

GENEVA CONFERENCE CORE GROUP

MINUTES OF MEETING

2 December 2003, 10:30 – 13.15

UNRWA West Bank Field Office - Jerusalem

Participants:

List of Core Group participants attached

UNRWA Staff: Karen AbuZayd (DCG), Andrew Whitley (DER), Rene Aquarone (DEO), Paul McCann (CPIO), Luc Duchesne (ERPO)

Agenda:

See attached.

1. Welcome

The Deputy Commissioner General (DCG), Karen Abu Zayd, welcomed the Core Group (CG) participants, including Italy, which had joined the Core Group for the first time. She hoped that the Jordanian participants would be able to join the group via satellite phone. [In the end, no one from Jordan was able to participate; the PLO joined the meeting after it had begun.]

She informed the group that she and the Director of External Relations (DER), Andrew Whitley, had recently spent two days in Switzerland to prepare for the Conference. The first day was spent in Berne for meetings with Swiss officials and the second day in Geneva where they visited conference facilities and met with UN officials to benefit from past experience and get advice on rules and procedures.

The Deputy Head of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Fritz Froehlich, said that it was imperative to “line up” the thinking and perspectives of the HQ and the fields. He explained that the first day would be used for workshops where issues could be discussed at length. On the second day, the substance of the discussions would be drawn together.

The DCG said that a revised scenario had been prepared, under which there would be no formal speeches. She was hopeful that everybody would agree that this would result in a more productive meeting.

2. Building Common Positions

The DER said that Mr. Froehlich had mentioned the need to reconcile all concerns. He was pleased to say that all involved had engaged in formal and informal meetings

between donors. This was exactly what the organizers were looking for in order to reach a common understanding. UNRWA received several letters and papers from various actors including the PLO and the EC, on behalf of a group of six CG members.

He hoped to reach a high degree of consensus on issues and format to achieve results and to have broad support from a wide range of countries not only the traditional donors. There was clearly a need to have at least four solid and well focused workshops. A pre-notification for the Geneva Conference will be sent shortly to about 60 countries which are regular supporters of the Agency or else with which UNRWA is currently in contact about possible support for its work.

Relation between the Core Group and the Steering Group

The DCG explained that the Steering Group, which last met on 25 September, included all participants. The next meeting will be in Amman (11 December) and the invitations have been sent. She hoped that the group would be able to preserve a unified position after engaging in talks with their capitals and avoid reopening discussions on subjects already agreed within the Core Group. The Steering Committee meeting would essentially be an information meeting. The meeting had been planned in such a way that people could return home from Amman the same day. She hoped the regular Core Group participants would attend so that they could inform the wider audience of the progress made over the past two months. She added that most Core Group participants see the situation through an oPt lens but the perspective for the Conference must be much broader, taking into account the needs of the refugees in the Agency's three other Fields.

Summary Document

A near-final draft of a one-page summary of the Conference, including its proposed new title (agreed with SDC) was distributed to participants. This document, once finalized, will become a public document and will help everybody reaching a common understanding on the purpose of the Conference. The DER invited comments. Switzerland proposed several minor changes in the text. He said that the word "practical" should be replaced by "concrete" in the fourth paragraph (...*debates, which will focus on concrete conclusions and recommendations*).

Participation of Israel

The issue of the possible participation of Israel sparked off a lively debate.

The US said that it was fine to invite Israel but it was important to get UNRWA's views first. The DCG said that the Agency's working assumption had been that Israel would attend, as this was an exceptional conference in Geneva of all stakeholders in UNRWA's work. The host countries had not said anything on the subject. The US representative asked about Syria's views on the subject. She stressed that the subject should be discussed with all concerned. The DCG replied that it had not so far been formally discussed; but that the host countries would have an opportunity to present their opinion at the forthcoming Steering Committee meeting.

The EC questioned why Israel should be invited. The DCG replied that it was important that they see for themselves what was involved in the Agency's humanitarian work. Not inviting them could lead to problems. The Netherlands said that Israel's presence could distract from the main guests, the donors and the host countries. The Director of the Executive Office (DEO), René Aquarone, noted that the Humanitarian Liaison Working Group in Geneva had exceptionally extended its membership to include Israel when subjects of concern to the latter were discussed. From a political point of view, their exclusion would create an issue and could represent a danger with regard to the press.

