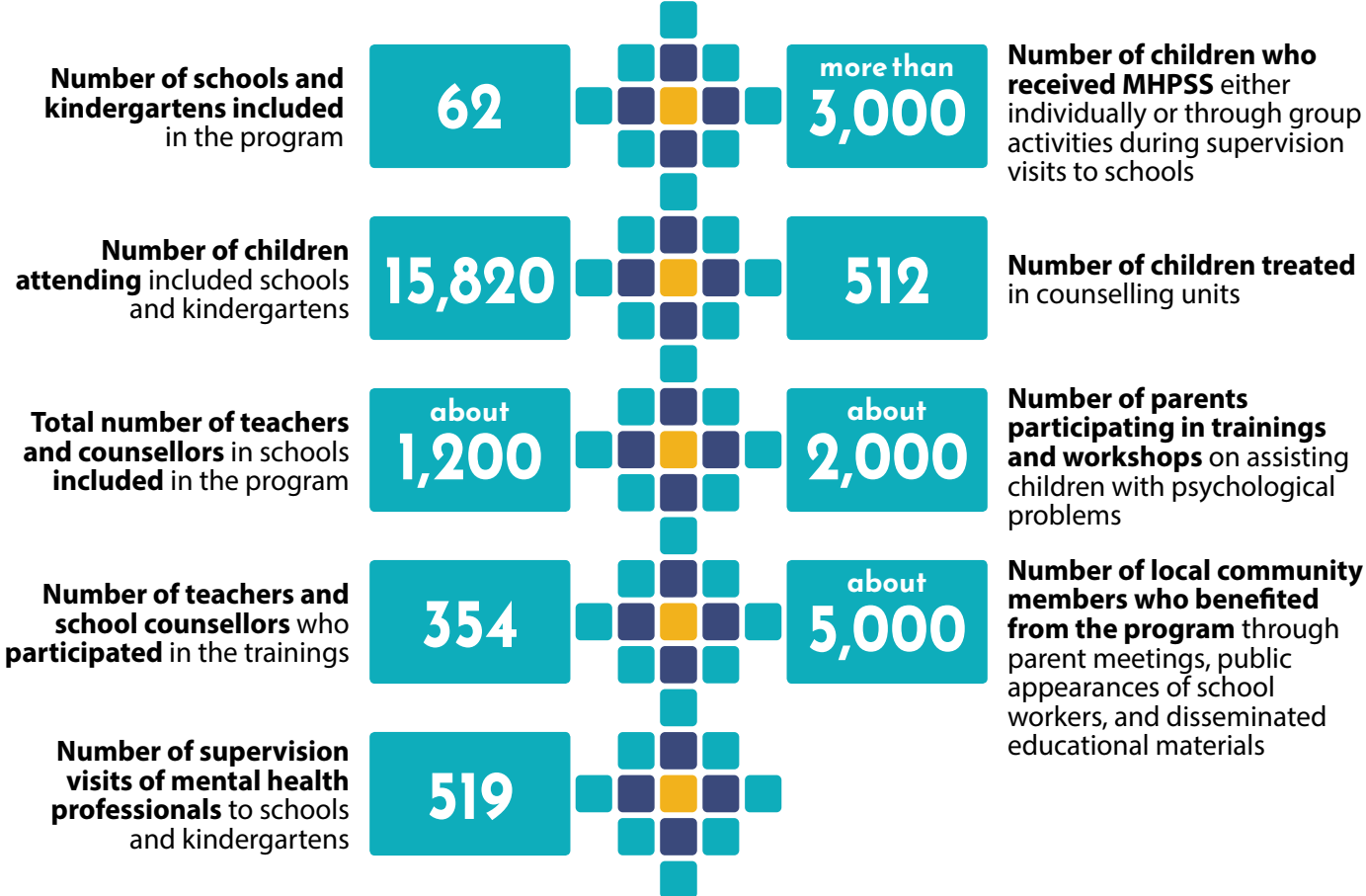
MAIN ACTIVITIES

- **Trainings for teachers, kindergarten teachers and school counsellors – promoters and disseminators** of the program within included schools
- **Brief workshops for all teachers of included schools**
- **Implementation in schools of approaches and skills stemming from ideas, exchanged experiences and knowledge generated in trainings:** application to everyday practice in the class and in the school, and the dissemination of knowledge among fellow teachers, students and parents
- **Visits of mental health professionals from Gaza to schools,** including monitoring, counselling, case discussion sessions, supervision and workshops for all teachers of included schools
- **Activities of counselling units** run by school counsellors and mental health professionals
- **Publishing leaflets and other mental health promotive and informative materials** for teachers, students, and parents
- **Visits of Slovenian experts to Gaza,** videoconferences, and other activities enabling cooperation between professionals and coordinators of the program from Gaza and Slovenia



