unrwa wishes to thank the European Union and the government of the Kingdom of Belgium for supporting this conference.
Executive summary

The last year has been one of extraordinary transformation in the Middle East. While there is hope and excitement, there is also risk and uncertainty. Palestinian youth, the region-over, and particularly those living under the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, have a significant stake in change and are likely to play a growing role in creating it. A drive for economic empowerment and political horizon are likely to be the spearhead of their efforts.

These changes and upheavals coincide with a period during which the proportion of young people relative to other age groups has been increasing. The region is in the grip of an unprecedented youth bulge, and the absolute number of young people is set to continue rising throughout the first half of this century. This poses considerable challenges but also opportunities for social and economic development.

Since 1950 the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has played a significant role in the human development of Palestine refugee youth, providing quality basic education, ensuring long and healthy lives, and preparing them for entry into the labour market.

The Agency ensures access to education for 500,000 students in 700 schools, using the host authorities’ curricula, and enriching them with supplementary materials such as human rights, conflict resolution and tolerance education. UNRWA’s 137 clinics provide basic health care and preventive services. On average, Palestine refugee youth attend UNRWA clinics six times during the course of a year.

UNRWA also offers a range of interventions to enhance the employability of refugee youth and support them in their efforts to find work. A network of vocational training centres provides youth with marketable skills and supports a successful transition to employment. The Agency also operates one of the most successful microfinance programmes in the Middle East, supporting many young entrepreneurs.

Civic participation and being able to shape one’s future is yet another important dimension of the transition to adulthood. As part of UNRWA’s camp improvement efforts, youth are given direct roles in improving their living conditions in refugee camps through participation in project development and focus groups that discuss community priorities and concerns.

Recent events in the Middle East have highlighted the determination of young men and women in the Middle East to play a greater role. They have also brought into sharp focus the lack of social justice for Palestine refugees, whose condition remains characterized in some fields by dispossession, political disempowerment, and widespread denial of basic rights and fundamental freedoms. One of UNRWA’s key human development goals is the enjoyment of human rights to the fullest extent possible by all Palestine refugees, including youth. UNRWA aims to attain this goal by assuring quality services, with a particular attention to the most vulnerable, and through advocacy.

The Agency is now piloting a holistic approach to youth, which includes life skills and entrepreneurship training, career counselling, job placement, and youth-led community development. The rewards are significant and will be far-reaching for the youth and communities involved. With its significant regional experience, and extensive operational footprint in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and the occupied Palestinian territory, UNRWA is well-placed to expand this approach, working with partners and funders of similar interest.

Helping Palestinian youth shape a productive and peaceful future for the region requires that UNRWA listens to them, engages them with trust and respect, and invests in their ideas and priorities. Working with its partners and within the framework of its Medium Term Strategy, UNRWA is committed to deepening its involvement with refugee youth, to bolster their human capital and improve their life chances, thereby providing a foundation for the prosperity of future generations of Palestinians across the region.
Introduction

Palestine refugees have made remarkable strides in human development terms over the past 60 years. Whilst similar trends have been recorded across much of the developing world, outcomes for refugees have often surpassed those of the nationals of other countries in the Middle East. Refugee mortality profiles have long since approximated patterns in developed countries, and literacy levels have historically been amongst the highest in the region, with groundbreaking progress achieved for women. Sustained investment through UNRWA has allowed successive generations of refugees to become progressively healthier and better educated, against a backdrop of conflict and upheaval and in conditions of dispossession and occupation.

However, for many of the current generation of young Palestine refugees – the largest in history – hopes of further improvements in quality of life and opportunities for prosperity are giving way to frustration and marginalisation, as youth in general face momentous and unprecedented challenges in their quest to make a successful transition to adulthood. Rapid and pervasive changes in communications, technology, education, and the functioning of markets and societies have dramatically altered the environment in which young people are coming of age. Globalisation and improved access to information have changed perceptions with regards to cultural norms and acceptable standards of living. The situation is compounded by an unprecedented regional rise in the number and proportion of young people. Sixty per cent of the population of the region is now under 25 years of age.

It is in this context that UNRWA convened the “Engaging Youth” conference in Brussels on 19-20 March 2012, to engage in an open discussion with UNRWA partners on Palestine refugee youth in order to strengthen strategic thinking on UNRWA programming related to youth; to widen the support base for Palestine refugee youth and UNRWA while deepening UNRWA’s relationship with traditional donors, hosts and other key partners; and to showcase the work of the Agency to key global audiences in order to raise the visibility of the Agency.

