

Emergency assistance for farmers affected by the Wall

by Saed Essawi and Emily Ardell

Construction of the Wall in the occupied Palestinian territories has had a harsh impact on Palestinian farmers, separating many from their land. Catholic Relief Services Palestine¹ has initiated a project to try to mitigate the impact.

The Wall follows a zig-zag path, in some places deviating up to 14km from the internationally recognised Green Line which separates Israel from the OPT. The Wall comes very close to several Palestinian towns and villages. In many cases this means farmland next to or near these towns has been 'moved' to the Israeli side of the Wall. Many Palestinian farmers are now physically separated from both their land and water sources – and risk losing their only source of income in an already struggling economy. In the northern districts of Tulkarem and Qalqilya at least 6,000 farms have been directly affected. These districts represent some 20-25% of total Palestinian agricultural production. Many irrigation networks have been destroyed by military and Wall construction vehicles.

The Wall, surrounding Qalqilya in the West Bank.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS), in partnership with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)² and the Palestinian Hydrology Group (PHG)³, has initiated a project for 'Emergency assistance to farmers affected by the separation wall'. An initial meeting with farmers provided a forum for discussion of the project's budget, the technical role of PHG and the farmers' own involvement prior to and during project implementation. Priorities were identified and farmer committees established and approved by municipal or village councils. Agreements were signed with each beneficiary to clearly outline the responsibilities of everyone involved in the project. The construction company was chosen partly on the basis of having permission from the Israeli authorities to work along the Wall.

Efforts focused on improving existing systems. The contractor and local farmers worked together to rehabilitate or replace existing machinery and install new irrigation pipes. Eight cement pools were constructed to store water in areas where the primary water source was inaccessible during certain hours of the day. Project teams repaired buildings housing the wells. Whenever possible, PHG engineers and MCC and CRS staff visited the locations despite the difficulty in passing from one side of the Wall to the other. Farmers contributed to the project in cash or in kind (or both) and took responsibility for following up on the implementation of project activities in cooperation with the PHG engineers.

Project staff encountered several challenges. It was very difficult to transfer materials and tools from the Palestinian side of the Wall to farmlands. Israeli soldiers controlling entry/exit gates often refused to allow the contractors to transfer





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materials or large tools. The teams have had to find alternate routes to reach fields, necessitating long and time-consuming journeys. Many farmers still find it impossible to take agricultural tools from their homes to their fields. We have not been able to find a way around the restrictions preventing farmers transferring their crops through the Wall to reach West Bank markets or to challenge the long-established prohibition on sale of Palestinian agricultural products in Israeli markets. Whether or not goods are allowed through gates depends on decisions made by Israeli soldiers, at their discretion and without predictability. Facilitating this process was not one of the primary objectives of this project but is vital to sustaining agricultural livelihoods. Substantial advocacy is needed to guarantee farmers the rights to transport agricultural tools, machinery and harvested goods through the Wall.

Project results and conclusions

The technical assistance succeeded in improving water volume flow and reduced operating costs. The end result is a much larger area of land irrigated with adequate amounts of

water, at a greatly reduced cost to farmers. A total of 5,901 farmers have benefited from these improvements in the Tulkarem and Qalqilya areas. Beneficiaries whose lands are located behind the Wall have been encouraged to continue planting and looking after their lands, rather than abandoning them. With the improved irrigation system in place, the farmers now have a much greater incentive to stay and to continue investing in their land. Stemming migration of Palestinians away from fertile areas helps to maintain the equilibrium of populations in these areas, a necessary factor in ultimately establishing a just resolution.

Another positive result has been improved relations between farmers working on neighbouring plots of land. Previously, plastic pipes connected directly to the water source criss-crossed neighbours' lands, creating tension between the farmers. The new network allows each farmer to access one of several branch pipes, eliminating the need to cross over each other's land. Preventing tension and improving communication between local farmers promote cohesiveness and strengthen capacity for future advocacy.

The Wall is a source of extreme economic, social and political tension for communities in the West Bank. While CRS is pleased with the positive impact of an initiative to provide farmers with income and incentives to remain on their land, we also recognise that the existence of the Wall has broader consequences that cannot be resolved by the programme alone. There are many complex issues that require international attention if there is to be economic and social justice in the West Bank. By reducing the negative impact of the Wall on local populations, we have only addressed one small component of the problem: the Wall itself. In the words of the late Pope John Paul II, "the Holy Land does not need walls, but bridges!"

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1. www.crs.org
2. www.mcc.org
3. www.phg.org