education
learning together

communications division
unrwa jerusalem
po box 19149, 91191 east jerusalem

jerusalem (+972 2) 589 0224, jerusalem (+972 2) 589 0274

goza (+972 8) 677 7533/7527, goza (+972 8) 677 7697

www.unrwa.org
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UNRWA’s education mission

To provide quality education that allows Palestine refugees to achieve their full potential both individually and as a member of the local and global community towards active and productive participation in social, political, economic, and cultural life.
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The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of some 5 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees to achieve their full human potential pending a just solution to their plight. The Agency’s services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance, and emergency response, including in times of armed conflict.

The Agency operates one of the largest education systems in the Middle East, opening the doors of its 700 schools to nearly 500,000 pupils every day in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), including East Jerusalem. Nearly half of UNRWA’s schools are located within the region’s 58 refugee camps. In addition, the Agency’s vocational training centres accommodate around 6,650 trainees each year.

With almost 40 per cent of Palestine refugees below the age of 18 and with Palestine refugees broadly affected with high levels of unemployment and poverty, education is crucial for lasting positive social and economic development. The basic education delivered by UNRWA’s education programme is one of the most important human development priorities of all the Agency’s services and accounts for over half of the Agency’s budget.

Unlike many other UN agencies, UNRWA is engaged in direct service delivery, and as such is responsible for running schools, delivering the curriculum of host countries, and hiring, training, and professional development of educational staff. Over time, UNRWA’s schools have gained a reputation for high academic achievement, while also realising ground-breaking achievements in gender parity in student enrolment since the 1960s. Today, literacy and levels of educational attainment among Palestine refugees are amongst the highest in the Middle East.

UNRWA’s current focus is on broadening the quality of its basic education services in line with the Agency’s mission - to help Palestine refugees achieve their full potential in human development under the difficult circumstances in which they live - and the global Education for All (EFA) initiative.

By focusing on providing a quality and relevant education, the Agency answers the demands of youth to be equipped with the necessary skills to thrive as adults in an evolving social and economic landscape. Developing the life skills for both employment and personal development is of particular relevance to students in UNRWA schools who face a distinct set of human development challenges due to their life circumstances as refugees, and resultant restricted life choices.

Spearheaded by a coherent reform strategy that seeks to strengthen quality education by 2015 – the same date by which the world hopes to achieve EFA – UNRWA strives to ensure that refugees receive an education that reflects international standards. This will be achieved through the provision of well-trained and motivated teachers within empowered schools; equal access for all children regardless of gender, ability, disability, impairment, health conditions and socio-economic status; a relevant and attainable curriculum; a suitable school and classroom environment; and well-developed learning resources, including the use of new technology.

Providing a quality education for all young people will impart an understanding of their place in the world and convey a common set of key values such as dignity, tolerance, a sense of cultural identity, gender equality, human rights, and respect for the environment; while strengthening coping strategies, especially in a context where poverty pervades daily life. The responsibility to realise such a commitment has never been more vital.

The four pillars around which the educational reform strategy is structured are as follows:

1. The learner
2. The educator
3. Knowledge and skills
4. Tools and resources

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the learner
student needs and educational priorities

Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 29
States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

a. The development of a child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
b. The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
c. The development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own.
d. The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
e. The development of respect for the natural environment.

“Receiving an education through an UNRWA school will help me in achieving my future goals. Education is very important to my development and will help me face challenges that I might have in my life. The teachers help us develop our self-confidence and empower us to be successful. Being educated gives me the feeling that I have the power and ability to achieve my hopes and ambitions for the interest of all Palestinians.”

Dalia, ninth grade, from Kalandia refugee camp, West Bank

The provision of quality education to students through UNRWA’s network of schools and training centres ensures that in spite of the absence of a durable solution to their plight, each and every Palestine refugee child has the right to education. This is a right that forms part of the International Bill of Human Rights, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. The United Nations General Assembly has encouraged the Agency to continue to make progress in addressing the needs and rights of children, including children with disabilities and special needs, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
Education is one of the most fundamental forms of personal empowerment, a central component in global efforts to alleviate poverty, and a crucial measure of future well-being. Within the wider developmental life-cycle of human development, childhood and adolescence are the most decisive phases for learning; these are the times when cognitive and physical skills are developed and beliefs, hopes, expectations, and values are acquired and shaped.

All refugee children of school age are eligible to enrol in UNRWA’s schools which provide free basic education for girls and boys across nine grades in the West Bank, Gaza, Syria and Lebanon, and ten grades in Jordan. This includes six years of primary schooling and three or four years at a preparatory level.

