



unrwa and the sustainable development goals (sdgs)

Introduction

In September 2015, world leaders unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) officially came into effect on 1 January 2016 and provide a shared blueprint to address global challenges, including poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, climate change and peace and justice. UNRWA is making a direct contribution to many of these goals across all five of its fields of operation so that Palestine refugees are not left behind.

The Agency's commitment to the SDGs is also reflected in the [UNRWA 2016 – 2021 Medium Term Strategy](#). Like the SDGs, the UNRWA MTS recognizes that advancing human development for Palestine refugees requires a multi-dimensional approach involving poverty alleviation, respect for human rights, access to quality health and educational services and reductions in inequality and economic growth.

Read on to see how UNRWA is advancing the 2030 agenda for Palestine refugees. Data on UNRWA services is drawn from [the Agency's 2018 Annual Operational Report](#).



SDG 1 – No Poverty

The SDGs call for the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions by 2030. Whilst globally the number of people living in extreme poverty has dropped by more than half in the last 30 years, the incidence of poverty in the Middle East North Africa region increased between 2010 and 2015, unique amongst world regions.¹ Poverty remains prevalent amongst Palestine refugees, with those suffering the impacts of conflict (Gaza and Syria), occupation (West Bank), blockade (Gaza) and social and economic exclusion (Lebanon) bearing the brunt. Poverty rates are also typically higher inside Palestine refugee camps, where approximately one third of the Palestine refugee population live. More than half of all households living in Gaza are poor,² as are 75 per cent and 65 per cent of Palestine refugees living in Syria³ and Lebanon⁴, respectively.

UNRWA has adopted a holistic approach to tackle poverty and the disruptive effects associated with over 70 years of displacement. Access to free primary health care, basic education, livelihood opportunities, relief and social services, shelter and environmental health are critical to ensuring that Palestine refugees have the fundamentals to overcome the multidimensional nature of poverty. In addition, efforts to bridge the gender gap, protect the vulnerable and empower the marginalised (including women and persons with disabilities) ensure that nobody is left behind on the path towards sustainable development.



SDG 2 – Zero Hunger

The right to food is the most basic of human rights. UNRWA safeguards this right through the provision of cash assistance and basic food items to the most vulnerable Palestine refugees who would otherwise be unable to meet their food consumption needs. The Agency also provides emergency cash and food assistance in times of crisis to reduce the suffering of affected families.

¹ <http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-1-no-poverty.html>

² https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_Rainbow/Documents/Levels%20of%20living_pov_2017_03e.htm

³ <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/emergency-appeals/syria-regional-crisis-emergency-appeal-2019>

⁴ https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/survey_on_the_economic_status_of_palestine_refugees_in_lebanon_2015.pdf



SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being

Universal health coverage means that all people have access to the quality health care they need, when and where they need these services, without financial hardship. At its heart is primary health care, which is about caring for people and helping them improve their health or maintain their well-being, rather than just treating a single disease or condition. UNRWA has been the main comprehensive primary health-care provider for Palestine refugees for some 70 years, while assisting the most vulnerable to access secondary and tertiary care. With 144 health centres and some 3,300 health staff across its five fields of operation, the Agency delivers over 8.5 million primary health care consultations per year.

Immunization, maternal and child health, including ante and post-natal care, and sexual and reproductive health, including family planning, have constituted core activities in UNRWA health centres for decades. In line with the changing health profile of the Palestine refugee population, the Agency has also placed increased emphasis on the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases and chronic conditions that require lifelong care, including diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular and chronic respiratory diseases.

Persistent insecurity, occasional outbreaks of violence, widespread poverty and restrictions on the movement of persons and goods have resulted in deep distress among Palestine refugees across many fields of UNRWA operation. In order to support their psychosocial well-being, mental health and psychosocial support are being mainstreamed across Agency programming. This is with a view to protecting and promoting the right of every Palestine refugee to achieve the best possible mental health and psychosocial well-being.



SDG 4 – Quality Education

Since it began operations in 1950, UNRWA has educated over two and a half million refugee children under a programme recognised as a significant educational force in the Middle East. Quality education helps young Palestine refugees understand the world in which they live and promotes values of tolerance, cultural identity and gender equality. Through its education system, the Agency aims to ensure that Palestine refugee students develop their full potential and become confident, innovative, questioning, thoughtful and open-minded individuals who uphold human rights, are proud of their Palestinian identity and contribute positively to the development of society and the global community.

