table of contents

a timeline of displacement and dispossession 3

70 years for palestine refugees 4

the unrwa impact 6

unrwa and the sustainable development goals 7

unrwa response to covid-19 17

unrwa in numbers 18
a timeline of palestine refugee displacement and dispossession
70 years for palestine refugees

More than 70 years after their initial displacement in 1948, (known as the Nakba, or “catastrophe” in Arabic), Palestine refugees are one of the longest lasting cases of forced migration in modern history. Scattered over the Arab world, they have experienced extremes in violence, suffering and injustice. Today, they face daunting human development and protection challenges which threaten to arrest their significant potential.

But Palestine refugees are not alone. Since 1950, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has been by their side, carrying out direct relief and works programmes as they face repeated humanitarian crises. Across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, UNRWA has been a beacon of light to generations of Palestine refugees with primary education and health care, social safety net interventions, microfinance and protection services, and humanitarian assistance in times of emergency.

2020 marks 70 years of the Agency’s service for Palestine refugees. It is both an occasion for sober reflection on Palestinian exile and an opportunity to consider the contribution of the Agency’s programmes to generations of Palestine refugees. In 2020, the world must reaffirm its commitment to the now 5.6 million Palestine refugees as they await a just and durable solution to their plight.

1950s providing the tools for survival

After their 1948 displacement, more than 700,000 Palestine refugees lost their homes, land, family and whole lives. In hastily constructed refugee camps, they faced overcrowding, lack of food and water, and life in unfamiliar places. On 1 May 1950, UNRWA begins providing rations, basic health care, free basic education and vocational training, and introduces mass immunizations.

1960s education and a setback

With Palestine refugee children eager to learn, education overtakes relief as the Agency’s largest programme and gender parity is achieved in our schools. The June 1967 hostilities create a new wave of displacement, with approximately 300,000 Palestinians fleeing the West Bank and Gaza. UNRWA establishes 10 new camps and provides emergency aid and relief.
1970s
unrest and relief

Unrest in Jordan and Israeli military operations in Lebanon result in turmoil and additional hardships for Palestine refugees. We continue to provide rations, health and emergency medical care and emergency aid. The most vulnerable refugee families find UNRWA their only source of relief, and so the Special Hardship Case programme is born to distribute food to the neediest families.

1980s
emergencies in Lebanon and the OPT

Unrest continues as Israel invades Lebanon in 1982 and the intifada, a spontaneous popular uprising, begins in the OPT in 1987. We provide large-scale emergency relief programmes as the total population of Palestine refugees surpasses two million.

1990s
sustainable poverty alleviation

In the 1990s, Palestine refugees begin seeking more and more sustainable livelihood opportunities. Our burgeoning microfinance programme begins providing small, direct loans to Palestine refugees in Gaza, eventually establishing branches in the West Bank, Jordan and Syria and contributing significantly towards achievement of SDG 1 and SDG 8.

2000s
second intifada and human rights

Palestine refugees face a difficult decade with the second intifada in the OPT, the construction of the West Bank Barrier, the destruction of the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in Lebanon, the blockade and the first of several Israeli military operations in Gaza. We continue to provide basic services, establishing psychological counselling and support programmes across the OPT, improving the physical and social environments of the camps, and integrating human rights to our curricula in our schools.

2010s
protection crisis

Throughout the decade, Palestine refugees in the region face the most serious protection crisis since the Nakba: blockade and devastating cycles of violence in Gaza, renewed displacement and dispossession in Syria and the full impact of occupation in the West Bank. A continuing source of support, we provide food assistance to 1 million Palestine refugees in Gaza, protection assistance in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and cash assistance to help Palestine refugees meet their essential needs.
virtual eradication of malaria cholera tb measles polio

infant mortality rate of only 18/1000 live births (2013)

2.5 million palestine refugees educated since 1950

food aid to 1.45 million food insecure palestine refugees

666,771 jobs created through microfinance (1991 - 2019)

77% employment of VTC graduates (2018)
Poverty eradication and respect for human rights, central pillars of the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are at the core of the Agency’s work. As the largest direct service provider to Palestine refugees, UNRWA provides concrete and sustained results across 11 SDGs.
Watch the video on UNRWA and SDG 1 to understand how the Agency aims to achieve NoPoverty by 2030.