Secondary education is offered only in Lebanon. This provision is to address the problem of restricted access for Palestine refugees to the education system operated by the Government. In the remaining host countries, refugees continue their education beyond the preparatory phase within government schools.

In addition, post-secondary level education is provided to Palestine refugee youth through UNRWA’s technical and vocational training colleges, which offer a range of trade and semi-professional courses alongside short-term needs-based training.

For a growing population either living under occupation, or scarred by conflict, and in all cases facing an uncertain future, education brings a degree of structure, stability, and hope to their lives. Responding to the educational needs and human development aspirations of young people, particularly in response to persistent joblessness and widespread under-employment, is central to a successful transition from youth to adulthood. It is also a vital building block towards creating the foundations of future prosperity and security.

Projected demographic changes over the coming years indicate an increase in the numbers of Palestine refugee children needing to be accommodated in UNRWA schools. The population of registered refugees of school age (6-14 years) is predicted to grow from around 909,800 refugees in 2010 to 967,300 by 2020; a 6.3 per cent increase in the number of registered refugees of school age.

Following improved standards in health care and higher fertility rates, the demographic youth bulge
“Education is vital for us. Life in the camp is often difficult. Attending school provides us with a safe environment where we can grow as individuals. It will help us build our future and realise our human rights. As a young woman, being educated also means that I am able to make independent life choices. I would like to study to be a doctor when I’m older in order to reduce the suffering of Palestinian children.”

Fatima, 9th grade, Haifa school, Burj Barajneh camp, Lebanon

of the Middle East presents an undeniable challenge for the Agency, host countries, and the region as a whole. Nonetheless, this demographic also offers a tremendous resource for social and economic progress if effectively galvanised.

As part of global advocacy efforts to both improve the quality of education and ensure access, UNESCO’s 2010 Education for All Global Monitoring Report highlighted that students across the Middle East performed well in less cognitively-demanding skills, such as knowing facts, performing routine arithmetic functions and recognising shapes. However, students were less capable in more complex processes of drawing inferences and applying knowledge to real-world situations. These results were mirrored by those of Palestine refugee students in UNRWA schools in the monitoring and learning achievement (MLA) tests, where close to two-thirds of boys scored between 0 and 30 per cent in eighth grade Arabic. Another challenge is dropout, where despite some specific initiatives to decrease drop-out rates, further efforts are needed as approximately ten per cent of boys and five per cent of girls enrolled in UNRWA schools do not finish the full cycle of basic education.

Responding to these realities, UNRWA’s education reform places the learner at the centre of the Agency’s services, supported through: teacher development and empowerment; inclusive education approaches; curricula and assessment; and school management, infrastructure, and technology. Through renewed investment in these programme pillars, the Agency is committed to provide quality education for Palestine refugees which assists them in achieving their full potential, both individually and as members of the local and global community towards active and productive participation in social, public, economic, and cultural life.
the educator
teacher development and empowerment

Teacher development

The teacher is the single most important educational resource. Today, around 23,000 UNRWA educators are engaged in meeting the educational needs of Palestine refugee children through a network of schools and vocational training centres. Tens of thousands of dedicated educators have been central in developing UNRWA’s reputation for delivering quality education in an often volatile and problematic context. Their strong motivation to support Palestine refugee children in their pursuit of learning is a key determinant of the positive results achieved to date.

Established with the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Swiss Government in 1963, the UNESCO/UNRWA Institute of Education (IoE) has trained 32,000 teachers to date. It has been the driving force in strengthening professional standards and the key determinant of education quality. Training programmes for educators and administrators has often been through on-the-job training. In its first five years, the Institute of Education was able to successfully reduce the proportion of untrained teachers from 90 per cent to 9 per cent.

In 1974, the IoE also established five education development centres to support technical co-operation and co-ordination between headquarters and schools on a local level. Annually, an average of 800 to 900 staff receives in-service training covering diverse content and skill areas. During the 1990s, three university-level educational science facilities were established in Jordan and the West Bank, accommodating 1,630 teachers and students each year. Their four-year degree programmes have been commended by host governments and regional authorities for their high quality.

As the Agency takes stock of its successes and looks to broaden quality in UNRWA schools in line with international standards and the needs of the 21st
century, the teacher remains a primary determinant of improvement. From the early days during which very few of the teachers deployed in the wake of the displacement of Palestine refugees resulting from the 1948-1949 Arab-Israeli war had any formal training, to emergency on-the-job training that encouraged “teaching the way they were taught as teachers,” there is now a move towards career-orientated educator development.

