

UNRWA: assisting Palestine refugees in a challenging environment

by Greta Gunnarsdóttir

UNRWA is the largest UN operation in the Middle East, with over 27,000 staff, almost all of whom are refugees themselves. Originally envisaged as an organisation with a temporary mandate, UNRWA's programmes have evolved to meet the changing needs of the 4.3 million Palestine refugees living in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

UNRWA began operations on 1 May 1950. Its first priority was to secure a reasonable standard of living for refugees by providing basic food rations, shelter and social welfare facilities. UNRWA's first decade of work established the blueprint for its present four priorities: education, health, relief and social services, and microcredit. UNRWA currently operates over 700 schools, clinics and other facilities for Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the OPT.

With more than 50% of the Palestine refugee population under the age of 25 there is constant pressure on public services, including education, which has always been considered as a tool to empower future generations of Palestine refugees. To this day

UNRWA's Education Programme is its largest, accounting for over 70% of all UNRWA staff and over half of its budget. UNRWA provides elementary, preparatory and (in Lebanon only) secondary education to almost half a million registered Palestine refugee children in 663 schools. Vocational and technical education and training, as well as pre-service teacher training, are provided in eight vocational training centres. UNRWA encourages refugees to become self-reliant, productive members of their communities and to maintain their cultural heritage. UNRWA aims to foster a spirit of tolerance, in particular by raising awareness of fundamental human rights, including those outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).¹

UNRWA's Health Programme – its second largest programme – focuses on primary healthcare services, with special emphasis on maternal and child healthcare as well as disease prevention and control. Two thirds of patients receiving integrated non-communicable disease care at UNRWA primary healthcare facilities are women. UNRWA has helped bring vaccine-preventable diseases under control and has achieved universal immunisation coverage of children and women. It provides assistance to women during delivery and runs programmes to prevent and control iron deficiency anaemia among Palestine refugee women and children, as well as tuberculosis. Emergency food aid is provided to Palestine refugee children, who are nutritionally vulnerable, as well as to pregnant Palestine refugee women and nursing mothers. UNRWA also has several projects to promote environmental sustainability in refugee camps. Its emergency environmental health programme in the Gaza Strip helps municipalities hosting refugee camps to maintain vital public utilities such as water treatment plants, waste disposal systems, water wells and pest control. Since March 2006, there have been serious shortages of fuel and other supplies for the operation of water pumps and sanitation facilities, and also of chemicals needed to purify water and eliminate vermin and mosquitoes.

Fatmeh Abu Ghlieh is sixteen weeks pregnant. Before the erection of the barrier by Israel, Fatmeh's journey from her home in Abu Dis to UNRWA's Jerusalem clinic took fifteen minutes. Now it can take an hour and a half, mostly on foot. Fatmeh's one-year-old daughter needs vaccines that she can only get at UNRWA's clinic as Abu Dis has no public health facilities. Women like Fatmeh face a difficult choice:

Amal is eleven years old and attends Shatie Elementary School, one of 187 UNRWA-funded schools in the Gaza Strip. Its students, aged from six to twelve, are from the nearby Beach Camp, just outside Gaza City. The camps in which Amal and most of the other students live are among the most densely populated places on earth and have few open spaces. School offers the opportunity to play and interact freely with other children. "I wake up happy in the morning because I am going to school," says Amal. The constant threat of violence pervades the camps. Since twelve-year-old Najah's brother was killed in the neighbouring streets, she has not dared to play outside. "I feel safe at school," she says. "They teach non-violence – that's why I like it. I'm afraid outside but at school I'm not scared anymore."

As the population of the camp rapidly grows, so does the number of children needing education. There are now so many children that the school has to be divided into two shifts with more than one thousand children in each session. At lunchtime, a new session begins as a fresh set of children and teachers start their school day. Despite the growing numbers and logistical challenges UNRWA will not turn any child away. "We can't say 'no' to anyone," says headmistress Al-Madhoun. "I have all the records and I personally check with the families to make sure that no one is missing out on their education."

delaying a check-up could jeopardise the health of mother or baby but so too could a long wait at a checkpoint or a hazardous journey to the clinic.

