

UNRWA AND ITS NEEDS

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Overview of UNRWA's mandate and operations

UNRWA was created on 8 December 1949 in order to tend to the basic educational, health, relief and social needs of those destitute Palestinian refugees who, as a result of the 1948 war in Palestine, had lost their homes and means of livelihood, and to promote their economic integration in its fields of operations: Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. UNRWA's temporary mandate has been regularly extended by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in order to contribute to regional stability and peace.

Currently staffed by some 30,000 employees, mostly refugees operating as local employees, UNRWA has established itself as a quasi-state institution, taking on responsibilities usually assigned to governments. While its services are accessible to a registered population today reaching 4.8 million persons, their regular users are mainly refugees living in camps (one-third of that population) and on their fringes. UNRWA has also provided emergency assistance in times of conflict, most recently in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) since 2000.

The Agency's mandate has also had political implications. Refugees and host countries have primarily viewed it as reflecting the United Nations' commitment to implement paragraph 11 of UNGA's resolution 194 that promotes voluntary repatriation and/or compensation as a basis for a permanent solution. In this way, it has contributed to preserving a Palestinian identity in exile.

Yet, UNRWA's status as a temporary subsidiary organ of the UNGA has remained unchanged. This has constrained its quasi-permanent humanitarian mission in several respects:

Funding and expenditures issues: UNRWA's budget is funded quasi-exclusively by voluntary contributions. Since the mid-1970s, and more especially since the start of the "Oslo peace process" in 1993, these contributions have failed to keep pace with the needs of an ever-expanding registered population, resulting in an ongoing deterioration of its services. UNRWA's margin of maneuver is limited: Over 70% of its budget is spent on the local staff's wages.

Lack of operational guidance/political support: Both the UNGA and the long dormant Advisory Commission (including host and donor countries) have long refrained from providing UNRWA with the required guidance (and political support) whenever it has had to make sensitive decisions, such as those related to eligibility rules or any re-orientation of its activities. Its institutional isolation has been compounded by a weak working relationship with its stakeholders. While reciprocal mistrust has plagued its relationships with the refugees (fear of the Agency's politicization "from below" versus fear of permanent resettlement, respectively), donor countries have long expressed little interest in UNRWA matters. UNRWA has generally

had to accommodate the often contradictory interests of the refugees, the host and the donor countries.

The host authority factor: UNRWA's operations are subjected to the consent of the host authorities. Over the years the Agency's relations with the Arab host countries have turned into a matter of routine. Israel has seriously impeded the Agency's activities in the oPt since the late 1980s.

UNRWA' current needs

UNRWA finds itself at a crossroads. As hopes for a rapid resolution of the refugee issue have vanished, it is facing a major financial crisis (a shortfall of US \$140 million in 2010) that is threatening its services at a time when these still play a crucial socioeconomic role, particularly in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. Against this mixed background, its present needs emerge as follows:

Adequate financial support: UNRW needs more stable funding mechanisms for its regular programs. The "fatigue" of its traditional western donors should prompt the UN to fund a higher share of UNRWA's regular budget (above the current 4/5%). UNRWA's fund-raising strategies also need to reach out more dynamically to private sources. Arab countries should increase their donations from the 1-2% of UNRWA's regular budget to the 8% mark as recommended by the Arab League.

Stronger partnerships: Despite the revival of the Advisory Committee in 2005, UNRWA remains in need of enhanced partnerships with its stakeholders, based on a shared vision of its mandate and operational priorities. Fundamental differences continue to exist among and across groups of stakeholders. While the host countries (and the refugees) claim that UNRWA should provide adequate services until the refugee issue is solved satisfactorily, donor countries are divided between those that wish to continue to support UNRWA as a necessary contribution to the region's stability and those that urge it to adjust strictly to the refugees' basic needs. The emergence of areas of consensus among stakeholders, for instance UNRWA's reform agenda may eventually lead to the establishment of a sustainable "partnership agenda".

Continuous support for UNRWA's reform agenda: In 2006, UNRWA embarked on a multi-layer "Organizational Development" scheme designed to streamline its managerial regulations and create a working spirit based on the "human development" paradigm, namely an emphasis on the refugees' potential and the protection of their human rights. In this vein, UNRWA has adopted modern management techniques including program cycle management and has decentralized its planning activities. It has also started mainstreaming such concepts as community participation, gender equality and (services provision-based) protection across its programs. Yet, UNRWA's continuous money problems cast doubt on the donor countries' ability (or wish) to commit themselves to the increased costs incurred by HD goals. Donor countries should decide whether its services contribute to regional peace and stability and accordingly reconnect their humanitarian, political and developmental agendas. This may also entail increased pressure on Israel to respect the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access in the oPt and preparations for the role UNRWA may play in future with the implementation of any peace deal.



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Extensive research agenda: All of the above may be informed by empirical research. In this respect, it is important that stakeholders take stock of the quantitative and qualitative research carried out in recent years by statistical institutes, academic institutions, UNRWA itself and individual researchers as a first step towards a knowledge-based management strategy. UNRWA also needs to develop an “information sharing strategy” in order to facilitate access to its data for research purposes and organize cooperation with researchers. Finally, UNRWA ought to orient research towards the living conditions of the refugees living outside camps (two-thirds of registered refugees).