Teachers are now being introduced to new methods of supporting student learning, moving away from the previous focus on a didactic approach encouraging processes of memorisation, and towards the more holistic style of “active learning”. The reform programme further encourages teachers to reflect on their own ways of teaching and exposes them to educational best practices and theories about how children learn. This is being achieved through a blend of open and distance learning, coupled with new methods that include peer learning and professional learning communities, with the added support of web and multimedia materials to further enable professional development.

Driven by UNRWA’s teacher education and development policies, professional training and development will take place throughout a teacher’s career—from pre-service training and ongoing professional development, to the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of teacher training. The aspiration is that teachers will have the necessary skills, a more diverse and motivating career structure and strengthened professional accountability to drive systemic change.

Similarly, head teachers or principals have a central role in providing school leadership towards improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. Systemic change must be driven by leaders who have the understanding, knowledge, and skills to lead improvements and manage change; to ensure that they are well placed to meet this challenge; schools are being empowered through a head teacher training programme, Leading for the Future. Here, the emphasis on school empowerment is a move away from administrative supervision towards more effective management and leadership that engages and involves all staff members. Under this model, front-line teachers are encouraged to undertake a broader role as a member of a school team, working together to achieve school improvement.

“Education is evolving into a two-way dialogue between teachers and students that drives open learning. Encouraging my students to take on a greater degree of self-direction in shaping their own learning experience, they are becoming increasingly motivated and self-reliant. Having this degree of flexibility also enriched my own sense of self-fulfilment as an educator. I’m also confident that once they conclude their education with UNRWA, they will be more able to meet the challenges that await them in their daily lives.”

Mazin, teacher, Kalandia girls school, West Bank
knowledge and skills
inclusive education, curricula and assessment

Statement of commitment

“The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is committed to providing quality inclusive education which respects the rights and appreciates the diversity of all children. UNRWA aims to remove barriers to access and equal opportunity for learning and participation in order to enable all Palestine refugee children to realise their full potential regardless of their abilities, disabilities, gender, socio-economic status, health and psychosocial needs.”

Inclusive education

UNRWA’s commitment to inclusive education—an education which meets the needs of all children—is framed within the international human rights framework, in particular the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Convention of the Rights of the Child. These instruments require free and equitable access to (primary) education for all children, enabling students with disabilities or special needs to realise their full potential. Across the Middle East, there is a growing recognition of the need for change to ensure that no child is marginalised. UNRWA’s commitment to inclusive education complements its disability policy.
However, despite major improvements in access to and equity of provision, the poorest refugees in all of UNRWA’s fields, alongside low achievers and those with special educational needs, remain particularly vulnerable to exclusion and drop-out from school. It is estimated that 20 per cent of students have some specific learning needs that could be met in the regular classroom but are not currently being adequately catered to.

In response, UNRWA is engaged in a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all refugee children through increased participation in learning and engagement in local communities. Inclusive education does not refer only to children with special needs or to remedial education; rather, it is an approach that aims to meet the educational, psycho-social, and health needs of all children. Inclusive education fosters a change in attitudes towards diversity by (where feasible) educating all children together; it is the foundation of a just and non-discriminatory society. The importance of employing a holistic approach, representing a shift towards student-centred active learning in classrooms, is particularly relevant for meeting the needs of all children. An inclusive approach makes for a more efficient education system, affording long-term cost savings when the needs of children are addressed within the school system and during school hours.

Curricula and human rights

Whilst UNRWA follows the curricula of host authorities in its schools, they are enriched with supplementary materials where needed. Such material includes those that promote an understanding of non-violence, social cohesion, conflict resolution, and human rights in line with UN values embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Trainees at UNRWA vocational centres and teacher training facilities are also exposed to training on human rights concepts. This focus is designed to ensure that Palestine refugee children and youth have an appreciation of the need to uphold civic values, understand the role of culture, history, and diversity, and respect the rights of all citizens, allowing them to make a positive contribution towards the development of their society as adults.

A holistic human rights programme will be introduced during the 2013-2014 school year. This programme builds on existing materials, best practices, and lessons learned—both internationally and across the Agency. Dedicated curriculum materials are complemented by the supporting and further strengthening of existing school practices, such as school parliaments, in order to cultivate a school-wide commitment to and experience with democratic values and practice.
Skills training

UNRWA’s technical and vocational education and training programme began in 1951, and was designed to equip refugee youth with skills and technical expertise relevant to host-country or regional job markets. The Agency offers market-responsive courses in traditional and modern trades at the post-preparatory level (after nine or ten years of schooling), and semi-professional courses at the post-secondary school level (after 12 years of schooling). This includes, amongst others: fashion, plumbing, carpentry, pharmacy, graphic design, business and computing, and architecture and surveying. UNRWA operates a total of ten vocational training centres across its five fields of operation, accommodating around 6,500 trainees each year. In addition, short-term needs-based training courses are provided in partnership with non-governmental organisations, focused on providing employable skills and knowledge.

