

Geneva Conference Core Group Minutes of Meeting

UNRWA West Bank Field Office
Jerusalem, 17 October 10.30 am

Participants:

Jerusalem:

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS ATTACHED

UNRWA Staff: DCG, DER, DEO, DUO/WB. SERPO (RH)

Amman (via telephone):

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS ATTACHED

UNRWA Staff: SERPO (ET)

1. Welcome

The Deputy Commissioner-General welcomed the Core Group participants to the meeting, and asked them to introduce themselves. She reminded the group that the papers distributed at the meeting regarding the themes and agenda for the Geneva Conference were all provisional. In preparing the preliminary list of themes UNRWA had consulted with academics from Jordan, the oPt and Geneva.

She introduced Mr Meinrad Studer from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), in Geneva, to address the meeting.

Mr Studer outlined the importance of establishing a link with Geneva at this early point in the conceptualization of the Conference to ensure that everyone is on the same track. He then outlined the key concepts behind the invitation of Switzerland to host the meeting. This included the promotion of Geneva as a centre for humanitarianism – it is the birth place of the Red Cross and the headquarters of many international agencies. The Geneva diplomatic missions have a good understanding of humanitarian issues and there are numerous networks relevant to these issues. Switzerland would like to see the Geneva Conference embedded into this broader humanitarian context. An outcome would be greater awareness of UNRWA and assistance to the Agency to reach out to donors. In addition, Geneva is an excellent location to avoid some of the potential political pitfalls. Clearly the conference needs to be more than the regular Amman MDM. In addition it needs to have a broader focus than just looking at the Agency's donor base. There are numerous ways of looking at the work of UNRWA. Locating the meeting in Geneva means that the Agency can draw on the various networks and expertise located in the city. Switzerland is willing to assume the role of co-chair and host for the conference, in addition to assisting with the establishment of contacts with Geneva-based organizations and Permanent Missions

2. Composition of the Core Group

The Director of External Relations, outlined the process to date for determining the composition of the Core Group. It began with an invitation from the Deputy Commissioner-General at the 25 September meeting to interested parties. In determining membership, the Agency has also been keen to ensure a balance of representation. Jordan has offered to represent the other host countries, following consultations among themselves. In addition it is important to consider financial interests as well. There is around 45% representation by the EU which approximately reflects their financial contribution. It is also seen as important to have the adequate participation of other non-EU countries: the USA, Canada and Norway – these countries have had a heavy involvement with the Agency for many years. In considering the composition of the group it was also seen as necessary to ensure a manageable number of participants, to ensure that consensus can be reached and decisions taken expeditiously.

The Steering Committee, to which the Core Group will periodically report back, includes all participants of the regular Informal Meeting of Major Donor Countries and Host Governments in Amman. UNRWA proposes that the Core Group be convened every six weeks, to provide an opportunity for regular updates and discussion. UNRWA proposes that the Core Group continue to be convened in Jerusalem, while the Steering Committee meetings be held in Amman. UNRWA will act as the secretariat for the preparatory meetings. It is important to note that the Core Group is not a closed shop; the Agency is not restricting membership, and would be pleased to receive offers of practical help in preparing the Conference from other donor countries.

The representative from Jordan raised the difficulties for representatives based in Amman attending the meetings in Jerusalem.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General responded that it might be possible to alternate between Jerusalem and Amman; but this would need to be investigated.

Other meeting participants later stated that they would prefer it if the meetings could remain in Jerusalem, as most Core Group participants were located either there or else in Ramallah.

3. Proposed Meeting Arrangements

The Director of External Relations spoke to the paper handed out during the meeting: *Geneva Conference Draft Scenario: Meeting Arrangements*. Regarding the working **title** of the Conference, *Meeting the Challenges: High Level Conference of UNRWA and its Partners on Palestine Refugees*, while acknowledging that it was rather general and anodyne, the title spelt out broadly the overarching theme of the conference. In terms of the **location**, the International Conference Centre in Geneva was clearly the most suitable venue. The earliest date that space is available there is on the 7 and 8 June 2004. This requires postponement of the meeting from the first week of May as originally envisaged (the new proposed dates still need to be confirmed after checking the UN calendar). **Participation** in the meeting will include the host countries of UNRWA, the PLO/PA, the regular donors to the Agency and other states that might be interested in future

