



ASSESSING DECENT EMPLOYMENT SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVES IN THE GAZA STRIP AND THE WEST BANK

Briefing note on the Occupied Palestinian Territory

INTRODUCTION

Growth and labour-market trends in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) have traditionally closely mirrored periods of conflict and instability, de facto reflecting the reliance of the Palestinian economy on Israel and the adverse economic impacts of the regime of closures and restrictions.¹

The conflict triggered by the attack by Hamas on 7 October 2024 and subsequent ground operations and bombardments have caused a staggering loss of lives and acute food insecurity across the Gaza Strip and displaced almost all of the 2.2 million population.²

Due to the conflict, the value added of all economic activities in the OPT dropped in the fourth quarter of 2023. The agriculture sector saw a 38 percent decline compared with the previous year, 12 percent in the West Bank and 93 percent in the Gaza Strip. This was the second highest decline of any sector of the economy, after the construction sector.³

Economic access to food has also been constrained by a sharp decrease in incomes due to a sudden employment decline.⁴ A sharp contraction in the gross domestic product (GDP) in the Gaza Strip of more than 80 percent was accompanied by a rise in unemployment, with the rate reaching 79.3 percent. The decline in employment in the West Bank resulted in an unemployment rate there of 29 percent.^{3,5} These are the highest levels of unemployment in the OPT in decades.⁵

It is estimated that approximately 507 000 jobs have been lost in the OPT since to the conflict began, 201 000 in the Gaza Strip and 306 000 in the West Bank. These job losses translate into an estimated daily labour income loss of USD 25.5 million.⁶

Since the start of the conflict, Israel, via the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) unit of the Ministry of Defense, revoked all work permits for Palestinians. This was followed by mass arrests and detention of some Gazans working in Israel; others fled, were expelled to the West Bank or were sent back to the Gaza Strip after their permits were revoked.⁷ The prospect for new work permits for Palestinians remains unclear at present. Israeli representatives from both the agriculture and construction sectors are putting pressure on the Government to find solutions to labour shortages. The Israeli Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, in cooperation with the Population and Immigration Authority and the Committee for Foreign Workers, has already intervened, increasing the quota of permits for foreign workers as a solution for Israeli farmers who relied on Palestinian seasonal workers, further exacerbating unemployment for Palestinians.⁸

Palestinian incomes have also dropped due to a decline in trade and private-sector activities and an increase in restrictions to movement. During the first month of the conflict, the Palestinian Ministry of National Economy surveyed 80 major producers and 51 importers in the West Bank, focusing on sectors crucial for food security. In the food sector, 60 percent of importers of essential items faced disruptions due to increased security checks and issues at Israeli ports, leading to a 15 percent rise in transport costs, a 22 percent increase in storage fees and a 57 percent increase in insurance rates. Additionally, 62 percent of producers engaged in exporting encountered obstacles, including crossing closures, limited operating hours, higher transportation costs and difficulties collecting payments from Israeli companies.

Some 85 percent of local distributors faced hurdles due to movement restrictions, settler attacks and military incursions.⁹

The conflict is thus resulting in a humanitarian crisis with long-lasting repercussions on the labour market and employment prospects of the OPT.^{10,11}

SITUATION PRIOR TO THE CURRENT CONFLICT

Projections of the impact of the conflict on employment in either the Gaza Strip or the West Bank are in continuing evolution and depend on the duration of the conflict; as such, this part of the brief focuses on the large number of structural problems and inequalities in the labour market prior to the conflict.

The land, sea and air blockade of the Gaza Strip, which began in 2007, severely restricted the movement of goods and people, including workers, prior to the current conflict. The situation in the West Bank between 2007 and 2023 also became more fragmented, e.g. through existing obstacles such as roadblocks and checkpoints that de facto restricted or delayed movements of workers or goods. Jerusalem, for example, has been cut off from the West Bank by the separation barrier.ⁱ Access to Area Cⁱⁱ remains restricted for most Palestinians and the Area has been increasingly settled by Israelis, despite the fact that it includes a large percentage of the land foreseen for a future Palestinian state.