Young people across the Middle East have been at the forefront of momentum for change and their voices must be listened to by global leaders, statespeople, humanitarians and those responsible for the security and prosperity of our world. Palestine refugee youth represent an opportunity that must guide our strategic planning. The Agency must engage with youth in ways that promote initiative and productivity and introduce more meaningful and effective approaches to employment and participation.

Box 1: Defining youth

There is no internationally-agreed definition of youth. While the United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines youth as persons between 15 and 24 years of age, it further acknowledges that age bands may vary across countries or regions due to socio-cultural, institutional, political, legal, and economic considerations. Thus, youth is something of a social construct, and is perhaps best understood as the period when an individual leaves childhood behind and gradually takes on a series of adult roles and responsibilities. For the purposes of this document, UNRWA has adopted the age range of 15 – 29, to better reflect the experience of young Palestine refugees and to provide a more appropriate framework for the Agency’s programmatic and policy responses.
The nature and scale of the challenges faced by current and future generations varies considerably, across and within countries. Similarly, Palestine refugee youth face different realities in different settings, ranging from occupation and near-perpetual conflict in Gaza and the West Bank, codified inequity in Lebanon, relative stability and hospitality in Jordan and to an unpredictable situation in Syria. Despite geographical specificities, the refugee condition brings with it a common set of social, political, and development challenges. These are best understood in terms of dispossession, an absence of justice, and the denial of the right of self-determination – circumstances which often place young refugees at particular risk of exclusion and marginalisation.

UNRWA has thus identified Palestine refugee youth as a particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged group within the refugee population, whose development needs are an increasingly pressing concern. Support for youth at this critical juncture is vital if UNRWA is to make sustained progress towards its human development goals. This will require a set of commitments and activities, involving partnerships at international, national and local levels, and active participation of refugee youth. Close collaboration with host authorities, whose own youth populations are confronted with many of the same challenges as young Palestinians, is also of paramount importance.

The purpose of this document is to inform partners, experts and policy-makers about UNRWA’s activities and interventions for young Palestine refugees, positioning these within a broader life-cycle framework, whereby human development is viewed as a lifelong and cumulative process. The document was developed to inform a consultative process initiated at the “Engaging Youth” conference with the aim of bringing about a more strategic and purposeful approach to UNRWA’s existing engagement with Palestine refugee youth.

Box 3: Why focus on youth?

1. Youth (aged 15 – 29) account for almost 29 per cent of the registered refugee population; they are growing at an unprecedented rate.

2. They are the future human capital and source of productivity of the refugee community, a vital engine for prosperity and a positive force for change in the societies where they live.

3. Investments in youth are investments in the future, needed to advance development prospects in the 21st century.
Demographic context

At the end of 2010, more than 1.4 million Palestine refugees were aged between 15 and 29 years, accounting for around 28.5 per cent of the registered refugee population; a further 1.3 million (27 per cent of the total population) were aged below 15 years of age. The youth cohort has tripled in size since 1975, at an average annual growth rate of 3.2 per cent per annum. This compares to around 3.1 per cent for the population as a whole and only 2.2 per cent p.a. for the 0-14 age group.¹

The distribution of refugee youth across UNRWA’s fields of operation is broadly consistent with overall refugee numbers, with 40 per cent of all registered refugee youth in Jordan and a further 25 per cent in Gaza (see Figure 1).

On a field-by-field basis, the share of youth in the overall population varies from around 27 per cent in Lebanon to over 30 per cent in Gaza, as indicated in Table 1.

![Figure 1: Refugee youth by field, as a share of all registered refugee youth, end 2010](image)

Table 1: Summary data on registered refugee youth, end 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Total registered RR population</th>
<th>Number of RR youth</th>
<th>Youth as a share of all RR youth</th>
<th>Youth as a share of the total RR population in each field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaza</td>
<td>1,167,361</td>
<td>352,749</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bank</td>
<td>848,494</td>
<td>241,323</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>1,999,466</td>
<td>574,926</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>495,970</td>
<td>136,568</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>455,373</td>
<td>119,053</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>4,966,664</td>
<td>1,424,619</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNRWA registration statistical bulletin, various years.