Sweden said that if Israel was invited, national statements should not be made, otherwise it would politicize the event. Ireland stated that any anti-Israel criticism would not create a positive impression with new donors. The UK asked if UNRWA had done a risk analysis of the benefits and dangers of inviting Israel. The DER said that UNRWA's sense was that, on balance, it was better to invite Israel, taking into account that there would not be any official statements. Canada stressed that Israel should be invited. He said that no matter what, the event would be politicized. He added that focusing strictly on economic issues might help reduce the possibility of politicizing the event. The DCG said that the Israeli Deputy Ambassador to the UN had recently made vitriolic public statements in the GA about the Agency and the Commissioner-General. This could happen again. The EC stated that it would look strange to invite Israel and not Palestinian refugees to attend. The DCG said that the PLO and the PA would attend. They represented the refugees. Many were refugees themselves.

Ireland asked if it was possible to invite Israel as an observer. Would they consider that as an insult? It was certainly better than not inviting them at all. The US reiterated that Israel had to be invited. Not to do so would be astounding. It was important not to sideline the government with whom UNRWA had such a crucial relationship.

The UK said that they were not convinced of the added value of having Israel at the conference. Was Israel interested? Were they being invited only for political reasons? If them, why not others? The EC mentioned that the Conference was about debating the future of humanitarian assistance. Was this Israel's role? The DCG responded that the new title mentioned partnership; and Israel was a partner.

Sweden said that the risks had to be balanced. What were the risks of not inviting Israel? The DER said that it could create problems in the Agency's future work. It was important for them to hear about practical issues faced by the Agency. Norway asked if Israel had ever attended an UNRWA meeting. The DCG said no. Norway then suggested to simply keep them informed. The DCG said the issue raised the question of what to respond to those not invited who wanted to attend.

The DEO commented that there were drawbacks in not inviting Israel. The UN-Israel relation is a complex one and Israel often feels excluded. Not inviting them could cause a scandal. Israel could use the press to say that this was a forum to bash the country. The UK said that this was not a good enough reason for inviting Israel. However, the US agreed with the DEO's comments. The purpose of the meeting was to increase financial and political support for the Agency. There could be risks in not involving Israel. It could also affect US ability to provide support.

The PA said that the presence of Israel would lead the PLO and host countries to discuss the role of Israel and the essence of the problem. He said that he was not against their participation in principle, but it would be a surprise to see them participate in this high-level conference for the first time. Ireland said that Israel must be consulted. They may decline the invitation. Netherlands said that the meeting was also about planning for the future. Israel would have to be invited at some stage for planning purposes.

Switzerland said the issue was: “Is this a normal UN meeting or a simply a working meeting?” The DCG said that it had been agreed that this was not a normal UN event. She concluded that there was not a full consensus on this issue. UNRWA would not invite Israel before holding further discussions. The Agency would informally consult the Israeli Government and inform it about the conference.

3. Revised scenario

Format

The DCG said that the preparation of the event was a heavy process that involves consultants, UNRWA and the donors. Day 1 will begin with a video that would constitute a document interesting to all – both historical and contemporary (UNRWA’s Chief of Public Information Office will be responsible). Workshops will then take place all that day. Among the workshops there was a need for a common thread. It will be important to have agreed conclusions from all groups. The Swiss government has offered a dinner for all in the evening.

On Day 2, there will be a short inauguration of the plenary session probably by the Swiss Foreign Minister, if she has not spoken the night before, followed by video-link to a UNRWA school in Amman. Then there will be an address by the SDC Director-General and by the Commissioner General. The panel debate (topics to be discussed) will follow and the summaries of the workshops will be presented after lunch for discussion and hopefully endorsement.

