



One Year On: Implementing the Colonna Report at UNRWA

Annual Report
June 2024 - June 2025

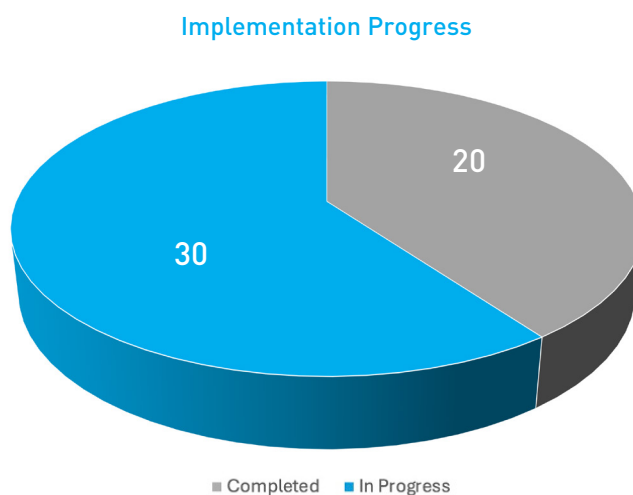
Safeguarding Neutrality,
Strengthening Trust



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Executive Summary

One year on from the publication of the Independent Review of Mechanisms and Procedures to Ensure Adherence by UNRWA to the Humanitarian Principle of Neutrality¹ – informally ‘the Colonna Report’ – the Agency has made significant progress implementing its recommendations. UNRWA has fully implemented twenty of the report’s fifty recommendations (40 per cent), while the remaining thirty are at various stages of active implementation. This progress highlights the urgency with which UNRWA has responded to the report’s findings, and demonstrates the organisation’s commitment to expanding existing neutrality safeguards and accountability systems. UNRWA’s implementation of the Colonna Report is rooted in a longer-term transformation aimed at building systems and strengthening institutional culture.



Despite major operational shocks – including the ongoing conflict in Gaza, new restrictive legislation passed by the Israeli Knesset, and persistent financial uncertainty – UNRWA has stayed the course, achieving results across all eight categories identified in the Colonna Report, namely: (1) engagement with donors, (2) governance, (3) management and internal oversight, (4) staff neutrality, (5) installations, (6) education, (7) unions, and (8) enhanced cooperation with other UN agencies. The reforms are supported by enhanced internal governance mechanisms, a reinforced oversight structure, and improved tools for due diligence, third-party monitoring, and field-level implementation support. A dedicated implementation architecture has been established, including a detailed High-Level Action Plan with timelines, indicators, and risk mitigation measures, coordinated by an Implementation Support Team under the leadership of the Deputy Commissioner-General for Operational Support.

Over the last year, UNRWA has worked closely with key stakeholders to ensure transparency and shared ownership of the implementation process. Regular Member States briefings have been held in Geneva, New York, and other capitals, complemented by quarterly written updates and detailed reporting during Advisory Commission meetings and SubCom meetings. The support of key donors – Austria, Canada, Denmark, the European Union, Germany, Norway, Japan, Luxembourg, and Switzerland – has been critical to the reform effort. To date, approximately US\$ 12 million has been mobilized to support implementation, through both earmarked and flexible contributions. Notwithstanding this progress, critical funding gaps remain in priority areas such as education reform, independent oversight, and protection.

To ensure a credible, measurable, and practical approach to implementation, UNRWA has adopted a “minimum viable product” (MVP) methodology to define completion of each recommendation. This approach allows recommendations to be marked as “complete” once their core functional objective is met—even as broader institutionalization or scale-up continues. This pragmatic model ensures transparency, accelerates delivery, and reflects the dynamic operating environment in which UNRWA operates.

¹ [Independent Review of Mechanisms and Procedures to Ensure Adherence by UNRWA to the Humanitarian Principle of Neutrality: \[https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/unrwa_independent_review_on_neutrality.pdf\]\(https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/unrwa_independent_review_on_neutrality.pdf\)](https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/unrwa_independent_review_on_neutrality.pdf)

The Agency's continued implementation of the Colonna Report over the coming 18 months will focus on deepening and sustaining these gains. Priorities include embedding neutrality across staffing, management, and programming structures; expanding the reach and quality of education oversight mechanisms; and enhancing cooperation with UN partners and host authorities. The measures taken so far have laid the foundation for a stronger, more accountable UNRWA that is better equipped to meet the needs of Palestine refugees and to uphold the humanitarian principles that underpin its mandate.