In early 2023, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) documented 645 physical obstacles to movement of people into and out of the Gaza Strip, of which over half were assessed as having a severe impact on Palestinians by preventing or restricting access and movement to main roads, urban centres, services and agricultural areas.¹² Most Palestinian farmers with land isolated by the separation barrier (which runs mostly inside the West Bank) could, in theory, access their groves through approximately 69 gates; however, the Israeli authorities kept the gates closed most of the time.¹²

De facto, the occupation was already distorting the Palestinian economy and enforcing the de-agriculturalization and de-industrialization of the territory¹³ while drastically reducing the potential to create decent employment. Even before the latest conflict, approximately 30 percent of the Palestinian population was living below the poverty line, with a significant impact on their economic access to food.¹⁴ Food insecurity was widespread, with certain groups deemed more vulnerable, including women, refugees, those living in urban areas and Bedouin communities in Area C in the West Bank.¹⁴

ⁱ Israel constructed the barrier beginning in 2002, with the stated aim of preventing violent attacks by Palestinians. The vast majority of the barrier's route deviates from the Green Line and runs within the West Bank, separating Palestinian communities from each other and aggravating the existing fragmentation of the OPT. In 2004, the International Court of Justice stated that the sections of the barrier route that run inside the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, together with the associated gate and permit regime, violated Israel's obligations under international law.¹⁸

ⁱⁱ The 1995 Interim Agreement ("Oslo II") divided the West Bank into three administrative areas – Area A, Area B and Area C – in an arrangement that was intended to last until 1999, by which time a final status agreement was supposed to have been reached. The Interim Agreement granted the Palestinian National Authority (PA) full jurisdiction over civil affairs in Areas A and B (comprising about 40 percent of the territory and 90 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank). The PA also assumed full responsibility for "internal security and public order" in Area A, while in Area B it is responsible only for public order, with Israel maintaining the "overriding responsibility for security for the purpose of protecting Israelis and confronting the threat of terrorism." According to the Agreement, Area C (60 percent of the territory in the West Bank, containing all the Israeli settlements) is under full Israeli jurisdiction for civil and security matters apart from issues for which powers and responsibility have been transferred to the PA by agreement, for example, in education and health services. The Agreement also stipulated that, despite the redeployment of its forces, "Israel shall continue to carry the responsibility for external security, as well as the responsibility for overall security of Israelis for the purpose of safeguarding their internal security and public order."¹⁸

Decent employment concerns

The low income and low economic growth of the OPT did not allow for adequate job creation to keep up with a rapidly growing labour force even before the conflict.¹⁵ As reported by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), “although the economy grew by an average 7.4 percent in 1969–1992 and 4.4 percent in 1994–2016 following the establishment of the [Palestinian National Authority] and despite low labour force participation rates, the domestic economy has consistently failed to provide employment for more than one third of the workforce.”¹⁶

Before the conflict, the unemployment rate in the OPT was 24 percent. The unemployment rate was also much higher in the Gaza Strip than in the West Bank (45 percent in the Gaza Strip compared with 13 percent in the West Bank). Gender inequalities were also evident; the unemployment rate was 40 percent among women, compared with 20 percent

among men.¹⁷ The weak capacity of the Palestinian economy to generate jobs has left a large number of workers with no choice but to seek employment in Israel and Israeli settlements.^{18,iii} The long-standing tendency of the OPT to serve as a reservoir of cheap labour for Israel’s economy has accelerated in recent years, with the majority of Palestinians employed as unskilled workers in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, construction, mining, quarrying and low-technology manufacturing (Figure 1).¹³

Prior to the conflict, the West Bank experienced higher labour demand than in previous years due to a slight increase in the number of work permits issued, which improved access for Palestinians to employment in Israel and Israeli settlements. In contrast, workers from the Gaza Strip were granted only a limited number of permits and had limited ability to travel to the West Bank for work. West Bank workers constituted 22.5 percent of the total number of employed persons in Israel in 2022, compared with only 0.8 percent for the Gaza Strip, earning around USD 3.8 billion or 24 percent of the GDP.¹⁹