DER pointed out there would not be a pre-conference event, as previously discussed, unless there was support for such activity at the Core Group meeting. With regard to the participation of Palestinian refugees in the work of the conference – a suggestion made by several CG members - there would be several opportunities for their voice to be heard. The PA had suggested a survey of refugee needs. How it would be conducted has not yet been decided. There had to be an emphasis on practical needs, to avoid political statements and ensure proper discussions.

The UK asked if the Conference was a “one off” event. The DCG confirmed that it was but said that the outcome of the Conference would be followed up. One possibility is to include the conclusions in the annual Report of the Commissioner General. The DER said that another option was to discuss the outcome at the forthcoming General Assembly where the renewal of the Agency’s mandate will come up for discussion in the next GA session. The DCG said that the upcoming mandate renewal could be another reason for inviting Israel to the Conference.

Panel Debate

Discussion took place on possible topics for discussion during the proposed high-level panel debate.

DER suggested that one topic could be protection. The PA said that the issue of protection could mean several things in the oPt. There was also the need to differentiate between refugees and non-refugees. Discussions have taken place with UNHCR on protection issues. His opinion was that it would be better to discuss access-related issues. The EC asked what was meant by protection: legal? shelter? education? The DER responded that the idea was centered on the concept of human security: the monitoring of needs and addressing vulnerability. The international community was responsible for the well being of the refugees including their safety. The DCG said that this was an important academic debate. Canada said that as the event would bring together top aid officials there was a need for a topic that would entice them to provide more funding. It was important to raise their awareness of UNRWA. The subject of “protection” had political overtones.

- Ireland suggested “Reducing the risks and vulnerability in the lives of refugees”.
- The EC suggested “Providing support to refugees”.
- DER said the US had suggested “UNRWA as a force of stability”.
- Switzerland said that there was a need to discuss human security and conflict resolution. It was time to redefine the problem so as to attract funding. In this regard, the DCG remarked that discussions should not focus on the background of the conflict.
- Sweden suggested “Requirements for an exit strategy for UNRWA”. The DCG discouraged this suggestion, saying that this kind of discussion made the refugees and others very nervous.
- The EC then suggested “Position of Palestinian refugees in a future state”.
- Coming back to the stability concept, Ireland said that stability meant in effect: “Stay where you are”. The DCG framed this as: “Promoting stability in the lives of refugees.” This was not deemed attractive enough by the US.
- Norway proposed: “Living conditions of refugees compared to non-refugees”.
- The PA suggested: “Providing a better life for refugees.” Several participants responded positively to this suggestion.

ECHO said that, whatever the topic, it was important the panel theme be clarified as soon as possible. Protection was a core issue. In response, the US pointed out that the debate had to focus on the region as a whole, not just the oPt.

Norway said that everything must be wrapped up at the end of the Conference. He feared that the event could finish without any conclusions. There was a need for a strong final message. The UK acknowledged the value of the panel debate but said that the outcome of the workshops was important and deserved more discussion time than was provided for in the draft scenario before them. DER said that the rationale for the current scenario was that it would create a lively start which would energize the rest of the Conference.

Switzerland suggested the establishment of a small working group to define the topic of the debate. He said it was important to have something professional with inputs from

groups like the International Crisis Group (ICG) which could add substance to the discussions. The DCG asked for volunteers to join a small working group led by Switzerland to define the theme of the debate and report back to the CG. Norway and the PA agreed to work with Switzerland on the subject.

DER sought the endorsement of participants not to re-open the debates held at the CG at the next Steering Committee meeting.

4. Working Group/Workshop Themes

The DER said that it was important to agree on the themes (he proposed that for practical reasons there be a maximum of four) and then chose the countries to articulate the discussions. The DCG said that there would need to be leaders and sub-leaders, so as to engage as many people as possible. The DER said that if UN agencies wanted to join and lend their expertise, they would be welcome.

Italy said that there should be a discussion on how to involve the Gulf countries. The DER responded that Gulf countries would participate in the Conference. The DCG said that in terms of the relationship to their UN “assessed contribution”, some of the Gulf countries had become good donors. The DER informed the meeting that the Com-Gen is planning a visit to the Gulf countries in January when the subject of the Geneva Conference would be raised with high-level officials.