The Agency operates 708 elementary and preparatory schools, including eight secondary schools in Lebanon, providing free basic education to over 530,000 Palestine refugee children. Students in UNRWA schools follow the host authorities' curricula and textbooks which the Agency complements with its own materials on human rights. UNRWA is committed to improving the quality and inclusiveness of its education programme, through the further professionalization of teachers and the enrichment of curriculum in order to strengthen pupils' competences and life skills. The Agency is also committed to ensuring equal opportunities and outcomes for boys and girls and to strengthening its disability programming so that the needs of children with special needs are adequately identified and responded to. In addition, through its Education in Emergencies (EiE) programme, UNRWA helps to ensure that Palestine refugee children can continue to access quality education and learning opportunities, even in times of crisis and conflict. The Agency's EiE programme has become renowned in the region and beyond: the host countries in which UNRWA works, as well as other UN agencies, continue to replicate its approaches and use the specific resources developed to further learning goals.



SDG 5 – Gender Equality

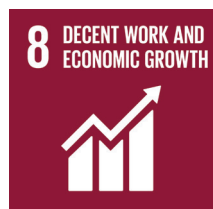
Advancing gender equality is not only critical for the equal enjoyment of human rights, it is also integral to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development. The Agency's commitment to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment is enshrined in its Gender Equality Policy (2007) and the Gender Equality Strategy 2016-2021. Building on a 'dual-track' approach that focusses on changes in both organizational culture and front line service delivery, the Agency has also, since 2009, taken a multi-sectoral approach to ending gender-based violence by: (i) ensuring that survivors have access to a range of preventative and rehabilitative services provided through UNRWA programmes and external service providers; and (ii) engaging community members in prevention and awareness-raising. In addition, the Agency addresses the gendered impact of crises and emergencies, focusing on ensuring the delivery of gender-sensitive programming to those affected.



SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation

Access to potable water and basic sanitation is essential for human life and provides the foundation for good health and an adequate standard of living. Almost one third of the Palestine refugee population lives in 58 camps across the five fields of UNRWA operation. Starting out as temporary settlements, these camps have evolved into highly built up spaces with inadequate water supplies and sanitary conditions. Through its Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Programme, the Agency aims to ensure

that living conditions in camps meet minimum acceptable standards, prioritizing projects that address water supply and sewerage networks that have suffered as a result of years of planning and resource deficits. UNRWA provides camps with water and sanitation, including solid waste management and water and sewerage maintenance and rehabilitation services. Nowhere are these services more crucial than in Gaza where Palestine refugees rely almost completely on a coastal aquifer. As groundwater levels have declined, sea water has infiltrated from the nearby Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, the aquifer has been contaminated by nitrates from the uncontrolled flow of sewage and use of fertilizers. Today, 96 per cent of the water from the aquifer is not safe for drinking.



SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth

Palestine refugees face high levels of unemployment. Amongst young people, especially female youth, levels of joblessness are quite alarming. Gaza suffers one of the highest rates of unemployment in the world as a result of the blockade while in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Israeli occupation and its entrenched system of access and movement restrictions continue to stifle economic growth, limiting Palestinian access to land, markets and livelihood opportunities. In Syria, the continuing

conflict has devastated the economy, with dramatic consequences for all, including Palestine refugees. While public services have been severely impacted, economic disruption, a fragile employment market and the scaling down of social security programmes have both created and compounded existing vulnerabilities. In Lebanon, within a context of high unemployment and intense competition for scarce job opportunities, Palestine refugees are among the most vulnerable and marginalized as they are barred from many professions and face discrimination in the labour market. In Jordan, unemployment remains a major challenge with young people bearing the brunt.

UNRWA promotes livelihoods by building the human capital of Palestine refugees and providing access to income generating opportunities and employment.

Since 1991, the UNRWA microfinance programme has been providing sustainable income-generation opportunities for Palestine refugees. Offering credit and complementary financial services to households, entrepreneurs and small-business owners to create and sustain jobs, reduce poverty and empower clients, in 2018, the 38,183 loans were extended to clients with a total value of US\$ 35,599,738 in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan and Syria. Women and youth continue to be prioritised as loan recipients. In 2018, Microfinanza – a global microfinance authority - awarded the Agency an A+ rating for social performance in Palestine, the only microfinance provider to have received this honour in the MENA region, situating it within the top five per cent of all microfinance programmes in the world.