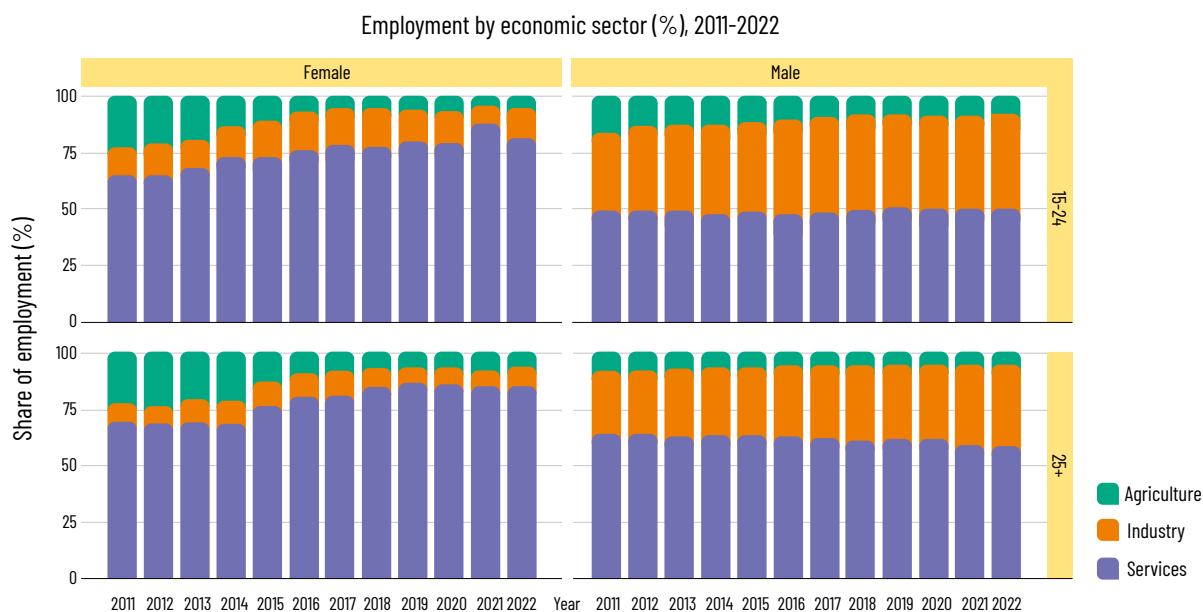


Figure 1. Employment in selected sectors (2011–2022), disaggregated by gender and age cohort (youth [15–24 years of age] vs adults [25 years and older]).

Source:

International Labour Organization. 2024. *Constructed using “Employment by sex, age and economic activity (thousands), Annual”.* In: ILOSTAT. Geneva, Switzerland [Cited 12 February 2024].

https://www.ilo.org/ilostat-files/WEB_bulk_download/indicator/EMP_TEMP_SEX_AGE_ECO_NB_A.csv.gz

iii Israeli settlements are civilian communities, associated infrastructure and industrial areas established by Israel in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since its occupation by Israel in 1967. The Israeli settlements have repeatedly been deemed illegal and condemned by the United Nations Security Council, the General Assembly and other international bodies as a violation of international law. The International Court of Justice also found the settlements to be illegal in its 2004 advisory opinion. Yet Israel continues to expand existing settlements and to build new ones, despite objections from the international community. The United Nations Secretary-General has recalled that the establishment and expansion of settlements in the OPT, including East Jerusalem, have no legal validity and are flagrant violations of international law.

More broadly, the instability resulting from the occupation pushed both economic activities and employment towards the informal sector, as a way of compensating for Israeli restrictions on formal employment. The structure of informal employment in the OPT also varies across subsectors, with the largest share of informal employment in agriculture, where over 97.7 percent of employment was informal (and therefore, according to International Labour Organization (ILO) definitions, vulnerable), followed by construction at 92 percent.²⁰

Youth unemployment

The OPT is home to a young society. Youth, aged 18–29 years, represent 22 percent of the entire population (22 percent in the West Bank and 21 percent in the Gaza Strip).²¹

Lack of employment was pronounced even before the conflict, with 33 percent of young men and almost 60 percent of young women unemployed. The Gaza Strip had one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, with 60 percent of its youth population unemployed. Young refugees in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have been shown to experience even higher unemployment rates. Furthermore, youth were also known to face widespread under-employment, although there is a lack of accurate data.²² The number of youth working informally before the conflict was estimated at 59 percent of the total working youth in the OPT, 62 percent of whom were young men and 38 percent young women, with 58 percent of them in West Bank and 62 percent in the Gaza Strip.²¹

Who is a youth?

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) defines youth as individuals between 18 and 29 years of age (inclusive). Youth-specific data from PCBS and Palestinian sources, unless specified, refers to that age group. This definition differs from that used by the United Nations, which defines young people as individuals between 15 and 24 years of age. Elaborations in this note are based on the United Nations definition.