Implementation Overview

UNRWA has established a robust and centralized implementation architecture to operationalize the 50 recommendations of the Colonna Report. The High-Level Action Plan sets clear timelines, deliverables, and performance indicators, structured across short-, medium-, and long-term milestones. Strategic oversight is led by the Deputy Commissioner-General for Operational Support (DCG/OS), who serves as the senior executive responsible for guiding the implementation process across all levels of the Agency and reporting directly to the Commissioner-General and Secretary-General. Her leadership is supported by the Agency-wide Neutrality Task Force, a standing internal body chaired by the DCG/OS that brings together Directors and senior focal points from across the Agency to coordinate delivery, validate completion, resolve bottlenecks, and ensure implementation coherence across the eight thematic pillars of the Colonna Report. These arrangements reflect the Agency's efforts to operationalize Recommendation 11, which calls for high-level leadership and cross-functional coordination to drive forward implementation. Externally, the Advisory Commission (AdCom) plays a critical oversight and engagement role, having integrated neutrality and integrity as a standing agenda item in its biannual meetings and receiving regular technical briefings from UNRWA. While the dedicated AdCom Working Group on Neutrality has been formally endorsed by the Advisory Commission, it has not yet convened its first meeting. In parallel, Member States have actively supported implementation efforts through financial contributions and strategic dialogue. Together, these internal and external structures ensure institutional ownership, rigorous monitoring, and alignment with the expectations of the international donor community.

Operational coordination is led by the Implementation Support Team within the Executive Office. This dedicated team ensures coherence across departments and fields, liaises with donors and oversight bodies, and compiles regular progress updates. It also manages internal and external communications on the reform process, ensuring consistency of messaging and responsiveness to partner concerns. UNRWA has adopted a pragmatic and results-oriented methodology to track and assess progress in implementing the Colonna Report. Initially, the Agency approached completion through a broad, long-term reform lens. However, this approach has evolved towards a more adaptive, responsive, output driven determination of completion that simultaneously allows for measurable progress on implementation within the same wider context of continuous institutional reform. A recommendation is considered complete once its core objective has been met through clearly defined, functional, and replicable deliverables—such as the rollout of a policy, the operationalization of an oversight mechanism, or the initiation of a training programme. This does not imply that implementation ends at that point; in many cases, activities will continue to be refined, scaled, or institutionalized over time to ensure the sustainability of the change. This refined methodology ensures greater transparency and accountability. It also ensures that implementation efforts remain dynamic, measurable, and responsive to the complex operational environment in which UNRWA works.

To support transparency and external engagement, UNRWA has developed a suite of implementation tools. A digital tracking system has been designed to provide AdCom members with near real-time access to progress updates, status changes, and key documentation for each of the 50 recommendations. This is complemented by a system of quarterly reports summarizing achievements, challenges, and resource gaps. Additionally, mandated Integrity Briefings by the DCG/OS are delivered biannually in Geneva and New York, offering Member States and partners the opportunity for direct dialogue with UNRWA senior leadership and technical focal points. Finally, individual departments and/or the IST provide regular bilateral briefings upon request. Together, these tools ensure that implementation remains on track, responsive to stakeholder feedback, and aligned with the Agency's broader commitments to transparency, neutrality, and institutional integrity.

Highlights by category

Category 1: Engagement with Donors, Recommendation 1

Impact Headline: UNRWA has significantly enhanced transparency and strengthened trust with donors through structured and regular communication on integrity and financial matters.

Showcasing Impact: In 2024 – 2025, UNRWA institutionalized “Integrity Briefings” for donors in New York and Geneva, creating a regular platform to update Member States on neutrality measures, internal oversight efforts, and the Agency’s financial situation. These briefings complement quarterly briefings on the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) portal and targeted reporting during AdCom/SubCom meetings and high-level engagements by UNRWA’s senior leadership.

Status: 1/1 recommendation completed

Category 2: Governance, Recommendations 2–3

Impact Headline: UNRWA has strengthened strategic oversight and donor engagement by embedding neutrality into the governance framework of its Advisory Commission.