As indicated in Table 2, refugee youth growth rates have varied widely between fields since 1975. Whilst the number of youth has increased everywhere, Gaza and Jordan have witnessed the greatest expansion. Data also indicates divergent trends across fields, with rates of growth since 2000 increasing in Gaza and the West Bank and slowing in other fields (see Table 3). Average annual rates of increase during 2000 – 2010 were as high as five per cent in Gaza and close to four per cent in the West Bank, with the absolute number of youth increasing by around two-thirds and 50 per cent respectively. These patterns suggest that much of the expected increase in the youth population in the coming years and decades will be in these fields, as discussed in more detail below.

Increases in the number and relative share of youth are the result of a shift from a regime of high birth and death rates to one in which both are low, a process commonly referred to as the demographic transition. Inter-field variations are largely due to the differential pace and timing of the onset of fertility decline. This is discussed in more detail in Box 4.

¹ The analysis in this section is based on UNRWA’s registration data, which tends to over-estimate the de facto refugee population in each field. Registration with UNRWA is a voluntary process. Individuals who move overseas, either permanently or on a temporary basis, may remain registered. Further, deaths tend to be under-reported, as do the numbers of those under five.
Table 2: Growth rates of registered refugee youth, 1975-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gaza</th>
<th>West Bank</th>
<th>Jordan</th>
<th>Syria</th>
<th>Lebanon</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of RR youth, end 1975</td>
<td>94,138</td>
<td>86,084</td>
<td>174,655</td>
<td>50,751</td>
<td>54,887</td>
<td>4,966,664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of RR youth, end 2010</td>
<td>352,749</td>
<td>241,323</td>
<td>574,926</td>
<td>136,568</td>
<td>119,053</td>
<td>1,424,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage change in RR youth population, 1975-2010</td>
<td>274.7%</td>
<td>180%</td>
<td>229%</td>
<td>169%</td>
<td>116.9%</td>
<td>209.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual growth rate of youth cohort, 1975-2010</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNRWA registration statistical bulletin, various years.

Table 3: Growth rates of registered refugee youth, 2000-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gaza</th>
<th>West Bank</th>
<th>Jordan</th>
<th>Syria</th>
<th>Lebanon</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of RR youth, end 2000</td>
<td>213,313</td>
<td>162,590</td>
<td>466,557</td>
<td>107,006</td>
<td>101,153</td>
<td>1,050,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of RR youth, end 2010</td>
<td>352,749</td>
<td>241,323</td>
<td>574,926</td>
<td>136,568</td>
<td>119,053</td>
<td>1,424,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage change in RR youth population, 2000-2010</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual growth rate of youth cohort, 2000-2010</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual growth rate of total registered refugee population, 2000-2010</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNRWA registration statistical bulletin, various years.

Box 4: Explaining the youth bulge

The late 19th century saw major improvements in sanitation, disease control and medical care across the Middle East, leading to rapid declines in death rates, particularly amongst infants and women in childbirth. However, fertility levels (i.e., the number of births per woman) remained persistently high, fuelling rapid population growth. Over the course of the second half of the 20th century, the population of the Middle East increased fourfold (PRB, 2007); the registered Palestine refugee population witnessed a similar expansion, rising from around 900,000 persons in 1950 to above 3.8 million by 2000.

Fertility levels in the region only began to decline in the late 1970s, proceeding thereafter at a rapid pace. This produced a “baby boom” generation (i.e., a group that was larger than subsequent birth cohorts). As these individuals now enter adulthood, they are producing a distinctive youth bulge in population age structures. This is illustrated in Figures 2a – 2c, in the form of population pyramids for Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and Syria for the years 1975, 2000 and 2025, based on national demographic data and projections prepared by the United Nations Population Division (UN, 2010).