Throughout 70 years of operation, our holistic approach to tackling the multidimensional nature of poverty includes providing access to free primary health care, livelihood opportunities, relief and social services, and shelter and environmental health. We particularly focus on the development and self-reliance of less-advantaged members of the Palestine refugee community – especially women, children, people with disabilities and the elderly.
We work to safeguard Palestine refugees’ right to food across fields of operation that include civil unrest and other political challenges. By providing basic food items and cash assistance to the most vulnerable Palestine refugees, including in times and areas of crisis, UNRWA is there for Palestine refugees.

Mahmoud - head of his household in Khan Younis refugee camp in Gaza - struggles on daily basis to provide food and a proper house for his family.

If we do not receive UNRWA food assistance, we would not be able to survive our conditions.
For 70 years, Palestine refugees have turned to us as their main comprehensive primary health care provider. We provide 8.5 million primary health care consultations per year with 144 health centres and some 3,300 dedicated health staff. Limited mental health, psychosocial support and secondary and tertiary care are also provided to ensure every Palestine refugee can achieve good health and well-being.

Watch the story of Hassan Hamdan al-Zatri who was about one year old when his mother sought help at an UNRWA health centre in Gaza to treat his life-threatening dehydration. Thanks to the use of Najjar salts - an oral rehydration formula for the treatment of dehydrated diarrhoeic infants that was pioneered by UNRWA - Hassan, like thousands of other Palestine refugee children, survived. He lives today in Gaza and is the father of seven children. In 2013, UNRWA photographer George Ne’meh traced him and his doctor in Gaza for a forty-year reunion.

The introduction of oral rehydration salts (ORS) in the early 1950s drastically reduced the mortality rate of Palestine refugee children under five years of age. Its success cemented the wide-spread use of ORS by international agencies, including UNICEF. In 2013, UNRWA surpassed the health target of the under-five mortality rate of 25/1000 within the Sustainable Development Goal of Good Health and Well-Being with a rate of 20.4/1000 live births.
sdg 4
quality education

Over the decades, we have provided education to more than 2.5 million Palestine refugee children. The classroom is a center stage for Palestine refugee students to become confident, innovative, questioning individuals and we are proud that our education programme is recognised as a significant educational force in the Middle East. Click here to hear more from Palestine refugee students at UNRWA schools! Click here to hear more from Palestine refugee students at UNRWA schools.

meet obaida:
an engineer in the making

“I’m very happy that UNRWA schools opened on time this year. If they hadn’t, I wouldn’t have been able to register in a private school and I wold be on the street,” explains Obaida last October, an UNRWA student from Deir Qasi School in Saida, Lebanon. Obaida and his family live in Ein El Hilweh, a Palestine refugee camp that is oten characterized by the presence of rival armed groups. This hostile environment creates a number of protection issues as children and other vulnerable groups are particularly affected, requiring strong psychosocial support among other vital interventions. For UNRWA students from Ein El Hilweh, education is a critical gateway to a better future.

education during the coronavirus crisis

With the responsibility for 533,000 Palestine refugee students, every day attending its 709 schools, and for 8,000 students of its Vocational Training Centres, UNRWA worked throughout the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that the students were actively benefitting from self-learning, psychosocial support and health and safety activities at this very challenging time. This required new ways of thinking about how best to adapt its renowned Education in Emergencies approach.

how unrwa helps with education in emergencies

- Ensuring a safe and secure learning environment for Palestine refugee children and youth that supports their physical and emotional wellbeing
- Relevant and quality teaching and learning, including alternative methods of teaching and learning in times of crisis
- Ensuring parental, community, and student engagement to support the quality and continuation of education in emergencies
Palestine refugee students at UNRWA schools have elected school parliaments since 1999 as part of the Agency’s Human Rights Conflict Resolution and Tolerance programme. Those parliaments have been a key vehicle for the promotion of respect for rights, democratic practices, and tolerance. The elected students seek to represent all students and support their communities. For example, school parliaments organize human rights related activities, help resolve conflicts between students, organize field trips, invite guest speakers, and represent students when speaking to school administration.

In November 2017, the first-ever Agency-wide Student Parliament (ASP) was elected, consisting of 21 members representing each geographical area from the Agency’s five fields of operation. The ASP is designed to provide a collective space to enhance the engagement of students across all UNRWA fields, help them express their pride in their common Palestinian identity and strengthen their social cohesion, voice their opinions on relevant issues, and convey their views and opinions on various matters – reflecting the specific issues and aspects of each field to the Agency’s headquarters.