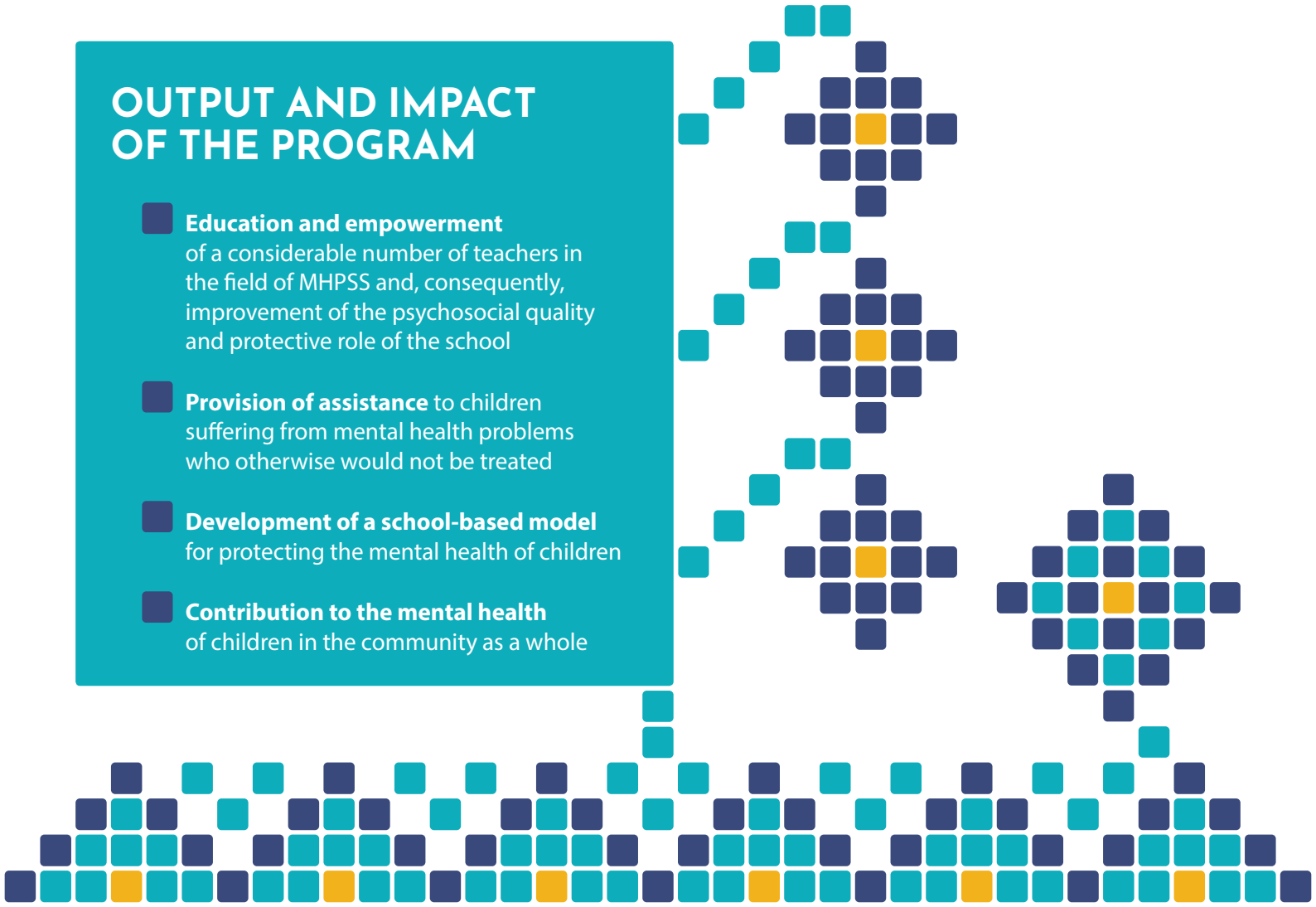
Visit of school by Slovene experts

BENEFICIARIES - SOME FIGURES



OUTPUT AND IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM

- **Education and empowerment** of a considerable number of teachers in the field of MHPSS and, consequently, improvement of the psychosocial quality and protective role of the school
- **Provision of assistance** to children suffering from mental health problems who otherwise would not be treated
- **Development of a school-based model** for protecting the mental health of children
- **Contribution to the mental health** of children in the community as a whole





Dr. Michaela Fried with children from a school included in the program

LESSONS LEARNED

School-based psychosocial programs can enhance the role of schools in protecting the mental health of children.

Cooperation and synergies among schools and local mental health professionals are an important component of the program.

These programs provide assistance to a considerable number of children with mental health problems, as well as to their parents. They are able to reach each child independently of the social situation of their family or capacities and readiness of parents to bring children to specialised mental health services, which are not easy to access in Gaza.

School-based psychosocial programs are well accepted by teachers, parents, and children. Consequently, schools are in a good position to spread awareness

and information about mental health among teachers, students and parents, and also in the community.

Psychosocial programs should be less focused on techniques and more on the emotional, humanistic and psychoeducational components of mental health protection and psychosocial support to children and parents. It should activate the energy, wisdom and skills of school workers.

Program should also address the mental health of teachers living in adverse and traumatic conditions in the Gaza Strip and their job-related psychological burdens.