Gender inequalities are also evident, with only one in ten women aged 15 years and over (hence including young women) employed. Moreover, unemployed women are mostly young (34 years of age or younger) and highly educated: 93 percent of them had completed 13 or more years of schooling, while only 30 percent of unemployed males attained the same level of education. Even before the conflict, it generally took young women twice as long as men to find a job.¹⁹ **Figure 2** shows the number of women and men participating in the labour force, disaggregated by age and location.

Before the conflict, about 47 percent of Palestinian youth were not in education, employment or training (NEET) (31 percent young men, 63 percent young women). With such an unstable situation, high youth unemployment and NEET rates and low political representation, young people were reported as feeling that they did not have agency over their own lives. Limited economic opportunities and uncertainty were also associated with a rise in unhealthy coping mechanisms and psychological issues among youth.²²

Additionally, according to a survey on youth in Palestine undertaken before the conflict by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Institute, the young people most likely to be satisfied with their economic situation were those living in rural areas, where 75 percent of those interviewed asserted that their economic situation was very good or rather good.²³ One possible explanation for this is that, before the conflict, there was an increase in the number of young people (many of them from rural areas) working in Israel. Palestinians working in Israel could make considerably more money than those working in the Palestinian economy, despite the occasionally exploitative or substandard working conditions; hence it was still perceived as a good opportunity.

Lastly, both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have extremely high fertility rates, suggesting that the population will grow by a million by 2030 and more than double by 2050; hence urgent solutions are needed to create new jobs.²⁴

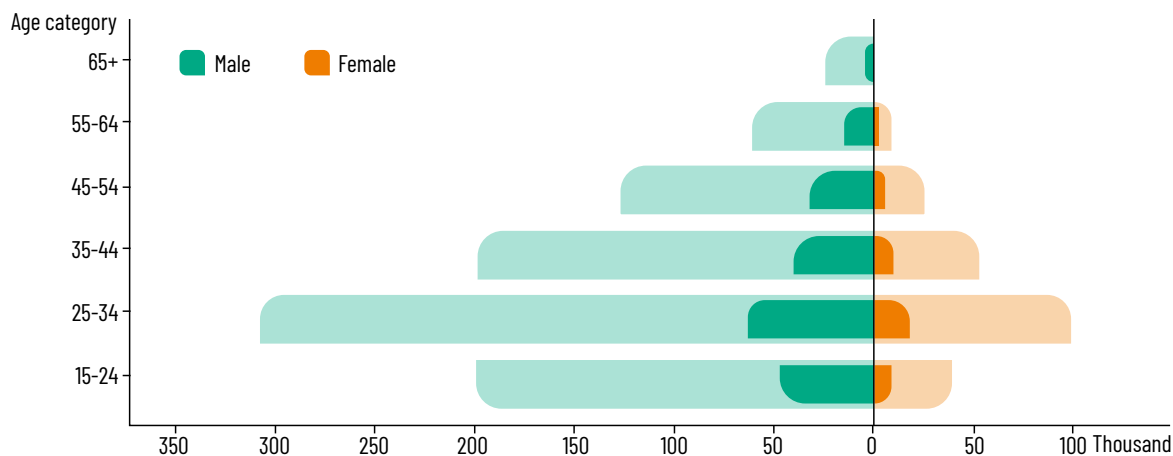


Figure 2. Labour force by gender, age and location. Values for rural populations in solid colour.

Source:

International Labour Organization. 2024. Constructed from “Labour force by sex, age and rural / urban areas (thousands)”.

In: *ILOSTAT*. Geneva, Switzerland. [Cited 12 February 2024].

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Child labour

Both Israel and the OPT are party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognize the right of the child to be protected from being exploited economically and performing work that is likely to be hazardous or interfere with the child’s schooling.^{iv} In addition, Israel is party to ILO Conventions 138 and 182. Under those conventions, Israel has affirmed a minimum age of employment of 15 years (permitting “light work” for children of ages 13 and 14) and agreed to prohibit hazardous work for any child under the age of 18 years of age. Israeli law provides that a child may be employed only as an apprentice during the period of compulsory schooling and children aged 14 years are permitted to work during the summer vacation but only in positions that are relatively undemanding and are not hazardous to their health.