collaboration – all by invitation. This would involve between 60-65 delegations. UNRWA envisages that delegations would be represented by Permanent Representatives to the UN, heads of offices and Embassies in the Middle East region, and senior officials from capitals. In total, we estimate there would be between 200-250 people present. The Agency would be hoping for representation at the Director or Director General level. Switzerland has offered to **chair** the meeting and UNRWA would be looking at four vice-chairs. They would act as the chairs of the Thematic Working Groups preparing the Conference and then the parallel Conference Workshops. The selection of **vice-chairs** would be a function of the Core Group. It would obviously be desirable to have a balance between the host countries, the EU and other members. UNRWA would like to restrict **Observers** at the Conference to selected inter-governmental and UN agencies with whom the Agency has an established relationship. The Agency does not propose to invite NGOs to attend the meeting. **Media** would be restricted to the morning plenary session on the first day and the closing session on the last day. The secretariat would complete a **summary record** of each session for the Chair, forming the basis of the Chair's summary. To prevent lengthy argument over language, there would be no agreed or negotiated conclusions. Instead there might be a short final declaration - but this remains a matter for discussion. There are views for and against having a "Geneva Declaration" – the discussion process involved has the potential to be hijacked by those wishing to politicize the text; at a minimum, it could become a distraction from the substance of the meeting. In principle, senior officials from capitals would expect to be asked to endorse a joint declaration, spelling out the way ahead, as one outcome of the Conference.

Discussion on proposed meeting arrangements

The representative from Canada suggested that the proposed name of the Conference was fine as a working title, but that it would be good to look at something potentially more inspiring. Separately, she said it would be sensible not to be too prescriptive regarding the requested level of participation; invitations to "senior officials" might be more apt.

European Commission (Bret  ch  ) – By not inviting a country to the Conference there is a potential to threaten their future involvement in the Agency's work.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General replied that the Agency would not exclude any country that really wanted to attend but that it was important not to extend a blanket open invitation, as the meeting would end up like the General Assembly.

Canada – A clearly focused, and carefully framed, invitation to the meeting will be crucial. It must clearly state what the meeting is and is not aiming to achieve. The representative from the Netherlands added that the title should include the word "humanitarian."

- The Deputy Commissioner-General agreed that the invitation would need to be carefully crafted. She confirmed that all those currently attending the MDM, including its observers, would be invited.

The representative from ECHO suggested that the involvement of NGOs should be reconsidered. A possible compromise position could be to invite an umbrella body such as the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) whose members are actively engaged in the oPt. Switzerland (Studer) suggested broadening this to include ICWA and the US-based representative body: InterAction. He added that it would be necessary to be clear why the meeting is distinguishing between observers and participants.

Switzerland (Fröhlich) – The meeting should not just focus on the oPt and humanitarian issues as there are the other three Fields of UNRWA’s operations to consider. He added that there should be more involvement by UN agencies, in particular WHO and UNICEF. In addition, groups such as the International Crisis Group should be considered – to provide a broader analytical focus.

- The Director of the Executive Office responded to the question of “observer status” by stating that this distinction stems from the General Assembly to which UNRWA reports; he agreed that the reality is that it would make little difference.
- The Deputy Commissioner-General added that the Conference would have only two plenary sessions; at the workshops all the invited delegates would be able to participate fully. Regarding participation, she agreed that the three NGO representative bodies suggested should attend the Conference.

USA – Agreed that NGOs should not be invited to the meeting as there was the potential for politicizing the meeting. Clearly representation needed to be limited to responsible actors.

Switzerland (Fröhlich) suggested that there should be a range of pre-events rather than parallel events which could diffuse the meeting. The pre-events could then feed into the meeting and build on the various themes.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General responded by stating that the organization of the conference would involve a great deal of work for UNRWA, and she did not want to see the Agency overburdened with too many events. At this stage it was envisaged that the parallel events would include activities such as art or photo exhibitions.

Regarding the issue of a declaration or conclusion, Canada (Sinclair) stated that any statement that involved negotiating a consensus should be avoided, as it could waste a lot of time. Agreement on action plans resulting from the Workshops would be more appropriate. The PLO suggested the issuing of a press statement but added that a declaration could change the nature of the meeting to a political stage.

- The Director of the Executive Office stated that there should not be major negotiations of an agreed text: instead he proposed a statement of support which would be discussed and developed long before the Conference. This would be an embodiment of the general aims of UNRWA, going beyond a press statement. It could include a commitment to the mandate of the Agency and to refugees. The other outcome of the meeting would be the summary of the conference which would be the responsibility of the Chair to endorse as a fair rendition of events.

The EC agreed with this position.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General said everyone agreed there should be a chairman's summary; but agreement was still needed on the question of the statement.

The USA supported the idea of a short statement which would offer support to UNRWA and its mandate and Palestine refugees in general.

4. Conference Scenarios

The Deputy Commissioner-General summarized the agenda for the two day Conference before asking for suggestions on the proposed themes.

Switzerland (Fröhlich) stated that the agenda did not provide enough time for in-depth discussion between the various agencies.

- The Director of External Relations responded that three hours each had been allotted for the workshops.