DER than outlined the state of play on a number of proposed topics, using the communication from the EC-led group of donors as a guide.

Promoting the Well Being of Palestinian Children and Youth

Sweden is ready to lead the proposed workshop on children. The PLO said that the title “Promoting the well being of Palestinian children and youth” was OK, but needed to be elaborated.

New Approaches to Resources Mobilization

The DER said that the proposed workshop on “Resource mobilization” which was one of the “raisons d’être” of the Conference would incorporate discussions on management issues, as the efficient utilization of donor funds was an integral part of the subject matter. He hoped that Norway would take the lead on this.

Canada said that the theme “Resource mobilization” was out of place in the context of the other subjects under discussion. There was a need to focus on issues that would catch the attention of senior officials. The DCG agreed that a new title may be necessary for this topic, but emphasized the need for a public forum on this issue.

The Netherlands suggested instead that the workshop focus on “Resource management”. This was agreed to by most participants. Canada agreed that this was a good title.

Housing, infrastructure and environment

The DER said that this topic was a good one supported by most countries in their responses to UNRWA. The EC-led group had proposed including environment. UNRWA agreed. This would also be a good theme for host countries to take on.

Integration of Refugees into the Socio-economic Development

The DER said that skills training (information technology and vocational training) was a non-controversial theme that could be appealing to the PLO or the US. The word “integration” used by the EC-led group had, however, raised some concerns. Norway suggested using the term “participation” instead. The US suggested “Empowering Palestinian refugees to participate in regional socio-economic development.” Many participants liked this suggestion. There was consensus in the meeting that in one form or another this topic needed to be addressed.

Obstacles to Service Delivery

Lengthy discussion ensued on this subject. The DER said that he was aware of the strong feelings of the EC about this issue. He warned, however, that the Conference focus should not be just on the oPt, where this topic (“access” issues) was hottest. In its defense, the EC noted that one way to increase the efficiency of the Agency was to decrease obstacles to service delivery. The DCG said that it was important to present the issue in a different way and give it a positive spin.

The US shared the EC’s concerns about the importance of the issue but said that the Conference was not the best venue to discuss such a sensitive subject. Bilateral channels were more appropriate. This was done everyday in discussions through existing channels. Its discussion at the Conference could cause a big stink. The EC responded that the exercise had to be meaningful. The problem of access was a real one and could not be ignored. It affected financial contributions of donors. The DCG commented that access would undoubtedly be talked about but another name for it would be preferable. She pointed out that the subject would also be dealt with in other workshops (e.g. access to education, employment, etc.).

Sweden said that the focus should be on restrictions on movement, adding that without such restrictions there would be no need for the emergency appeal. Norway said there were two ways to discuss the issue: in each workshop or in a specific workshop. Ireland said that agreement must be reached with the US. He suggested “Government restriction on UNRWA’s operations”. The US asked what others hoped to achieve by having such a discussion in Geneva. The UK said that the problem should neither be underplayed (not doing justice to the issue) nor overplayed (creating problems). If managed and facilitated properly, it need not become “Israel bashing”. It was a very legitimate problem. The discussions and its contents could be controlled. The title: “Risks to delivering aid to the region” was suggested.

The Netherlands remarked that the aim of this subject was to make UNRWA as efficient as possible in the region. It was thus important to discuss how to achieve this result. Bashing a country will not get anybody anywhere.

The EC acknowledged the US concerns, but said there also had to be reciprocal understanding of the EC’s point of view. UNRWA had acknowledged the importance

of the problem. Socio-economic development needed freedom of movement. The workshop's report should describe how donors saw the access problem and make recommendations on how to solve it. The EC was ready to chair this workshop.

Switzerland said that access was a cross-cutting theme that would have to be addressed by the leaders of each workshop. There had to be a common and agreed format for the work of each Working Group and conference workshop. Access would be discussed in any case.

The US said that it could not accept any discussions on this subject in a separate workshop. She had clear instructions on this matter. She agreed that this was a cross-cutting issue and could be dealt with in that way. The problem (in the oPt) was a political one and could not be solved by UNRWA. It needed to be addressed through political means. A compromise could be reached if the access question were raised in a well fleshed-out manner in each other workshop. The UK agreed to this position if the workshop discussions were well structured.