The most recent data before the conflict assessed an incidence of child labour of 1.2 percent among 10–14-year-olds, while the incidence of hazardous work among 15–17-year-olds was assessed at 4.9 percent. Child labour appeared to be most prevalent in family businesses and among informal street vendors, including in the agricultural sector, in particular in Area C.²⁵

Although there is a lack of related accurate data since the start of the current conflict, the deteriorated socioeconomic situation in the OPT is likely to have had a negative impact on children’s rights and their ability to access education, and this could manifest in an increased number of school drop-outs and heightened risk of child labour.

Work permits and wages

Prior to the 7 October 2023 attack, some 150 000 Palestinians from the West Bank and an estimated 18 000 from the Gaza Strip had permits to legally enter Israel for work,⁹ with about one-third of them purchasing their work permits through illegal brokers.²⁶ These estimates of the number of permits are usually based on a yearly aggregation and do not necessarily imply that workers holding a permit were employed continuously throughout the year, as some may work for only a few months.²⁷ Furthermore, official estimates do not include illegal migration: in 2022, it was estimated that an additional 30 000 Palestinians entered Israel for work without a work permit.²⁶

There are about 70 different types of permit (e.g. for human, health, economic and civilian-related needs) that are issued by COGAT, which, jointly with the

^{iv} The expert committees that monitor states’ implementation of these and other human rights treaties, such as the Convention on Civil and Political Rights, have concluded that Israel is bound to apply the conventions to the territories it occupies, including the West Bank.

Government of Israel, determines a general quota of permits for each economic sector. Three types of permit are relevant to the labour market: i) permits for seeking employment, issued once every three months for 5–7 days; ii) green work permits, for workplaces in the Israeli settlements in the West Bank; and iii) orange work permits, for workplaces in Israel. Work permits allow the worker to enter an Israeli workplace under the condition that he/she works only for the employer who requested the permit and whose name is registered on the permit.²⁷

The incorporation of Palestinian workers into the Israeli labour market via the release of work permits has increased the standard of living for some Palestinian families but has also made the OPT increasingly reliant on the Israeli labour market as its main source of income (approximately 13 percent of Gross National Income prior to the current conflict) and jobs reservoir. This dependence was a key feature of the economic dynamics between Israel and the OPT prior to the current conflict.²⁸

The average daily wage for workers in the West Bank was 132 New Israeli shekels (NIS), with a range between NIS 147 for construction workers and NIS 91 for agricultural workers, who are among the lowest paid. Before the conflict, the average wage for workers in the West Bank was more than double the average for those in the Gaza Strip,²⁸ with women being paid less than men in nearly all sectors (Figure 3).

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The ongoing conflict continues to have heavy repercussions on the lives and livelihoods of people in the Gaza Strip and a major impact on the socioeconomic fabric of the West Bank. This includes severe and long-lasting repercussions on the Palestinian labour market, which was already unable to adequately meet the needs of the population before the conflict.

Considering the uncertainty of the context in the OPT and the strong dependence of its labour market on Israel, FAO's support to the OPT should combine the delivery of humanitarian aid with economic stabilization and job-preservation interventions in the agrifood sector, depending on the security situation and needs in the different parts of the territory.

The recommended actions foresee partnering with various development partners, such as ILO, UNCTAD, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and others, international and local civil society organizations and the private sector. FAO should also work with PA institutions to amplify the relief provided to the population, and in accordance with the relevant United Nations resolutions²⁹, the Road Map for Peace³⁰, the Annapolis Conference Joint Understanding³¹ and the Paris Conference.³²