2. Total fertility rates fell from 6.3 children per woman in 1975 to around 3.1 in 2002 (Tabutin and Schoumaker, 2005). It should be noted that aggregate figures mask sizeable inter- (and indeed intra-) country heterogeneity.
Figure 2a: Population pyramid for Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory and Syria, 1975

As per figure 2a, in 1975 children were the largest share of the population, and the size of each cohort declined progressively with age. Whilst this remained the case at the turn of this century (Figure 2b), fertility levels had begun to fall, evidenced by the narrowing of the base of the pyramid. By 2025 (Figure 2c), the United Nations Population Division (UNPD's) forecasts that the share of youth (aged 15 – 29) will be larger than those aged under 15.3

Figure 2b: Population pyramid for Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory and Syria, 2000

Figure 2c: Population pyramid for Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory and Syria, 2025

As per figure 2a, in 1975 children were the largest share of the population, and the size of each cohort declined progressively with age. Whilst this remained the case at the turn of this century (Figure 2b), fertility levels had begun to fall, evidenced by the narrowing of the base of the pyramid. By 2025 (Figure 2c), the United Nations Population Division (UNPD's) forecasts that the share of youth (aged 15 – 29) will be larger than those aged under 15.3

Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) are at different stages in their demographic transition. In Lebanon, where the onset of fertility decline began earlier than in neighbouring countries, the “youth bulge” is already reaching its peak. Between 2010 and 2025, the number of youth in Lebanon is projected to fall by around 20 per cent, according to the UNPD’s most recent projections, as indicated in Figure 3. By contrast, in Gaza, the youth cohort is expected to almost double in size over this period,4 according to forecasts from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). In the oPt, the youth cohort is set to continue growing until the middle of this century, whilst in Syria and Jordan it is expected to peak in around 2035.

3. Also visible in the pyramid for 2025 is the relative increase in the proportion of infants in 15 years, by which time the original baby boom cohort will have entered its child-bearing years. Notwithstanding the onset of fertility decline, these conditions will provide the momentum for further, fairly rapid population growth in the future.

4. The United Nations Population Division does not produce separate demographic forecasts for the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.
The “youth bulge” is contributing to a growing share of individuals of working age relative to the proportion of children and elderly. UNRWA registration data indicates that the overall share of the working-age population (here those aged between 15 and 59) has been increasing gradually over the past few decades, whilst the share of those aged 14 and below has begun to decline (see Figure 4).5

At Agency-level, the number of registered refugee youth is set to continue to rise for several years. On the basis of current registration data, it is estimated that the number of refugees aged between 15 and 29 will rise to over 1.5 million by 2020, from 1.42 million at the end of 2010,6 or by around six per cent. Rates of change will vary between fields due to the divergent pace and timing of fertility decline amongst refugees in different countries. Gaza, where fertility levels remain highest, will experience the largest growth, with the number of 15 – 29 year olds increasing by more than 15 per cent between 2010 and 2020, followed by West Bank (eight per cent) and Jordan (four per cent). It is estimated that the number of youth in Syria will increase only slightly whereas numbers in Lebanon will actually decrease slightly.

Source: UNRWA registration statistical bulletin, various years.

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5. Also visible in the data is the increase in the registered refugee population across all age groups in around 1990, due to the expulsion of Palestinians from Kuwait following the war of that year.

6. This assumes that mortality rates amongst refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon follow the national patterns described by WHO in *Life Tables for WHO Member States*, Geneva, 2011, and that these mortality rates do not change between now and 2020. As WHO does not produce life tables for the oPt, it has further been assumed that refugees in Gaza and West Bank will follow Jordanian mortality patterns. Migration is assumed to be zero.
The life-cycle approach to development

The life-cycle approach recognizes that human capital formation does not take place uniformly throughout the life course, but is concentrated in certain critical phases - most notably during birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, and youth. It is a cumulative process, whereby interventions at an earlier stage form the foundation for human capital accumulation in subsequent periods. Individuals are also typically more vulnerable during early childhood and youth: exposure to harm during these periods can have irrevocable consequences for their own prospects and the well-being of future generations.

As a tool for policy-makers, the life-cycle approach offers a useful lens for understanding the needs of specific population groups, and how vulnerabilities vary according to social and socio-demographic considerations, including gender and health status. This, in turn, facilitates inclusive and cross-sectoral analysis by helping to identify gaps in existing knowledge, providing a basis for effective responses that make best use of available resources.

Importantly, the life cycle approach also allows for local specificities and environmental factors to be taken into consideration when developing policy and programmes. Efforts to harness the potential of youth and to ensure a successful transition to adulthood depend not only on interventions that focus on this phase of the life-course but also on the conditions, opportunities and constraints afforded by the attendant environment. This includes supportive institutions and enabling normative and legal frameworks. From UNRWA’s perspective, this environment varies considerably between and within fields of operation, and thus requires a range of context-specific responses, as articulated within the Medium Term Strategy 2011 – 2015 (UNRWA, 2010).