Switzerland (Studer) - suggested that it could be useful to commence the Conference in a more innovative manner. Rather than having lots of statements, perhaps it could be good to show a film on the work of the Agency or outline the life of refugees in the region. This would then set the stage early for a meaningful debate. It was critical to involve people from the beginning and not have them sitting for half the first day. It would be important to ensure that the numbers attending the workshops were manageable – to ensure active participation it was important not to have 100 people attending a workshop. Workshops should be limited to 50 people – therefore it might be useful to consider more, and smaller, parallel workshops. It would also be important to develop mechanisms for feeding the results of the workshops into the plenary sessions.

Canada (Primeau) - said that from past experience it would be useful to distinguish between sessions with an focus on educating participants about UNRWA and more technical sessions which would focus on an identification of problems and solutions.

Netherlands – agreed with Switzerland that it was important to start the Conference with something attention-grabbing, which could assist participants to engage with the Palestine refugee question. This would be particularly important for new donors.

- Regarding how best to educate those new to the work of the Agency, the Deputy Commissioner-General responded by stating that this was the idea behind the proposed pre-conference one-day event.

DFID added that it was important to engage the participants with a story of the region before they could be intellectually stimulated. The European Commission (Bretéché) added that it would be appropriate to have representation of the refugee community given they were ultimately what the Conference was about. The PLO and Jordan responded by stating that the issue of representation (“Who speaks for the refugees?”) was complex and sensitive. It would not be practical to have a representative from each field. Instead the host countries and UNRWA directors could speak about the refugees and their situation.

The Director of UNRWA Operations, West Bank – highlighted his experience during the recent Stockholm conference where a group of Palestinian children had made a moving

presentation. Given that 80% of the community is under 30, they are an important group. Having children might reduce the political sensitivities. Sweden supported this idea.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General concluded that we were not discussing political representation. She added that most of UNRWA's employees were refugees; they also could thus provide a perspective on the situation of refugees. Depending on the themes of the workshops some of these staff would be present.

Switzerland (Studer) added that it is critical to ensure a human and emotional touch to the Conference. This could include the use of films or even a live hook-up via video with a refugee camp at the start of the Conference. DFID supported this view, adding that the voice of refugees could be the biggest selling point for the Agency. One idea would be to develop case studies focusing on particular geographic locations.

5. Thematic Workshops

The Director of External Relations distributed a paper on possible themes. He emphasized that these were not fixed, and that the Agency was still looking for ideas. The European Commission stated that the theme of “**access**” was missing from the discussion and should be included. The USA responded by stating that most refugees lived outside the oPt and therefore access should not be a primary focus as it was an issue limited to the oPt. Ireland added that the themes were very broad; and, if kept this way, could result in very vague outcomes. Regarding the issue of access, this could be addressed by having a more general session on the **operating environment** in all five fields.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General noted that, apart from the oPt, access was an issue in Lebanon.

The PLO suggested that the issue of **infrastructure in camps including sewage and environmental conditions** should be included within the fourth proposed topic covering Housing and Infrastructure.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General agreed that this be included.

The European Commission stated that the EU would be discussing the themes of the Conference at the next Heads of Delegation coordination meeting in Jerusalem, and within the next two weeks would be able to inform UNRWA of their suggestions.

Switzerland (Studer) emphasized that it was important to get the insights of academics, UN agencies, NGO groups, etc in determining the themes of the Conference.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General responded by stating that this is what the Agency had been doing.

Switzerland (Fröhlich) added that it would be important to ensure regional representation in the preparation of the thematic workshops - the development of thinking around the themes should not just be restricted to Geneva experts.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General agreed with this approach.

The PLO stated that they would be able to provide additional suggestions regarding the themes and ideas on representing or including the refugee community in the coming weeks. The USA – said it not received instructions from the capital at this stage

regarding themes and suggested the setting of a deadline for suggestions. These should then be made available in advance of the next meeting so they could be taken back to capitals beforehand. Separately, she asked what was the role of the chairs in relation to the financing of experts participating in the development of themes? What other work would be involved on the part of the chair?

- The Deputy Commissioner-General responded that the costs of experts was included in the draft budget to be discussed with Switzerland; but any additional budgetary support would be welcomed from countries that had the ability to pay. She added that a Core Group meeting was scheduled for 27 November and the Agency would like to have feedback on the themes within two weeks, by the end of the month. It was also agreed that the next meeting would be in Jerusalem. Other issues requiring the feedback of core group participants included whether there should be a pre-conference meeting and the nature of the official opening.

Canada (Sinclair) stated that the Conference did not need to commence and close with official statements from delegates. The USA suggested restricting statements to the closing session to allow the participation of new donors, to allow their voice to be heard.

- The Deputy Commissioner-General agreed that it was important to investigate mechanisms for bringing in new donors.

Next Meeting: 2 December (not 27 November, as initially proposed, due to the end of the Eid holiday.)