

## Rebuilding Lives: The Deprived Families Economic Empowerment Programme



Sameer al Hams in his workshop in Rafah. June 2009.

Sameer al Hams' workshop is hard to miss. Twelve washing machines spill from its doors into the dusty street.

He shares the workspace with a yellow stretch Mercedes taxi and dozens of old televisions and spare parts.

But it is the washing machines which have transformed Sameer's life, giving him an opportunity to lift him and his family out of poverty. A year ago, Sameer was dependent on aid, now he employs three men and saves \$100 per month.

Sameer and his family are one of 500 families in Gaza who are the

beneficiaries of the Deprived Families Economic Empowerment Programme, a pilot scheme designed to lift families out of poverty rather than simply alleviate the effects of poverty.

The project is funded by the Islamic Development Bank and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme with the help of Palestinian non-governmental organizations.

Sameer, 51, a father of five, left school at the age of 12 and like the majority of Gaza's labour force found work in Israel. For twelve years he helped build

Israel, working in construction sites all over the country. For a further 10 years, he worked at an aluminium plant in Rishon Letzion, south of Tel Aviv.

Then in 1996, following a bout of killings and reprisals, Sameer's application for renewal of his permit to work in Israel was denied. It was a serious blow, but Sameer had saved money and could take comfort that he would no longer have to spend up to eight hours per day travelling to and from Rafah to his place of work.

He bought a taxi and was still able to maintain his family's standard of living. Gaza's economic situation began to deteriorate in 2000 after the start of the Second Intifadah and got progressively worse. Rafah became a front line in the renewed conflict.

In May 2004, Sameer's taxi was crushed by an Israeli tank when Israel took control of several areas of Rafah. One week later his eldest son was shot dead by Israeli soldiers as he worked in a borrowed taxi. In one week, Sameer had lost his son and his livelihood. "All my savings had gone into the car and it was destroyed. We had gone from being comfortable to having no income. The whole of Gaza was suffering and there was no new work," he said.

The family was awarded a stipend of 500 NIS per month by the Palestinian Authority as compensation for the

death of their son. As refugees, the family also received food aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which was set up in 1949 to look after the needs of Palestinian refugees. But without regular work, the family's income remained below \$1 per family member per day, the measure of extreme poverty.

The period from 2004-2008 was a struggle for the family. One of their sons, now 23, suffers from autism and other disorders and cannot get proper care. Gaza's economy continued to shrink in spite of the departure of Israeli settlers and legislative elections.

Sameer's son-in-law, Mohammed al Hams (a distant relative) worked

Mohammad al Hams repairs a washing machine.



as an electrician, fixing washing machines. Over this period Sameer taught himself the mechanics of washing machines and how to fix them. But Mohammed's business was too small to provide his family with a good income, let alone pay a wage to his father-in-law.

Poverty was an isolating experience. Sameer no longer had the money to buy the gifts that it is customary to bring to the homes of relatives and friends so he stopped visiting. His friends and relatives could still visit but their frequency decreased as their situation did not improve.

In 2008, he heard that a Gazan non-governmental organization, the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committee, was looking for candidates for a pilot poverty reduction programme and he volunteered. The programme aimed to help families become self reliant by finding out their desires and abilities to earn an income and then supporting them as they work their way out of poverty.

Sameer said: "We worked out what was the best way that I could provide for my family. We decided that the repair of washing machine with my son-in-law was the most feasible project."

He told the committee he needed a high pressure vice, a generator, a compressor, grinders and other work

tools. Everything had to be available in Gaza because Israel rarely allows goods other than bare essentials to enter.

The total bill was \$7,872. Sameer was also trained in project management and book keeping. He shows pages of handwritten accounts. One week's profit was 2,040 shekels, another only 996 shekels.

The new equipment allowed Sameer, with the help of Mohammed, to take on much more work; some process which would have taken hours would now take minutes. They repair washing machines and re-furbish old ones for re-sale. Sameer also employs a man with a donkey cart to pick up and deliver machines and another man to carry out repairs on site. He has bought himself one of the many motorbikes that have been smuggled from Egypt.

Sameer is now looking to expand his business in Egypt and Israel, if their borders open but at the moment they don't believe there is enough of a market in Gaza for further expansion. At the moment, Sameer is happy to be earning a proper income for the first time since 2004.

"Income earned by own hand is much better than any other kind of money. When you work everything tastes better. You can send your children to school and you do not feel like a beggar," he said, "I have regained my self esteem."