UNRWA and the life-cycle approach to inclusive youth programming

UNRWA’s mission is “to help Palestine refugees achieve their full potential in human development under the difficult circumstances in which they live.” Considered from a life-cycle perspective, and focusing on the transition from childhood to adulthood, the Agency has identified three inter-related themes to guide its approach to youth programming, as follows:

- Surviving and growing
- Learning and developing
- Living and working

Building on these themes, UNRWA’s conceptualisation of a successful transition to adulthood incorporates the following attributes, which are central to advancing the human development of refugees:

- Growing up healthy, adjusting to reproductive roles and healthy behaviours
- Accessing quality higher education
- Preparing for the demands of increasingly-complex labour markets
- Becoming capable and productive community members and leaders

These issues are discussed in more detail below. Whilst the focus is on the 15–29 age group, activities that target earlier age groups are also discussed, where these provide the foundations for advancing human development amongst youth.
Youth and health: surviving and growing

Health, understood as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being (WHO, 1946), is a crucial component of human development, a prerequisite for building human capabilities and allowing individuals to develop their full potential. Healthy individuals are more likely to do better at school, to become active and productive members of their community, and to beget and rear healthy children. A healthy society is more likely to enjoy sustained economic and social development (WHO, 1978). Within the broader developmental life course, critical periods for health include, inter alia, birth, infancy, early childhood, adolescence, and youth. Each carries risks that can have profound and far-reaching impacts on future health and well-being.

During infancy and early childhood, a child’s health status is particularly fragile and the risk of death and permanent disability relatively high, due to greater vulnerability to malnutrition and infectious diseases. Health interventions during these years can yield major returns. For Palestine refugees, sustained strategic investments in comprehensive primary health care by UNRWA and its partners has seen dramatic improvements in infant mortality over the past 50 years, with rates amongst the lowest in the region. All of UNRWA’s fields are on track to meet Millennium Development Goal targets linked to infant death rates.

Conversely, adolescents and youth tend to be strong and healthy, at relatively low risk of succumbing to the degenerative conditions that are now the main causes of mortality and morbidity amongst the adult refugee population. The health risks they face are typically linked to the complex processes that accompany the transition to adulthood. During this period, as individuals seek their own identify, they also begin to play a greater role in determining and managing their own health status. They may fall prey to risky behaviours and acquire habits that can have profound and long-term impacts on their health, self-esteem and well-being. Equally, adolescence and youth are periods that offer considerable opportunities to instil positive behaviours which can yield lifelong benefits.

Youth is also the time when family formation begins. Despite a sharp reduction in maternal mortality and morbidity in the last 30 years, driven in large part by improvements to health services, pregnancy continues to carry serious risks. Thus, couples continue to require adequate and timely access to reproductive health care and information.

UNRWA’s health services

UNRWA provides a range of preventive and clinical health services to refugees across its fields, through a network of 137 health clinics and one hospital, serviced by around 3,650 health care workers. In Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon, supplementary programmes address the impact of protracted conflict and occupation, insecurity and deprivation.

Growing up healthy

UNRWA’s infant and child-care services provide the necessary foundations to allow children to do well at school and to succeed in later life. In accordance with the life-cycle approach to care, these services tackle the vulnerabilities faced at different ages and the specific needs of boys and girls.

For children under five, interventions range from immunisation against preventable diseases (where coverage rates are nearly universal) and oral health services, to specialist care for those with nutritional and growth problems.

Once refugees attain school age, UNRWA’s educational facilities become an important vehicle for the delivery of interventions to
maintain and improve health status. This includes medical examinations, immunisation boosters, health awareness activities, vitamin supplements, and screenings for vision and hearing impairments, thyroid conditions, and oral health problems. Those showing evidence of ill health, behavioural problems, or absence from school for long periods receive thorough examinations from medical officers; almost 4,000 school children received such support in 2010.

Adolescents and youth benefit from the full range of preventive and curative services available in Agency clinics and, on average, attend UNRWA clinics six times during the course of a year, typically to treat respiratory tract infections and arthrosis.

UNRWA provides a range of individual and community-based interventions aimed at discouraging unhealthy behaviours, including psychological and physical domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect. Mechanisms are also in place to provide protection against gender-based violence, including through counselling centres and a dedicated referral system in Gaza.

