

# Supporting the COVID-19 Response in Bethlehem

**UN HABITAT**  
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

Courtesy of  
UN-Habitat Palestine  
Country Office

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has cost over 3,800 lives, devastated the national economy, and upended many spheres of human life across Palestine. While Palestine may not have been the hardest hit country by the pandemic, it has certainly faced significant surges which were exacerbated by the lack of capacity to respond in a timely manner. This lack of capacity is due to the weakened apparatus as a result of the Israeli military occupation which has been in place for the past five decades.

Against this dismal background, progress towards the attainment of the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development in Palestine was tested. In truly transformative areas such as reducing inequality and tackling high poverty rates, progress has either been stalled or even reversed. Anecdotal evidence shows that Palestine, by and large, is not on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals and targets by 2030. One of the important means of implementation required to support sustainable transformation is the global flow of foreign direct investment, which declined considerably during 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 crisis in Palestine. The impact of COVID-19 will fall hardest on the most vulnerable groups, especially in crowded urban communities, including women, youth, the elderly, and other marginalized populations.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UN Habitat, with financial support from Alwaleed Philanthropies, provided support to the local government units in the Bethlehem area, which was the epicenter of the pandemic in Palestine. The overall goal of the program was to supplement UNRWA, the Joint Services Council for Solid Waste Management in Bethlehem, and Camp Service Committees' efforts to support solid waste management preparedness and response to the COVID-19 pandemic to further stabilize the community and

strengthen the integration between refugees and host communities in the Bethlehem area. This intervention allowed for the continuation of solid waste management services in the governorate and refugee camps during times of crisis, which supported the prevention of another health hazard during an already vulnerable time.

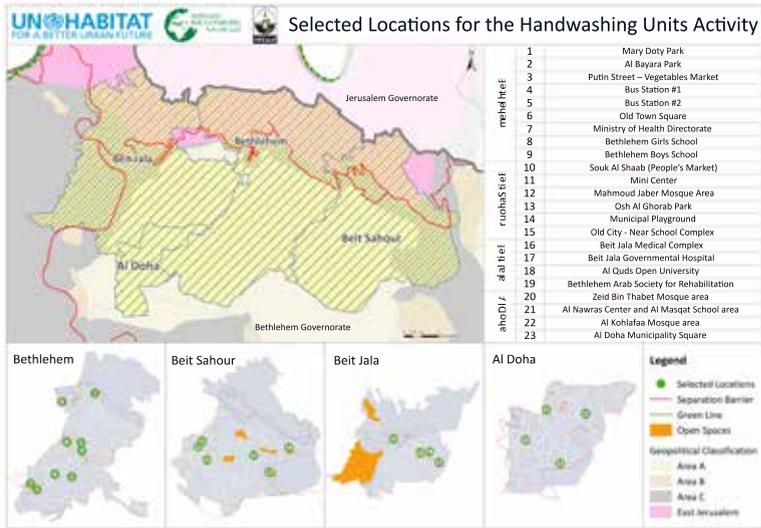
Providing and installing physical sanitation and hygiene units, while taking into consideration safety measures, was another important program deliverable. UN-Habitat worked with local implementing partners, mainly the Applied Research Institute- Jerusalem (ARIJ), and the municipalities of Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Beit Jala, and Al-Doha to select suitable locations with a fit-for-purpose technology to support these efforts. The units provide the public with safe and open access for handwashing as a means to promote public hygiene and reduce the transmission of COVID-19 in public spaces. Overall, 23 handwashing units were installed in public and crowded spaces in the four targeted



**Palestinian cities and communities should continue to work diligently towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, despite all the insurmountable challenges that they continue to face. The SDGs can't be under "lockdown"!**

■ Handwashing unit installed at Bethlehem's central bus station in March 2021.





Location map of handwashing units in the Bethlehem urban area.

municipalities (map); locations on the map can also be accessed by using the local mapping application, Doroob Navigation.

Furthermore, the program aimed to support the users of public spaces in the Bethlehem area, particularly markets, parks, and transportation hubs, to become more aware of their personal health, safety, and hygiene,

and to adopt the best behaviors in their surrounding environments to remain safe and healthy during the pandemic. This was achieved through developing and implementing a targeted awareness campaign which was officially launched with UN-Habitat's implementing partners on October 31, 2020, on the occasion of the World Cities Day. With the slogan

Infographic on hygiene and personal safety in public places; distributed in print and on social media platforms.



“Take care of you, to take care of them,” the campaign's main objective is to complement awareness and communication activities related to COVID-19 by the Palestinian Ministry of Health, the World Health Organization, and other organizations by focusing on messaging related to fact-checking, hygiene, and prevention measures, and coping with the mental health effects of the crisis. The campaign reached approximately two million users (52 percent of whom were female and 48 percent male) through its interactive posts and motion graphics on COVID-19 prevention and other related advice. The majority of the community populations reached were between the ages of 13 and 34.

The program as well is supporting a stocktaking exercise with national and local interlocutors to document the progress that has been made towards the attainment of both Goal No. 11 on “Sustainable Cities and Communities,” with a focus on identifying the achievements and the challenges pre- and post-COVID-19, as well as on the attainment of the New Urban Agenda in Palestine, also outlining how the pandemic has affected progress. This exercise will be documented in reports that aim to synthesize the data that is available on Goal No. 11 targets and indicators and compare them to the baseline data to determine the extent of tangible impact as well as the support, especially post-COVID-19, needed to further advance Palestine's path towards the attainment of Goal No. 11 and accelerate its commitment towards sustainable urbanization.

One of the earliest and most crucial lessons learned from this crisis is the need to expand efforts to support local government units in developing disaster-response capacity and

**With enhanced participatory and citizen-led urban development, Palestinian cities and communities still have the potential to recover and grow, offering better livelihoods, greater social inclusion, and green growth – all of which are important for fostering the physical and mental well-being of Palestinian citizens.**

preparedness, both within existing and planned urban operations. This must be done with a focus on enhancing spatial planning to reflect measures for spatial distancing, adequate provision of public green spaces, and disaster preparedness planning for potential future crises, whether man-made or natural.

The program has published documentaries related to the activities to support solid waste management and handwashing units.

UN-Habitat Palestine prepared this article with the assistance of Alwaleed Philanthropies. The content of this article can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Alwaleed Philanthropies or UN-Habitat. Furthermore, the boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on the maps presented do not imply endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.