School-based psychosocial programs have a sustainable and wide impact because teachers and school counsellors use new ideas and experiences in their future professional work with children.



Dr. A. Mikuš Kos running a training for school workers



Dr. A. Tawahina running group work with children



Dr. Thabet running workshop for parents



Dr. S. Owaida working with a family

PARTICIPATING EXPERTS

■ Dr. Anica Mikuš Kos

Dr. Anica Mikuš Kos is a retired Slovenian consultant child psychiatrist and an expert in the mental health protection of children in areas affected by armed conflict. She has been designing and running community and school-based psychosocial programs since 1991. Since 2007, she has worked closely with ITF, primarily in the Gaza Strip and Kosovo.

■ Dr. Ahmed Abu Tawahina (†)

Dr. Ahmed Abu Tawahina was a Palestinian clinical psychologist and human rights activist. A former director (1995–2014) of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program and founder of Mental Health Promotion and Capacity Building Center (MHPC), he published extensively on issues of peace, civil society, human rights and mental health.

■ Dr. Abdel Aziz Thabet (†)

Professor Abdel Aziz Thabet was a Palestinian child and adolescent psychiatrist. He was running the clinical setting in Gaza City and treating adult and child victims of trauma and political violence. He was an eminent researcher in the field of trauma impact on children and youth in Gaza and published many articles on this topic.

■ Dr. Sami Owaida

Dr. Sami Owaida is a Palestinian psychiatrist and the current director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program. He is a clinical worker and lecturer and he used to run psychosocial programs for traumatised children. He has been acting as a consultant for many international organisations working in this field.

PROJECT COORDINATORS

■ Ms. Amani Abu Tawahina

Ms. Amani Abu Tawahina is the current Director-General of the Mental Health Promotion and Capacity Building Center (MHPC) and a project manager, translator, and interpreter in Gaza. She has a Master's degree in Translation from English to Arabic and vice versa. She worked in the field of defending women's human rights, especially those living in the marginalized areas of the Gaza Strip.

■ Ms. Nataša Uršič

Ms. Nataša Uršič is a project manager at ITF responsible for the "Empowering the School for Mental Health Protection in the Gaza Strip" project. She has worked at ITF since 2001, as the project manager. She works in the fields of Mine Victim Assistance and UXO Clearance, managing projects in Gaza Strip and West Bank, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania.

STATEMENT BY A PARTICIPATING TEACHER FROM GAZA - MS. FATIMA AL-A'ASSI

The Valuable Work of ITF

Siege, poverty, conflict, multiple traumas, violence, and abuse have affected Palestinian children's psychosocial well-being. This is why our children need special psychosocial services. With ITF's support, we as school principals and teachers are able to provide them with the necessary assistance by integrating psychosocial counseling into the education system. The training we received, as well as the supervision and case discussion sessions, equipped us with the skills and abilities to empower and enhance our students' development.

With the support of ITF and MHPC, psychosocial care became an integral part of our daily work – in schools and our communities. Now, we are able to help heal psychological wounds and rebuild social structures damaged by traumatising events. ITF's continued support has contributed to establishing reliable community resources in Gaza, promoting the resilience of our students and their families. This helped change Palestinians into active survivors rather than passive victims.

I appeal to ITF to continue supporting psychosocial programs in our community, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians still need this kind of support.



PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

ITF Enhancing Human Security

ITF Enhancing Human Security (ITF) is a humanitarian, non-profit organisation established by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia in 1998. Since its inception, ITF has been continuously developing and strengthening its mission of enhancing safety, as well as enabling the recovery and development of conflict-affected countries by addressing the immediate and long-term impact of mine/ERW and other hazards following armed violence. The capacity building and resilience of people affected by armed conflict are important components of the work implemented by ITF.

Mental Health Promotion & Capacity Building Center (MHPC) – Gaza

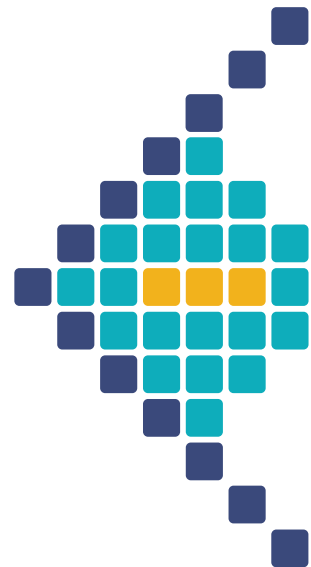
MHPC is a leading community-based institution in Gaza aimed at strengthening and empowering individuals, families, and communities to better cope with adversities, develop resilience and recover from psychological wounds through educational and preventative programs as well as treatment interventions.



Parent's meeting



A special thanks goes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (Slovenia's Development Cooperation), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea and the OPEC Fund for International Development for their longstanding financial support of the "Empowering the School for Mental Health Protection in the Gaza Strip" project. None of these activities would be possible without their generous donation.



SLOVENIAN AID



REPUBLIC OF KOREA