Strengthening the capacities of Palestine refugees and providing them with the necessary skills to achieve their potential and access the job market is at the core of the Agency's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme. Here, vocational training and technical education is provided through eight Vocational Training Centres for over 7,500 Palestine refugees across all five fields of Agency operation and an additional 2,100 students in two teacher training institutes in Jordan and the West Bank. At these facilities, UNRWA provides a range of long and short-term trade and professional courses, maintaining strong links with and relevance to local labour markets. Employment rates for TVET graduates are high, helping to mitigate youth unemployment.

UNRWA also plays a role in creating employment – primarily as a major employer of Palestine refugees – and through emergency cash for work programmes in Gaza and Lebanon, as well as through camp improvement programming in camps. The socioeconomic conditions of Palestine refugees living in camps are characterized by a high degree of vulnerability as many do not have a stable source of income and rely on low-paying and insecure jobs. As households struggle financially, many are forced into negative coping strategies, including the selling of critical assets or cutting back on vital health and education expenses, activating a cycle that pushes them deeper into poverty. Agency camp improvement works support local economies by providing seasonal and/or daily employment for thousands of refugees while stimulating demand for construction materials from local suppliers. In addition, as part of the UNRWA response to poverty and unemployment across all fields of operation, the Agency partners with a range of public, non-governmental, intergovernmental, community based and private partners dedicated to poverty alleviation and enhanced livelihood opportunities for Palestine refugees, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalised.



SDG 10 – Reduced Inequality; SDG16 – Peace and Justice

UNRWA protection activities respond to the needs of Palestine refugees amidst increasing conflict and displacement in the region. The Syrian conflict has displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestine refugees, including tens of thousands to Jordan and Lebanon, while Gaza has endured repeated rounds of hostilities and violence. Over 50 years of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, including the more than ten years blockade in Gaza, has had serious and on-going consequences for the enjoyment

of the rights of Palestine refugees. Within this context, Palestine refugees do not fully enjoy basic human rights; many women and children are vulnerable to violence and abuse. Under the 2016 – 2021 MTS, UNRWA has significantly strengthened its capacity to provide protection to Palestine refugees through various initiatives, including protection trainings for staff, dedicated protection activities to ensure focus on the most vulnerable and the introduction of protection staff across all

of the rights of Palestine refugees. Within this context, Palestine refugees do not fully enjoy basic human rights; many women and children are vulnerable to violence and abuse.

Under the 2016–2021 MTS, UNRWA has significantly strengthened its capacity to provide protection to Palestine refugees through various initiatives, including protection trainings for staff, dedicated protection activities to ensure focus on the most vulnerable and the introduction of protection staff across all fields of Agency operation. UNRWA has an extensive programme to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and is also implementing a comprehensive initiative to address violence against children.

While many Palestine refugees face difficulties due to their protracted displacement, those with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. The Agency is committed to working with all Palestine refugees including persons with disabilities, to achieve their full human development potential.

UNRWA will continue to advocate for the protection and promotion of the rights of Palestine refugees, through documentation of rights violations and engagement with relevant duty bearers and the international human rights system.



SDG 17 – Partnerships

Partnerships are at the heart of the 2030 agenda as the global goals can only be achieved with a strong commitment to partnership and cooperation. Partnerships are also an important component of the UNRWA approach to meeting the humanitarian and human development needs of Palestine refugees. UNRWA enjoys long-term, strategic partnerships with UNESCO and WHO, for the management of its education and health programmes. These date back to the first years of UN operations in support of Palestine refugees. The combination of the Agency’s operational footprint and the technical expertise and global leadership of UNESCO and WHO have made a vital contribution to the successful delivery of education and health services to millions of Palestine refugees. These partnerships help to ensure that the SDGs are appropriately embedded in UNRWA programmes and have allowed the Agency to make substantive contributions to global public goods.

UNRWA also partners with a number of other UN agencies, including UNFPA, UNICEF, ILO, OHCHR and UNHCR, to support Palestine refugee access to quality services, as well as the Red Cross / Red Crescent movement and local and international NGOs, including the Norwegian Refugee Council, Humanity and Inclusion and Save the Children, amongst others.



A patient smiles at the doctor in the UNRWA Am'ari Health Centre in the West Bank.
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united nations relief and works agency
for palestine refugees in the near east

www.unrwa.org

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of some 5.5 registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip to achieve their full potential in human development, pending a just solution to their plight. UNRWA services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.