Children and youth are the main beneficiaries of UNRWA’s community mental health programme (CMHP), which was established in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 2002 in response to increased psycho-social support needs arising from the violence, deprivation and trauma of the intifada of 2000. Interventions aim to equip refugees with constructive coping mechanisms and build a positive environment for mental health and well-being at community level, in order to prevent long term psychological distress. The programme also raises awareness on the social acceptance and integration of vulnerable groups, including the elderly and persons with disabilities. In 2010, around 165,000 persons benefited from UNRWA’s CMHP services in Gaza. Refugee children and youth received advice on life skills, healthy behaviours, stress and crisis management. Interventions - targeting children, youth, their parents, and community representatives - were delivered through a network of 236 counsellors based in UNRWA schools, health clinics, and community centres. In the West Bank, similar programmes supported an additional 65,000 refugees, including large numbers of adolescents and youth.

Box 5: Health reforms and youth

UNRWA is in the process of shifting to a “family health team” approach, grounded in the holistic care of the entire family and emphasising long-term patient-provider relationships. This approach will build on the philosophy introduced with the life-cycle framework by focusing on curative and preventive care needs at different stages of the life cycle. In a departure from current service provision, all care will be provided by the same family health team, which will take collective responsibility for the care of those registered with them.

For refugee youth, this approach will improve mechanisms for dealing with growth and development over the life course and will contribute to early detection and enhanced management of physical, developmental, and learning disabilities. A closer relationship between patients and providers will also support the identification of vulnerable individuals and allow for improved cross-sectoral care, involving UNRWA departments and other service providers.
Youth and education: today and tomorrow

Education is one of the most fundamental forms of empowerment, providing the foundation for sustainable human development. Within the broader life cycle, childhood and adolescence are by far the most important phases for learning, when cognitive and physical skills are acquired, and beliefs, expectations, and values are shaped. Learning outcomes from these years go a long way towards determining future life chances in terms of productive capacity, family formation, and responsible citizenship, including an understanding of the world and the embrace of common values such as tolerance, gender equity, human rights, and environmental protection.

Historically, Palestine refugees have long been recognised as one of the most educated communities in the Middle East, enjoying higher levels of literacy and attainment – particularly amongst females - than host country nationals and regional neighbours (FAFO, 2003). These achievements have extended to higher education, where already by the late 1960s the proportion of Palestinians attending university was comparable to many developed countries (Hallaj, 1980).

UNRWA has been a significant and transformational force in the education of Palestine refugees. The Agency’s programmes have guaranteed widespread access to basic schooling for refugees across the region and provided a vital springboard to higher education, up to university level. In parallel, vocational and technical training centres have endowed successive generations of refugees with marketable skills, enhancing their employability within regional labour markets; dedicated teacher training colleges have helped the Agency to sustain and expand its education programmes, in the face of ever-increasing demand and a growing school-age population.

UNRWA’s school system

UNRWA runs one of the largest education systems in the Middle East, opening the doors of its 700 schools to nearly 500,000 pupils each day and employing 17,000 teachers. All refugee children of school age are eligible to enrol in UNRWA’s schools, which provide free basic education 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 the preparatory level. During the 2010 – 2011 school year an estimated two-thirds of all eligible refugee children were accommodated in UNRWA schools. Around half of all pupils at UNRWA schools are girls.

Beyond the basic cycle of education, UNRWA operates six secondary schools in Lebanon. In other fields, refugees continuing beyond the lower preparatory phase are able to transfer to government-run schools. Post-secondary education is provided through ten technical and vocational training colleges (VTC), which offer a range of trade (vocational) and semi-professional courses, alongside short-term needs-based training provided in collaboration with NGOs. UNRWA’s VTCs currently accommodate around 6,650 trainees each year.

In Jordan and the West Bank, university-level education for pre- and in-service teacher training is available at dedicated facilities, accommodating 1,630 teachers and students each year. Other short-term in-service training programmes reach 800 to 900 teaching staff every year.

