

## Raising rabbits in Gaza



"I felt so excited when I set up our own little rabbit ranch for the first time. Our family has six daughters and nine sons, and we really needed a way to make money in Az Zawayda - the area where we live," said Subheya Motawe', an energetic Gazan housewife who is feeding her family and earning a regular income by breeding rabbits at home. "We have many debts to pay off, and school expenses are a big burden."

The innovative rabbit-raising project was conceived last summer as a way to lift families out of poverty and also boost the protein in their diets while the Gaza Strip remains isolated and under siege by the Israeli authorities.

The start up costs for each family keeping rabbits is 500 shekels (approximately 100 euros), and the upkeep is minimal. "Demand for rabbit at the weekly market is increasing," said Anas Mussalam, CARE International's agricultural engineer in Gaza City, who runs this project which is funded by the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO). "It's cheap and delicious."

According to an extensive report by the International Committee for the Red Cross, chronic malnutrition is steadily rising inside Gaza. Since the blockade was tightened by Israel in June 2007, family eating patterns have been compromised by a switch to "low cost/high energy" cereals, oil and sugar, instead of more nutritious but pricier meat, fish, and cheese. The lack of micronutrients is measurable and raising concerns. Poor people simply don't have access to eat enough protein.

The Red Cross report revealed how grim life is for lower-income families who do not have refugee status. In the face of massive

unemployment, ordinary people are forced to sell off their assets, slash the quality and quantity of meals, and skimp on clothing and even children's education. They scavenge for discarded materials and even grass for animal fodder appropriating anything that they can sell. Most rely on dwindling loans and handouts from relatives who are only slightly better-off. They feel indebted and desperate.

Small indoor rabbitries are making a difference for these marginal Gazan families, even though the animals are not traditionally found here.

With ECHO providing funding to CARE's rabbit scheme, Mr Mussalam, the project manager approached 70 vulnerable households in this conservative neighborhood to persuade them to try something out of the ordinary. Subheya, a 52 year old mother, immediately rented a small room on a quiet lane for her new rabbit hutches.

"We wanted to do it right from the start," she told us. "Experts say the best way is to keep four female rabbits for each buck. They reproduce very quickly that way. All we do is fill a big bag with grass cuttings, and it keeps the animals happy for three or four days. We also give them special food pellets and lots of clean water so they stay strong and healthy.

I do enjoy feeding and especially caring for the soft little babies. Rabbits are so quiet and calm; there is no annoyance when I come early in the morning to water them and clean the cages. No bad smell. My youngest son, Maamoun, is 16 and helps me look after the animals. We are fond of them but, yes, we eat them at least once a week. I boil rabbit meat in a stew with tender chard leaves and garlic. It's not a typical Gaza meal, but it tastes very good. Everyone loves it."

"It still makes me laugh to see these funny little creatures hop," she continued. "I just need to be able to afford bigger cages, so the rabbits can grow fatter and I can get more at the market for each one. My neighbour Hanan got 150 shekels at the market last Friday for selling hers, but mine are a lot smaller. All our rabbits live in wire cages. If we let them roam on the ground, they would disappear. These rabbits can dig tunnels through Gaza's sandy soil very quickly.

"We used to live close to the Israeli settlements in Gaza until 2002, but then we were displaced by all the fighting and our family had to shelter in a tent for six months. We were finally able to get a place in Az Zawayda, where the 17 of us share four rooms. Five of my sons and two daughters are in school full time and we hope that education will give them a better chance in life."

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