



united nations relief and works agency  
for palestine refugees in the near east

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**Realising the future we want – integrating population issues into sustainable development  
including in the post 2015 development agenda**

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East – UNRWA – welcomes the opportunity to address the Commission on Population and Development on the issue of integrating population issues into sustainable development. It will be recalled that UNRWA is dealing with the world’s largest and most protracted refugee situation – today there are about 5.2 million Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA, a number roughly corresponding in size to the population of Norway.

UNRWA is paying close attention to the intergovernmental discussions on Sustainable Development. The underlying challenge to develop universal, just, inclusive, and ambitious post 2015 Sustainable Development goals to reduce poverty and inequality is of direct relevance to Palestine refugees. UNRWA is concerned, however, that while post 2015 Sustainable Development goals are in principle of global reach, there is nonetheless a risk that displaced persons – now numbering globally more than 50 million persons, 10% of whom are Palestine refugees - might slip through the cracks of the intergovernmental process. This is because, so far, neither goals, targets nor conflict related displacement indicators, which would take into account the developmental needs of displaced people, appear likely to be adopted.

At the heart of UNRWA’s services to Palestine Refugees is the provision of developmental services such as quality education, health care, protection, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance as well as, when necessary, emergency assistance. Our goal is to assist our Palestine refugee community to have a good education, to lead healthy, self-reliant, dignified and fulfilled lives and to cope with adversity in times of crisis and upheaval. UNRWA’s work on behalf of Palestine refugees must continue until a just and lasting resolution to their plight is found in accordance with international law and UN resolutions.

In an environment that has constantly challenged the human security and enjoyment of rights by Palestine refugees, UNRWA, working in partnership with host countries and donors has contributed remarkably successfully to building the human capital of the Palestine refugee population since beginning its operations on 1 May 1950. Refugees, in different ways and to different degrees, have contributed positively to the socio-economic development of the host countries in which they reside. That contribution has been greater in areas of UNRWA operations where Palestine refugees' rights have been more protected. Restriction of rights, such as limiting Palestine refugees' opportunities to work and achieve viable sustainable livelihoods, inevitably leads to increased poverty and deprivation and is, ultimately, self-defeating in terms of sustainable development. Poverty disempowers the individual, forces him or her to seek out marginal sources of income and prevents him or her from making a significant contribution to the development of society as a whole.

Nothing illustrates this better in Gaza: in the year 2000 UNRWA provided food assistance to 80,000 persons. This year UNRWA will provide food assistance to 868,000 people, two thirds of the Palestine refugee population in Gaza and ten times greater than 15 years ago. Gaza has been experiencing de-development at a time when the international community is focusing on sustainable development. The World Bank estimated recently that Gaza's GDP fell by 15% in 2014. Unemployment currently stands at over 40% of those registered to work.

Amongst many challenges, three major population issues relating to the work of UNRWA should be highlighted.

Firstly, and notwithstanding UNRWA's need to provide increased emergency assistance to Palestine refugees resulting from the impact of conflicts in Syria and Gaza, the Palestine refugee population is growing by about 3% per year, or 150,000 persons, with the consequence that there is more demand for UNRWA's services. By way of illustration, UNRWA needs to build 7 new schools a year in Gaza just to keep up with the growing number of children of school age. Furthermore the Palestine refugee population is young; finding adequate job and work opportunities for youth is a major challenge. Roughly 20% of the total Palestine refugee population - 1.1 million persons – are young people aged 15 to 24 years old, and they are currently amongst the poorest in UNRWA's five fields of operation. At the same time these young people constitute the largest source of potential to address the poverty issue in our region.

Secondly, UNRWA's health services, which employ nearly 4000 of UNRWA's 30,000 Palestine refugee staff, are being reorganised to provide for a Family Health Team approach with a greater focus on life cycle approaches including mitigating preventable non-communicable diseases, improving life style and pre and ante natal care services. This transformation is already delivering positive results in terms of Palestine refugees' health. UNRWA is endeavouring also to provide services to ensure that individual choices on family size are made through informed decision making on family planning.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, in terms of population dynamics, Palestine refugees have been greatly affected by the impact of conflicts in UNRWA's area of operations. In Yarmouk, in Syria up to 18,000 Palestine refugees are trapped in a brutal siege described recently by the Secretary General as the "deepest circle of hell" from where nearly 160,000 PRs and Syrians have fled. More than 60% of the 460,000 Palestine refugees remaining in Syria are displaced, with 80,000 having fled to Lebanon, Jordan and further afield. In Gaza last summer, at the height of the hostilities, nearly 300,000 mainly Palestine refugees sheltered in 92 UNRWA schools. Many Palestine refugees remain homeless in

Gaza and major rebuilding of destroyed Palestine refugee dwellings, around 10,000 has not begun. These examples illustrate the constant insecurity facing large numbers of Palestine refugees, many of whom have been dispossessed not once as a refugee, but multiple times during their lives.

UNRWA is confronted therefore with a wide array of population challenges. Through the Agency's efforts with its partners, host countries and donors, we seek to ensure that the Palestine refugee community can make a positive contribution to community stabilisation. UNRWA itself, as an embodiment of the Palestine refugee collective, is itself an important element of stability in a very turbulent Middle East region. The sustainability of the Palestine refugee community and UNRWA is paramount until a just resolution of the question of Palestine refugees is found.

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