Relief & Social Services
Social Safety Net Programme

Mission of the Programme

To alleviate poverty amongst Palestine refugee families in UNRWA’s fields of operation with priority focus on the poorest of the poor, the ‘abject poor’.

Profile

In 2009 more than 300,000 Palestine refugees (made up of 75,823 families) will be beneficiaries of the Relief and Social Services (RSS) Social Safety Net Programme (SSN) – the only Programme that caters to the needs of the most vulnerable Palestine refugees in UNRWA’s five fields of operation by delivering food aid and cash subsidies on a regular basis. The SSN Programme distributes food items and cash from 58 fixed and 126 mobile distribution points. Supported by over 326 social workers, the Programme has a number of aims, however the primary interventions of the Programme are:

- To provide basic food supplies and cash subsidies to the most vulnerable Palestine refugees caught in the cycle of abject poverty;
- To provide selective cash assistance, one-off cash grants for basic household items (such as kitchen utensils and bedding) or other needs in the instance of fire, flood, sudden loss of the family breadwinner or other family emergency; and
- To ensure that Palestine refugee families have adequate shelter, in coordination with UNRWA’s Department of Infrastructure and Camp Improvement.

These interventions, and UNRWA’s integrated approach to poverty alleviation combined, are part of the Agency’s greater strategy to help achieve the first Millennium Development Goal – to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

History

Mass distribution of rations by UNRWA began in 1950 and included more than ten basic items, such as sugar, flour, rice, cheese, fuel and soap, and as contributions allowed, clothing, shoes, bedding and domestic items. However, over time the number and size of rations slowly diminished due to funding shortages and a growing awareness that not all refugees were in need of ration support.

1. Abject Poverty: priority will be given to families living below the abject poverty line (those who cannot meet their basic food requirements).

Relief staff attend all food distributions to ensure Social Safety Net families receive their full entitlements, and follow-up with those who are too sick or frail to attend distribution. (Photo courtesy of Julie Moujalli, 2008.)
The Agency’s Special Hardship Case Programme (SHC) was introduced in 1978 to provide assistance to the neediest refugee families. In 1982, the mass distribution of food rations by UNRWA to the majority of refugees was abolished (except in Lebanon where the mass distribution of food rations stopped in 1984). Therefore, by the mid 80’s the SHC Programme remained as the only programme that provided food rations to low income refugees. In 1997, a change in the form of food aid was introduced, and it became a quarterly food package combined with a cash subsidy. More recently, UNRWA began a major reform of its SHC Programme (now the Social Safety Net Programme), moving from a status-based approach to a poverty-based approach which uses focused analysis (Proxy Means Test Formula) of refugee data to better identify who the poor are and to better determine appropriate family specific benefit levels.

**Achievements**

Despite the many challenges faced over the past few years, such as the fluctuation and often increasing food prices and refugee poverty levels, the SSN Programme has continued to deliver to its beneficiaries. These are some of the outcomes for the SSN Programme over the past two years:

- Distribution of US$10.3 million in cash subsidies to refugees in 2008;
- Distribution of over US$37.6 million in food commodities in 2008;
- Delivery of over one million food parcels to hardship families in 2008;
- Emergency assistance provided to over 6,750 refugee families following the 2007 Lebanon crisis;
- Emergency distribution of household items, including blankets and mattresses to over 527 families in Gaza in 2007;
- Enrollment of 1,676 students from families in hardship into the Vocational Training Centers (VTCs) or Education Science Faculty (ESF) in conjunction with the UNRWA Education Programme during 2008;
- Distribution of over US$7.3 million in 2008 as cash under the Family Income Supplement initiative to bridge the poverty gap for SHC families identified as abject poor; and
- Continued capacity building of social workers. For example, by December 2008 279 social workers and their immediate supervisors successfully completed the Certified Education Programme in cooperation with the Southern Illinois University Carbondale, US.
Recent Initiatives

Eligibility and criteria reforms

Following UNRWA’s 2007 review of the criteria against which Palestine refugees are assessed, a new approach was adopted, eliminating any previous discrimination on the basis of age, gender or employment status (i.e. the bias against the working poor). The eligibility of refugees is now based on identification of an applicant’s poverty status using newly developed poverty lines which are both field and family specific, and depend on the local socio-economic context in each country. Through this reform, UNRWA will particularly target food insecure families and provide assistance which at a minimum includes the standard quarterly food basket and basic cash subsidy. The overall combined value of the 2008 food rations and cash subsidies distributed in each field, per beneficiary, was on average USD $149 (USD $109 for food and USD $40 for cash subsidy). However, this benefit level will increase, as UNRWA succeeds in attracting continued funding for Family Income Supplements for SSN families; cash which is directed to the abject poor above and beyond their current regular quarterly benefits. The amount of cash is determined according to a family’s depth of poverty and how much is required to bring a family up to the abject poverty line. UNRWA will also make every effort to help these refugees escape from the cycle of poverty they are caught in by offering other services such as training, referrals within and outside UNRWA, and skills development.

The Role of the Social Worker

Social workers form the backbone of the administration of the Social Safety Net Programme, conducting on-going home visits to assess poverty levels and eligibility of applicants as well as providing other specialized services. The latter include determining the causes of a given family’s poverty and interventions needed, referring family members to community or other UNRWA resources (such as the VTCs for skills training) to address family specific needs, providing psycho-social support and guidance on basic skills (home hygiene, conflict resolution; behavior modification) and working with the family to alleviate suffering, strengthen coping mechanisms (such as legal aid for domestic violence victims) and/or take action that will help a family break out of the cycle of poverty. Above and beyond normal case management responsibilities, social workers also are frontline staff during wide-scale emergencies; assist RRS, and sometimes host authorities, in social research studies; and identify those eligible for emergency cash assistance, food aid and shelter rehabilitation. They are expected to implement the industry-standard Generalist Approach to Social Work and adhere to Code of Ethics norms.
The Way Forward

UNRWA’s SSN Programme faces major challenges as population growth and poverty outstrip the Agency’s ability to provide desired levels of basic safety net assistance to the poor. The continuing instability in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) and the ongoing politically volatile situation in Lebanon have meant that the Palestine refugee population in these areas has become particularly vulnerable, suffering from a lack of protection and a breakdown in the capacity of traditional family structures to provide informal social safety nets. This, coupled with external factors such as the global financial crisis and the impact this has had to date on donor funding capacities, has complicated the Agency’s efforts to reach its goals. Nevertheless, the Agency, through its Medium Term Strategy and SSN reforms will continue to take new strides, regardless of the evolving challenges, to meet its Human Development goal of supporting a decent standard of living for Palestine refugees.

Palestine refugees in Jordan receive their Social Safety Net parcels which include food items such as rice, oil and pulses. (Photo courtesy of Julie Moujalessi, 2008.)