To facilitate the creation of academic and intellectual leadership in the refugee community, UNRWA provides small numbers of project-funded scholarships for university tuition, awarded on merit and to particularly disadvantaged groups, such as ex-Gazan refugees in Jordan.
However, despite major improvements in access and equity of provision in recent years, the poorest refugees, alongside low-achievers and those with special educational needs (SEN), remain particularly vulnerable to exclusion and drop-out from the basic education cycle. Refugee children in the oPt and Lebanon face further difficulties, in the form of problems of physical access that negatively affect their ability to go to school, as well as the quality of the education they receive. In Gaza, despite growing demand for further education, each year thousands are prevented from studying at universities and colleges in the West Bank and overseas. Restrictions on the entry of construction materials continue to impede the construction of new schools, forcing the Agency to accommodate pupils in containers. For those in the oPt, the threat of physical violence also remains present. According to a 2011 survey, almost half of all households questioned reported that they had suffered some sort of violence at the hands of Israeli soldiers or settlers (PCBS, 2011).

Inclusive education

Across its fields, the Agency offers a wide range of activities to SEN children and others who are failing to meet required standards, to help them remain in basic schooling and graduate to the higher educational cycle. For example, after-school classes and summer learning programmes have been a key plank of the Agency’s oPt Emergency Appeal for many years. During 2010 these initiatives reached 55,000 pupils. Results have been impressive, with pass rates from the summer learning initiatives in 2010 as high as 80 per cent. In Lebanon, with funding from the European Commission, UNRWA has set up remedial classrooms in all of its schools, where under-performing children receive an individualised educational plan to improve basic numeracy and literacy. Learning support teams also provide additional tuition to struggling pupils in all grades. During the 2010 – 2011 school year, more than ten per cent of the total student population benefited from these programmes.

The Engaging Youth initiative in Syria (see Box 7) provides another outstanding example, where support programmes have been introduced for pupils at ten preparatory schools identified as having the lowest learning outcomes and highest drop-out rates. This builds the capacity of UNRWA staff and youth workers to address the needs of learners of differing abilities, and to provide support classes for those at risk of exclusion. To date, more than 1,000 students have received such support whilst 271 teachers and 40 head teachers and supervisors have been trained on innovative learning methods. Moreover, a learning support centre has been established in Yarmouk camp to address the learning needs of children with disabilities and low-achievers.

The Agency estimates that approximately 100,000 students with special educational needs are not currently being served adequately. UNRWA’s Education Reform Strategy (2011–2015) places particular emphasis on improved support to this group, through the development of an inclusive approach to education. This will focus on identifying and supporting children with diverse needs and different abilities, using best-practice approaches alongside appropriate diagnostic tools and support mechanisms.

Inclusive education recognises that children have different abilities and different ways of learning. It emphasises the ongoing identification of learning needs through informal observation, information gathering and formative assessment throughout the school year. That means identifying when children need support instead of waiting until they perform poorly in end-of-term exams.

An inclusive education policy has been developed, which aims to establish a unified framework for the development of a more responsive, flexible, and child-centred education system with improved identification of individual learning needs and psychosocial support. It also aims to empower teachers to use strategies and approaches through which to organise learning that is inclusive of all children.
Achieving quality education as outlined in UNRWA’s Education Reform Strategy includes a number of inter-related dimensions. Central to this is the capacity development and empowerment of students to develop their critical thinking skills, values, attitudes, and behaviours – in line with the principles of human rights education. There are two specific focus areas of education reform that explicitly address both curriculum issues and human rights education.

UNRWA uses host authority curricula in its schools, enriching this with supplementary materials in certain areas. A draft curriculum framework has been developed, which provides the basis for an evaluation of the curricula in place across the five fields. It includes sections related to conceptual content, sequencing of knowledge, student interactivity, and bias and neutrality.

In pursuit of wider strategic goals and reflective of United Nations values, the forthcoming UNRWA human rights and conflict resolution training programme will draw on materials from the education programme and existing good practices to support teachers in promoting non-violence, social cohesion, conflict resolution, and human rights. The programme seeks to provide refugee children and youth with an appreciation of the need to uphold civic values and an understanding of the role of culture, history, diversity, and respect for the rights of all citizens, thereby allowing them to make a positive contribution to the development of their society as adults.

Meanwhile, a number of activities promoting awareness of human rights, tolerance promotion, and conflict resolution are already implemented in all schools for students between Grades 4 and 9. Dedicated human rights lessons are organised in Gaza, whilst in all other fields materials are integrated into other subjects. Trainees at UNRWA vocational centres and teacher-training facilities also receive instruction on human rights concepts, whilst in-service training has been provided to existing staff.