Members of the ASP have been actively engaging in key events with the Commissioner-General, such as the UN General Assembly, the League of Arab States meetings, and other Agency-level events. In this photo, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (left) meets with UNRWA school parliamentarians in Gaza on 30 August 2017.
Gender equality has been a central theme in the services we provide to Palestine refugees and the results achieved. We focus on addressing the gendered impact of crises and emergencies, integrating gender-based violence into our emergency response, providing economic opportunities to Palestine refugee women and empowering them in making maternal and child health.

For the nearly one third of the Palestine refugee population who live in 58 camps across our five fields of operation, ensuring that living conditions meet minimum acceptable standards is critical. We prioritize projects that address water supply and sewerage networks, providing camps with water and sanitation. These services are especially critical in the Gaza Strip, where 96 per cent of water is unsafe for drinking.
sdg 8
decent work and economic growth

For Palestine refugees facing high levels of unemployment, our programs can be a lifeline. By building the human capital of Palestine refugees through technical and vocational training, and providing access to income-generating opportunities through our award-winning microfinance programme and employment primarily of teachers, doctors, nurses and support staff, we strengthen the capacities of Palestine refugees and provide them with the necessary skills to achieve their full human potential.

Aysha was an exceptional Palestinian woman who faced many of the hardships typical of life in Gaza. Married when she was 14, she started her own business selling clothes in 1979 as a 40-year-old widow. When UNRWA started its microfinance programme in Gaza in 1994, Aysha was one of its first clients. Over the next 15 years, she borrowed loans worth $US 40,000 to finance her work, becoming legendary. Her microenterprise supported a family of 26. Sadly, Aisha passed away in 2008.

Obeida Shaabi from Syria had been working in a hair salon for a decade but had always hoped to open his own establishment. In 2017, he enrolled in an UNRWA short-training course and graduated with a diploma and a set of tools to help him get started. “These tools are the foundation of my shop,” he says. Prevented from opening a women’s salon due to cultural sensitivities in the refugee camp, he currently runs a barber shop. In the future, he hopes to run a hairdressing salon for both men and women. Until then he contents himself with cutting the hair of his two daughters - 10-day-old Mouna and two-year-old Joury - and his that of his wife. But he still has hope, “My mother-in-law also lets me do her hair!” he says proudly.

In 2018, Microfinanza - a global microfinance authority - awarded the Agency an A+ rating for social performance in Palestine, the only microfinance provider to have received this honour in the MENA region, situating it within the top five percent of all microfinance programmes in the world.
sdg 10  
reduced inequalities

As Palestine refugees are caught in the midst of increasing conflict and displacement in the region, we focus on protecting the most vulnerable amongst them with varied initiatives, including protection trainings for staff and the introduction of protection staff across all our fields of operation. The Agency is committed to working with all Palestine refugees, including persons with disabilities, to achieve their full human development potential.

sdg 13  
climate action

The fields that we operate in are quite vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and we prioritize a range of environmental efforts, including installation of energy-saving equipment in our facilities, as well as safe disposal of medical waste. Through our technical and vocational training programme, we encourage Palestine refugee youth in the design, manufacture and servicing of renewable energy technology and energy efficiency devices critical to job creation and the green economy.

“I have the right to learn and the right to receive treatment.” - Layan
sdg 16

peace and justice

Palestine refugees comprise one of the largest and most protracted refugee situations in the world today. Over the past 70 years, we have made a significant contribution to the welfare and human development of four generations of Palestine refugees through direct service delivery and protection, fostering human capital and peaceful development and supporting the stability of a region buffeted by crisis.

sdg 17

partnership for the goals

UNRWA enjoys longer-term strategic partnerships with UNESCO and WHO for the management of its education and health programmes. The Agency also partners with a number of other UN Agencies, including UNFPA, UNICEF, ILO, OHCHR and UNHCR, as well as the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement and local and international NGOs, including the Norwegian Refugee Council, Humanity and Inclusion, and Save the Children.
Since the beginning of the unprecedented global health crisis that is COVID-19, your support has made it possible for us to work diligently to deliver essential, life-saving services to Palestine refugees throughout our areas of operation. From distance-learning to improving and adapting health care services, UNRWA is there. Watch the video above to learn how UNRWA is responding in solidarity with and for Palestine refugees to confront this monumental challenge.
unrwa in numbers*

- 533,000 students
- 709 schools
- 8200 TVET trainees
- 270,000 SSNP beneficiaries
- 8.7 m annual patient consultations
- 5.6 m Palestine refugees
- 35,000 microfinance loans awarded

* during 2019