Showcasing Impact: Since 2024, neutrality has been a standing item on the Advisory Commissions biannual meetings, ensuring sustained Member State attention to integrity and reform. In June 2025, the Advisory Commission formally endorsed the creation of a dedicated AdCom Sub-Working Group on Neutrality and Integrity, a step that will institutionalize multilateral oversight and validation of progress against the 50 recommendations. In parallel, UNRWA launched a desk review of global governance models to explore options for enhanced strategic direction.

Status: 0/2 recommendations completed; 2 in progress



Category 3: Management and Internal Oversight, Recommendations 4–18

Impact Headline: UNRWA has reinforced its internal oversight and ethics functions, embedding neutrality and accountability across all fields of operation.

Showcasing Impact: In 2024–2025, UNRWA expanded the Department of Internal Oversight (DIOS) and Ethics Office by 17 staff, including field-based Ethics Officers and international investigators. A centralized 'Neutrality Investigations Unit' now handles all neutrality-related cases, while a new Code of Ethics has been rolled out Agency-wide with mandatory in-person training and field-based awareness sessions. Neutrality is also integrated into the Agency's Enterprise Risk Management system. Terms of References have been prepared for an external peer review of investigations, in line with Advisory Committee on Internal Oversight (ACIO) recommendations.

Status: 8/15 recommendations completed; 7 in progress

Category 4: Neutrality of Staff, Recommendations 18–28

Impact Headline: UNRWA has strengthened its ability to ensure staff uphold neutrality throughout recruitment and employment through enhanced screening, monitoring, and disciplinary systems.

Showcasing Impact: In 2025, UNRWA piloted a social media monitoring tool in Lebanon to detect public social media posts by staff that may violate neutrality standards. Based on lessons learned, the tool will be scaled up across fields, alongside an updated Neutrality Framework and mandatory onboarding questionnaire on political activities. Staff lists are regularly shared with host countries, and a screening mechanism has been introduced to detect potential red flags at the recruitment and promotion stages. A continuous vetting process is under development, with pilot initiatives informing the design of a scalable, risk-based system to regularly assess neutrality compliance across the workforce. Disciplinary processes have also been strengthened, supported by new Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), a whistle-blower policy, and expanded staff care capacity.

Status: 3/10 recommendations completed; 7 in progress

Category 5: Neutrality of Installations, Recommendations 29–33

Impact Headline: UNRWA has expanded its field-level safeguards to protect the civilian character of its facilities, including revised procedures, trainings, and proactive engagement with host countries and Israel.

Showcasing Impact: In 2025, UNRWA strengthened its integrated assessment methodology to systematically capture and document incidents of military misuse. Each of the five fields now has dedicated Humanitarian Principles Officers, conducting regular inspections using updated SOPs and questionnaires. Complementary efforts include piloting a bilingual e-learning course on humanitarian principles, placing awareness posters in every installation, and launching community outreach activities to reinforce the understanding of UNRWA's neutrality obligations. UNRWA has also regularly issued protest letters reporting violations of humanitarian principles and privileges and immunities.

Status: 1/5 recommendations completed; 4 in progress

Category 6: Education, Recommendations 34–41

Impact Headline: UNRWA is strengthening the adherence to neutrality of its education system in alignment with UN values and UNESCO standards through textbook reviews, enhanced teacher training, and expanded digital learning.

Showcasing Impact: In 2024–2025, UNRWA advanced textbook reviews in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, sharing initial findings with host countries and banning materials containing hate speech, antisemitism, or incitement to violence. A Community of Practice was established to support teachers in applying UN values and the Critical Thinking Approach in the classroom. Neutrality, human rights, and humanitarian principles training for teachers and school principals is being scaled up across fields. To boost transparency and quality, UNRWA is strengthening its Digital Learning Platform, rolling out classroom inspections, and implementing a new hotline for reporting problematic content.

Status: 4/8 recommendations completed; 4 in progress

Implementation in Action: Safeguarding Neutrality in Classrooms

- **Randomized school inspections** are conducted by Education Specialists and Quality Assurance Teams to monitor classroom content and provide feedback.
- **Rapid Review findings** inform lesson planning each semester, with teachers supported to apply the **Critical Thinking Approach (CTA)** using tailored planning tools.
- **In challenging contexts** like the West Bank, CTA has helped teachers address community concerns and foster solution-oriented dialogue with students.