It is because of access issues like these that numbers attending the Mother and Child clinic have fallen drastically. UNRWA's Dr Zakaria estimates that attendance has decreased by 30-40%: "Before the barrier we would have two to three hundred people every day from the western villages. Now we have 10% of that. And they will climb over the mountains rather than go through a checkpoint."

UNRWA's Relief and Social Services Programme provides assistance to Palestine refugees who suffer from acute socio-economic hardship. It aims – through activities such as training and microcredit provision – to reduce poverty within the refugee community and to promote self-reliance among its less advantaged

members, particularly women, youth and disabled persons. The Programme serves as the custodian of refugee historical records, which are used to determine eligibility for all UNRWA services. It administers UNRWA's Special Hardship Programme, providing the most impoverished refugee families with basic food support, shelter repair or reconstruction, cash assistance and/or preferential access to other UNRWA services. It also administers the Youth and Children Programme whose objectives include enhancing the well-being of children and youth and promoting their participation in constructive activities consistent with the objectives of the CRC. UNRWA mentors a network of 104 community-based organisations managed by volunteers, 63% of whom are women.

UNRWA's Microfinance and Microenterprise Programme – the largest of its kind in the

OPT – provides credit facilities to support small businesses and micro-enterprises, helping to create jobs, economically empower women and alleviate poverty. With its market share, the programme is now the primary financial services mainstay for a large segment of the poorest microenterprises, including businesses run by women and young people.

New challenges

UNRWA has been working in increasingly difficult circumstances to meet the needs of Palestine refugees struggling to cope with ever greater insecurity, food and energy shortages, the knock-on effects of the foreign aid freeze to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA) and tighter restrictions on movements of people and goods. The PA has faced financial crisis since foreign aid was



frozen after Hamas won the January 2006 elections. Prolonged closures of the Karni commercial crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip have caused serious disruption to the provision of assistance to Palestine refugees living in Gaza, over 700,000 of whom depend on UNRWA's food distribution of flour, oil, sugar and other basic items.

The deterioration in the Palestinian economy has led to a dramatic increase in the demand for UNRWA's services to Palestine refugees in Gaza and the West Bank. Approximately 302,000 Palestine refugee families live in the OPT: 187,000 families in Gaza and 115,000 families in the West Bank, representing approximately 66% and 30% of the total population of these areas respectively. UNRWA estimates that as many as 28,000 of these families depend on a PA salary, of which over 22,000 have already come forward to claim food rations from UNRWA.

The bulk of public services in the OPT are delivered by the PA and the task of substituting for these services cannot be performed by UNRWA. UNRWA has experienced an enormous increase in demand for employment through its emergency job creation programme with over 100,000 refugees currently on waiting lists for these programmes in Gaza.

The Agency's largest donors are the European Commission, the United States and some of the member states of the European Union. UNRWA's General Assembly-approved core budget for 2005 was \$339.3 million. This figure does not include funds required for projects or for emergency activities. Based on a scenario of optimism following the disengagement of Israel from Gaza in August 2005, the Agency's Emergency Appeal for 2006 comprised activities worth some \$91 million. In May this year, the Appeal was revised to \$171 million on account of the grave deterioration in living conditions in the OPT caused by a reduction in PA revenue, the non-payment of PA salaries and further restrictions on labour and trade. In June the already dire situation became even worse



following the resumed fighting and Israeli military operations in Gaza.

UNRWA's emergency activities aim to:

- provide additional temporary work opportunities for unemployed refugees (30% for female-headed households)
- include 23,000 new refugee families in Gaza in its food distribution programme. A 2005 survey found that UNRWA's emergency food assistance was the primary source of food for two thirds of those surveyed.

In over half a century of conflict, the positions of the parties to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have essentially remained the same in respect of the Palestine refugee issue. While UNRWA is not mandated to conciliate and influence the political positions of the parties on the refugee question, it remains an important stability factor in the region. In the

absence of a solution to the Palestine refugee problem, the General Assembly in December 2005 extended the mandate of the Agency to 30 June 2008, reaffirming the importance of UNRWA's services for the well-being of the Palestine refugees. UNRWA remains committed to assisting Palestine refugees in accordance with its mandate. It expects the international community to support this role, including by trying to do its utmost to prevent the further deterioration of the already bleak humanitarian situation on the ground in the OPT and Lebanon.

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