Professional and career guidance for students and placement services for graduates is also provided, with an average of 75 per cent securing gainful employment within one year after graduation. The demand for places on UNRWA’s vocational courses is high, with an average of three applications for each place. Special provision must be made to ensure the participation of the most vulnerable refugees, registered through the Agency’s social safety net.

Responding to emergencies

UNRWA’s operating context is challenging, ranging from relative stability in some host countries to more complex environments and sporadic flare-ups of violence, conflict and instability in others. In the past, UNRWA has responded to emergencies as needs arose; however, in recent years the need for a greater focus on education in emergencies has come to the fore in light of emergency situations in Gaza and the West Bank, Nahr el-Bared camp in Lebanon in 2007, and most recently the conflict in Syria.

As a result, an integrated approach to addressing education in situations of conflict is underway through the development of a comprehensive Agency-wide education in emergencies strategy. The strategy and a broader implementation plan will seek to strengthen the ability of UNRWA’s education system to respond in emergencies to ensure that safe quality education is accessible to all students. It will also ensure that measures are taken to address not only learning, but also safety, protection, health, and psycho-social needs of students and staff during emergencies through prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.
tools and resources

school infrastructure, technology and administration

Infrastructure

Resource constraints in UNRWA’s education programme remain a recurrent challenge. Since the 1950s, the Agency has been forced to operate many of its schools on a “double-shift” basis, whereby one school uses the facilities in the morning and a second in the afternoon. Today, of the 700 administrative schools operated by UNRWA, close to 500 are double-shifted, representing over 90 per cent of schools in Gaza, Syria, and Jordan.

Despite ongoing efforts to upgrade and expand infrastructure, around 15 per cent of all schools operate from rented premises as opposed to purpose-built structures. Many schools urgently need structural upgrading or rebuilding and often lack the space, lighting, and ventilation needed to create an environment that is conducive to learning.

In order to address this, UNRWA needs to phase out the use of rented premises. This would, however, mean replacing 96 rented schools (45 in Jordan, 25 in Lebanon, eleven in Syria and 15 in the West Bank) that are administered through, 72 school buildings (25 in Jordan, 25 in Lebanon, seven in Syria, and 15 in the West Bank). While the elimination of double-
shift schooling is beyond foreseeable reach, the Agency’s target is to decrease their number by 50 per cent across all fields by 2020. In light of these commitments and demographic needs over the coming ten years, UNRWA will need to construct close to 250 new schools.

Technology

To cope with the demands of the 21st century, students need to develop technological skills and teachers need to be provided with the means to support this. The use of information and communications technology to support both teachers’ and students’ learning is recognised globally. These technologies can also help in forging and maintaining links with peers, both within UNRWA and beyond. This can enable the sharing of best practices, experiences, and teaching and learning material.

The Agency aspires to create an e-library structure across its five fields. The e-library facilities and resource banks would support teachers and other educational staff in strengthening the knowledge base of their teaching methods and the subjects they teach.

Education planning and management

To help shape a responsive and holistic approach to local efforts to improve the quality of classroom education, evidence-based policy and decision-making will be guided through the integration of an education management information system (EMIS). Once fully implemented, an Agency-wide EMIS will provide the information needed by teachers and head teachers to make informed decisions, policies and procedures. Currently, because of a reliance on paper-based formats and the limited information-technology infrastructure in some fields, the data at the school, area, and field-office levels may be limited. Moreover, annual reporting through the manual completion of school data sheets does not lead to timely and reliable data to support decision-making and analysis by educational staff.

A centrally-based, computerised EMIS system will allow for the tracking of individual students, the generation of automatic reports, and the computerisation of relevant indicators and projected figures. These are fundamental elements in the process of improving the quality of the learning experience so that schools and teachers receive appropriate and timely professional and administrative support.

In line with the mandate given to the Agency by the United Nations General Assembly, UNRWA remains committed to meeting the educational needs of nearly 500,000 Palestine refugee children in the absence of a just solution to their plight. The Agency will continue to partner with host countries to strive to reach international standards in education; to equip youth with critical-thinking and life skills for a successful future; to ensure inclusive education for all students; and to empower learners to understand their human rights and respect the rights of others. It will do this through its network of 23,000 educators in 700 schools in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem.

Funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions, the vital educational support provided by UNRWA to Palestine refugees is made possible thanks to the invaluable financial support provided by the Agency’s donor partners.