

Sixty Years of Achievement



“Without UNRWA, the threat to peace and security in the Middle East would undoubtedly be far greater.”

Ban Ki-moon
UN Secretary General

“The Palestinian experience of recent years and the travail of the present, daunting as these are, must not be the sole measure of prospects for the future. I prefer to dwell on the range of possibilities that exist in the rich social and cultural Palestinian heritage, the Palestinian affinity for knowledge, learning and professional skills, and the capacity of the Palestinian people for economic self-reliance. It is on these attributes – and on the genuine thirst for peace among the majority of Palestinian civilians - that hope for the future rests.

UNRWA will remain dedicated to nurturing these possibilities through its human development work, and by its commitment to the values of neutrality, non-violence and respect for the human rights of all.”

Karen Koning AbuZayd
UNRWA Commissioner-General

Sixty Years of Achievement

On 8 December 2009, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA, will be sixty years old. Following the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1948, UNRWA was established by the United Nations General Assembly to carry out direct relief and works programmes for Palestine refugees. Today some 4.7 million Palestine refugees in UNRWA's five fields of operations – Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank including East Jerusalem – are eligible for the Agency's services.

While UNRWA's 60th anniversary provides an occasion for sober reflection on Palestinian exile, it also affords a moment to consider the contribution that the Agency's programmes have made to the lives of generations of Palestine refugees. Through primary education and healthcare, social safety-net interventions, the building and maintenance of homes and infrastructure, and microfinance services, UNRWA continues to be a positive force in the lives of Palestinians, at the individual and community levels. UNRWA's work exemplifies an international commitment to the human development of Palestine refugees, helping them to acquire knowledge and skills, to lead long and healthy lives, to achieve decent standards of living and to enjoy human rights to the extent possible.

Acquired Knowledge and Skills

Through times of strife in the Middle East, as well as times of relative calm, generations of Palestine refugees received their first years of education in UNRWA schools. Today, UNRWA operates one of the largest school systems in the Middle East, providing free education to 500,000 pupils enrolled in 689 schools, and employing 22,000 educational staff.

UNRWA has always made gender parity in education a priority, welcoming girls into its schools from the start. In 1951, the proportion of female pupils was 26 per cent. Gender equity in enrolment was achieved in the 1960s and has been maintained ever since.

Long and Healthy Lives

UNRWA's work in the field of primary health

care has had a considerable impact. Despite the difficult conditions in which Palestine refugees live, diseases preventable by vaccines and other communicable diseases have been kept under control. Between the 1960s and 2006, a drop in infant mortality rates from 16 to 2.2 percent was achieved, exceeding the World Health Organization target for middle income countries. The Agency has established a number of services - including mental health care, and physiotherapy and rehabilitation - to respond to the changing needs of refugees, and to deal with the consequences of protracted violence.

Today, UNRWA's health care programme is delivered by its own doctors and some 4,000 health workers in 137 busy facilities, where the focus is on mother and child care, family planning and disease prevention. UNRWA's clinics currently receive 9.5 million patient visits per year.

Decent Standards of Living

UNRWA has played an important role in improving refugees' ability to exploit economic opportunities when they arise, and in so doing has helped many avoid unemployment and poverty. In 1962, UNRWA opened the Ramallah Women's Training Centre - the first vocational training centre for women in the Arab world. Today, UNRWA operates 10 vocational and technical training centres. Over time, more than 60,000 refugees have graduated from technical and vocational training courses, equipped with the skills they need to enter the workforce.

UNRWA's Microfinance department was established in 1991 and aims to promote economic development and alleviate poverty among Palestine refugees. The department offers an inclusive range of financial services, including products specifically aimed at women, low-income households and microentrepreneurs. These services have helped to create and sustain jobs, empower women, and increase household assets. Since its inception, the programme has provided services to over 20,000 refugees, who have received 100,000 loans through its network of 17 branch offices.

Since 1983, UNRWA's Relief and Social Services department has concentrated its efforts on the poorest of the poor, providing basic food supplies and cash subsidies as well as emergency cash grants and shelter to the most vulnerable refugees. Currently, it deals with over 260,000 special hardship cases. The department also works to promote self-reliance and alleviate poverty through community development, and has established 65 women's centres and 37 Community Rehabilitation Centres. These centres benefit women, people with disabilities, young people and the elderly.

Today, 1.4 million refugees reside in the 58 recognized refugee camps in which UNRWA operates. Over time, UNRWA has rehabilitated around 13,500 shelters. In 2006, the Agency created a Camp Improvement and Infrastructure Programme aimed at better addressing the living conditions of Palestine refugees in the camps.

Over the past sixty years, UNRWA has taken action to mitigate the effects of emergencies on refugees' lives. In 2008 alone, UNRWA provided emergency assistance to over 195,000 refugee families in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Northern Lebanon. It introduced a feeding programme for all 200,000 pupils in the Agency's schools in the Gaza Strip, disbursed \$12 million in cash grants to 30,000 families and created 3 million job days for 56,000 refugees.

Enjoyment of Human Rights

Advancing respect for the human rights of Palestine refugees is implicit in UNRWA's human development and humanitarian work. Through UNRWA's programmes and activities, refugees experience the practical application of human rights relating to education, health, a decent standard of living, economic opportunity, human dignity and the right to life. UNRWA's protection role includes international advocacy - stressing the entitlements of Palestine refugees under international law, and reminding political actors of their obligations under human rights instruments as well as international humanitarian law.

About UNRWA

Some 4.7 million Palestine refugees in UNRWA's five fields of operations – Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem – are eligible for Agency services, including education, healthcare, social services, shelter, micro-credit loans and emergency aid. UNRWA employs nearly 30,000 staff, the vast majority of whom are Palestine refugees. UNRWA's operations are financed almost entirely by voluntary contributions from donors. The Agency's regular budget for 2008-2009 is \$1.1 billion, which covers the recurrent costs of the Agency's education, health and relief and social services activities. UNRWA's headquarters are in Gaza City and Amman.