A randomized classroom inspection in the West Bank. ©2025 UNRWA Photo

Category 7: Neutrality of Unions, Recommendations 42–47

Impact Headline: UNRWA is pursuing union reform to strengthen neutrality, gender equality and independent oversight in staff representation, aligned with UN standards.

Showcasing Impact: UNRWA is initiating a comprehensive reform of its staff representation structures, beginning with preparations to revise the outdated 1990 Staff Union Statute and align it with broader UN system practices. Consultations are underway to identify options for the independent neutrality vetting of union representatives, and the Agency is actively exploring mechanisms to outsource salary-setting functions to an impartial third-party. In parallel, the Women's Advisory Forum is advancing female leadership in union structures. These reforms aim to enhance legitimacy, transparency, and accountability in staff governance while reinforcing neutrality.

Status: 0/6 recommendations completed; 6 in progress

Category 8: Enhanced Cooperation, Recommendations 48–50

Impact Headline: UNRWA has deepened its integration into the humanitarian coordination system, enhancing partnerships and redefining its role with inter-agency mechanisms.

Showcasing Impact: In early 2025, UNRWA secured a new P-5 Senior Humanitarian Affairs Officer post through the UN Regular Budget to lead strategic engagement with the humanitarian system. This complements the Agency's strengthened participation in cluster mechanisms, Humanitarian Country Teams, and regional emergency preparedness fora. UNRWA also formalized partnerships with WFP, UNFPA, and IOM, and expanded staff training on pooled funding and coordination. Internally, a cultural shift is underway to reposition UNRWA as a proactive partner in joint planning and response.

Status: 3/3 recommendations completed

Looking Ahead

UNRWA remains committed to delivering on the full set of 50 recommendations outlined in the Colonna Report. As of mid-2025, 20 recommendations have been completed, with the remaining 30 actively under implementation. The Agency aims to complete at least 40 recommendations by the end of 2026, with remaining long-term actions—particularly those involving structural reform, funding or external coordination—continuing beyond that timeframe. Achieving this goal will require continued momentum, strengthened institutional capacity, and sustained donor support.

Several critical risks and dependencies must be carefully managed over the coming 18 months. Political conditions in key areas of operation, particularly in Gaza and the West Bank, pose significant constraints to implementation—both in terms of field access and operational continuity. Moreover, persistent underfunding, particularly in priority areas such as education reform, protection, and independent oversight, threatens to delay or dilute reform outcomes. UNRWA continues to work with partners to close these funding gaps and to build a more predictable and diversified resource base for implementation.

At the same time, the period ahead presents strategic opportunities. A priority will be to align Colonna implementation with the UNRWA Strategic Assessment which seeks to inform deliberations on how best to safeguard UNRWA's mandate under current conditions and guide decisions on the Agency's future role, structure, and sustainability. This integration offers an opportunity to embed neutrality, accountability, and governance reform into the Agency's core strategic vision. In parallel, partnerships are being deepened with key institutional actors—including UNESCO on education and host countries on information-sharing, staff vetting, and installation inspections.

Institutional sustainability will also be a key focus. This includes embedding reforms in Agency policies, training systems, and legal frameworks—ensuring that neutrality, integrity, and accountability remain standard practice. Expanded training for staff and managers and revised governance structures central to this effort.

The Agency remains attentive to the concerns raised by Member States, including host countries and donors. Specific issues—such as the role of host authorities in staff vetting—are being addressed through expanded safeguards, clearer protocols, and continued dialogue with Member States. UNRWA will maintain open channels for feedback and reporting, including through confidential briefings and public updates. Looking ahead, the Agency is determined to build on the progress achieved to date—consolidating reform gains, addressing remaining risks, and laying the foundations for an ever more transparent, accountable, and trusted institution.



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UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The United Nations General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees in the Agency's area of operations pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. UNRWA operates in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Tens of thousands of Palestine refugees who lost their homes and livelihoods due to the 1948 conflict continue to be displaced and in need of support, nearly 75 years on.