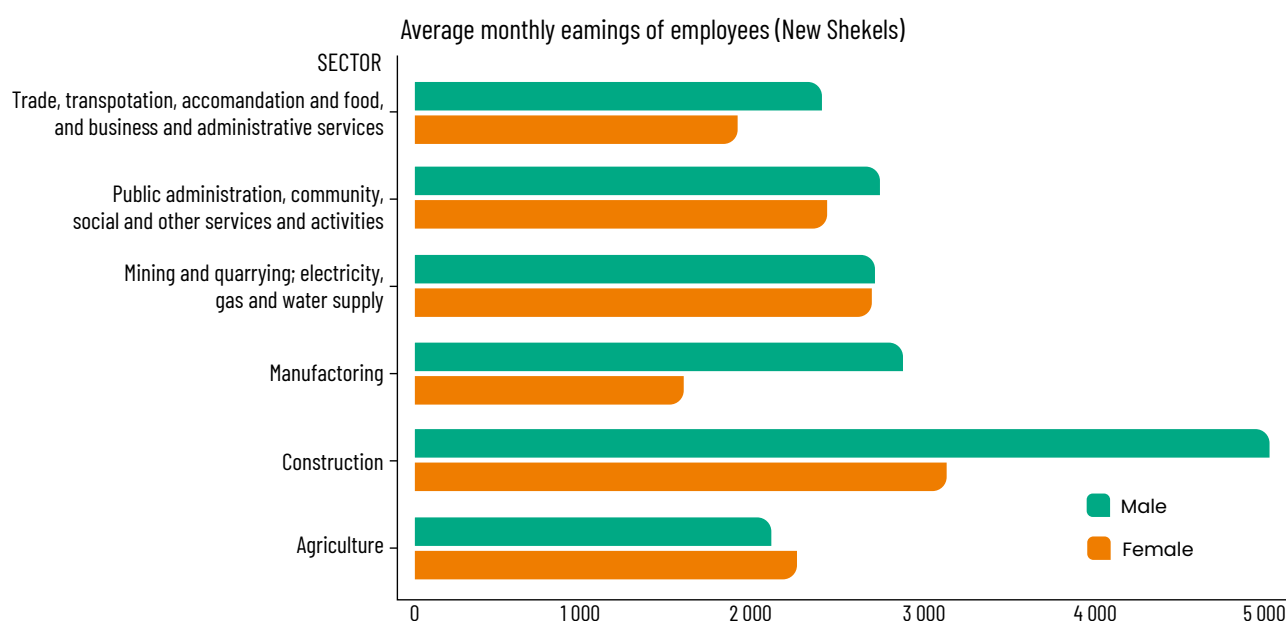


Figure 3. Average monthly earnings of employees disaggregated by sector and gender.

Source:

International Labour Organization. 2024. Constructed from "Average monthly earnings of employees by sex and economic activity (local currency)". In: *ILOSTAT*. Geneva, Switzerland. [Cited 12 February 2024].

https://www.ilo.org/ilostat-files/WEB_bulk_download/indicator/EAR_4MTH_SEX_ECO_CUR_NB_A.csv.gz.

At operational level

In the immediate term:

- ▶ Continue to assess the incomes and job prospects of the OPT to determine all the obstacles to creation of decent employment in order to strengthen and adapt assistance to the Palestinian people in line with available resources and operational activities.
- ▶ Support the rapid inclusion of internally displaced people and refugees in labour markets and educational opportunities, including by facilitating the recognition of educational credentials (if education attainments were hampered by the conflict), and leverage e-learning solutions when available.
- ▶ Provide income support through the facilitation of social payments and cash+ interventions that help in the rehabilitation of strategic agricultural infrastructure damaged by the conflict both in the Gaza Strip, once the fighting will allow, and the West Bank.
- ▶ Support economic stabilization measures in selected areas of the West Bank through development of the private sector, local employment partnerships and entrepreneurship training, in particular for women and youth (immediate, medium-term and long-term interventions).
- ▶ As the conflict has a destructive impact on the socioeconomic environment and can increase the risk factors associated with child labour, actions should also provide emergency support to ultrapoor households via their inclusion in social protection schemes and/or cash+ interventions.

In the medium term:

- ▶ Strengthen innovation on subjects related to agrifood systems in technical and vocational education and training centres and agricultural colleges for enhanced opportunities in both self-employment and waged work.
- ▶ Strengthen entrepreneurship and micro- and small-business start-up management skills and mentorship to enhance self-employment opportunities in agrifood systems.
- ▶ Strengthen the local private sector to enable an increase in the number of jobs in the agrifood sector.

At Institutional level

In the short, medium and long term:

- ▶ Strengthen the ability of the PA and its ministries to deliver decent employment programmes that generate jobs for young women and men in rural, peri-urban and urban areas within the OPT, in particular in the agrifood system.
- ▶ Create an enabling environment for improved integration of women and youth in the OPT labour market for agrifood systems.
- ▶ Support the development of innovative partnerships across the private and public sectors and stimulate private-sector investment to create decent employment in agrifood systems.
- ▶ Enhance social cohesion while supporting the systematic inclusion of youth in national dialogues and policy and strategic processes related to agrifood systems.

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