Sweden said the purpose of the Conference was to increase the donor base and the understanding of the main issues. If the theme (of access) was coming up in all fields, it deserved to be a topic on its own. UNRWA has to speak out about real issues. Year after year, it was asking for more and more money for the Emergency Appeal in the oPt. If donors did not give voice to the real problems, they would not be solved. If this was not done, the Agency would soon be asking for a billion dollars.

The PA said that the Conference was not only about raising money but also about raising awareness of the refugee problem. Access should be discussed. It was neither a technical nor a political issue. The Conference should not include political statements but should make recommendations on practical issues. The EC said that the Conference should expose the problems of refugees and allow them to be taken up to higher political echelons. The refugee problem was a political problem. The EC agreed with the US that the Conference should not be used as a political tool. It should, however, be used to inform Israel of pro-active solutions.

Canada commented that access was both a technical problem and a cross-cutting issue. In his view, it did not lend itself to a workshop. This would be a hard sell to CIDA. Senior officials would not be interested in coming to Geneva to discuss a technical issue. Senior managers should return home knowing more about the organization and committed to increasing funding.

The DER said that the theme "Strengthening the capacity of service providers" had been proposed in the past as an alternative for this topic. The US said management issues could be discussed in this workshop, but the US could not agree to a simple rewording of the access issue. The EC noted that this was a problem that needed to be further discussed. Access was a major problem for UNRWA. The DCG said that it was a major problem in every humanitarian conflict. She suggested that the EC and the DER work on it. The EC said that the additional staff in UNRWA working on the access issue represented an additional cost to the Agency.

The DER concluded by saying that UNRWA would redraft the contents of each workshop and then come back to the EC and the US to see if they could find common

ground. Recommendations on the format for each working group (guidelines on their work) would also be made in the coming days and distributed to participants.

5. Conference participation

The DCG said that it was important to reach a consensus on this issue. UNRWA was planning to invite the three umbrella NGO organizations based in Geneva: InterAction, the International Council for Voluntary Action (ICVA) and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR).

The US said there should be no NGOs in the plenary session. The DCG responded by asking whether Washington was aware that there would be no speeches and thus no opportunity for institutional statements by the NGOs. The US said no.

The EC questioned why the presence of NGOs was not welcomed by the US, adding that they work in the refugees camps and could bring an interesting perspective to the Conference. The US responded that NGOs might approach UNRWA in a way that was different from donors and might table specific demands. The event must be managed so that it is not hijacked and politicized.

Switzerland pointed out that donors are paying NGOs to do the work on the ground. They cannot be told they are not invited. The UK stressed the need for guidelines on the participation of NGOs. The DCG said that there were some lingering concerns on the subject within UNRWA, but the prevailing view was that the three umbrella organizations should be invited. However, she pointed out that UNRWA does not do a lot of work with NGOs. The EC said that they could participate in the Working Groups preparing the Conference. The DER agreed, but said that only the three umbrella organizations should attend the Conference workshops. The EC agreed.

6. Next steps

The DCG said that pre-invitations would be sent shortly and would include the one page summary document about the Conference. If other countries and organizations were interested in attending the Conference, the Core Group would be consulted.

The Steering Committee meeting on 11 December will provide the participants with an overview of latest developments from an UNRWA/Switzerland perspective. It will be an information meeting. UNRWA would have documents ready for the meeting.

The next Core Group meeting will be in January 2004, at a date to be announced.

Geneva Conference Core Group - (2 December 2003)

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Mr. Saji Salameh Khalil
Director General
PLO Refugee Affairs Department
Ramallah

Second “Core Group” Meeting: Jerusalem, 2 December, 10.30am

Provisional Agenda

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|----|-------------------------------|------------|
| 1. | Introduction | D/CG |
| 2. | Building Common Positions | DER |
| 3. | Revised Conference Scenario | D/CG & DER |
| 4. | Working Group/Workshop Themes | DER |
| 5. | Conference Participation | D/CG |
| 6. | Next steps | DER |