A dedicated Respect and Discipline in Violence Free Schools initiative is underway in Gaza, covering over 112,000 pupils in 112 schools. This is built around a code of conduct which outlines the responsibilities of students, teachers, and parents towards promoting good behaviour. Most of the target schools are elementary and preparatory boys’ schools, where behavioural issues are assessed to be most acute.

Box 6: Education reforms and youth

UNRWA is facing considerable challenges as it strives to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, embrace new technologies, and equip young refugees for higher education. Many of the quantifiable indicators of attainment, in particular class sizes and teacher-pupil ratios, have shown marked improvements in recent years and student performance is generally on par with host authority schools. However, mirroring trends across the Middle East, concerns remain about overall educational quality and whether curricula are equipping pupils with the higher-order critical-thinking skills they will need to thrive in social and economic life as adults. In the Gaza Strip, the situation is compounded by demographic pressures and continued robust increases in the number of pupils enrolled in Agency schools.

Financial shortfalls have consistently limited capacity to invest in human and capital resources. Since the 1950s the Agency has been forced to operate many of its schools on a “double shift” basis, whereby one group of pupils attends in the morning and a second in the afternoon. Today, around 80 per cent of elementary schools and 65 per cent of preparatory schools are double shifted, with the highest proportions in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. Around 15 per cent of all schools operate from rented premises and lack the space, lighting, and ventilation needed to create an environment that is conducive to learning.
Youth and employment: living and working

Creating sufficient employment opportunities for new labour-market entrants is critical for supporting youth. Most importantly, economic exclusion prevents youth from being able to marry, form families, live independently, and participate in the civic life of their communities.

Many Middle Eastern economies face daunting challenges in absorbing a rapidly-growing and increasingly-educated labour force (World Bank, 2004). For much of the past decade, the Middle East has endured the highest levels of unemployment of any world region, with particularly high rates of joblessness in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. The root causes of this chronic employment crisis are complex. In part they reflect the inability of public policy, state institutions and the broader functions of governance to keep pace with rapidly-changing labour market needs and the new realities created by modernisation and structural adjustment (Dhillon, Dyer and Yousef, 2009).

School systems tend to emphasize rote learning at the expense of the critical-thinking skills that are increasingly important in the modern economy, whilst economic policy and related regulatory frameworks are often too rigid to foster a vibrant and productive private sector.

Across UNRWA’s fields, unemployment is predominantly a problem of youth insertion into the labour market. In the oPt in 2010, for example, rates of unemployment for youth were far higher than for the population as a whole, reaching 70.7 per cent in Gaza and 34.9 per cent in the West Bank, compared to 43.6 per cent and 23.4 per cent respectively for the entire population (UNRWA, 2011). Likewise, in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, for the latest year that comparable data is available, unemployment rates for those aged 15 – 24 were more than three times higher than for the adult population (ILO, 2010). For those who can find jobs, working conditions - in terms of wages, job protection and social security - are often poor, and prospects for mobility are limited.

The general trend towards increased labour force participation amongst females, albeit from an extremely low base, has created further supply-side pressures on the employment market. Young women who do enter the labour market face particular difficulties in finding work and making a successful transition from education to work, as indicated in Table 4. In many cases, the most educated women face the highest unemployment rates.

The changes to human rights and SEN programming described earlier are part of a mutually-reinforcing set of reforms developed in line with a comprehensive Education Reform Strategy (2011–2015), aimed at better preparing children for adulthood and modern life, and paving the way for them to make a positive contribution to the development of their society. As part of this reform, traditional approaches to teaching and learning will be overhauled and replaced with those that focus on the development of higher-order thinking skills and instil the notion of lifelong learning.

The reform strategy places teachers at the centre, recognising that teacher training and professional development are key to ensuring quality education. A teacher policy has been developed to ensure that there is a system in place for ongoing and coherent professional development and career progression. This policy will be supported by a school-based teacher development programme, enabling teachers to study distance-learning materials in their own time. The modules will engage with the teacher, talk to them, ask them to think about their own teaching, reflect on the teaching of others through case studies, and explore new ideas.

Other reform areas include the establishment of an education governance framework and an Agency-wide e-system for education (EMIS).
In such conditions, Palestine refugee youth have often found themselves particularly disadvantaged, for various reasons:

- In **Lebanon**, in spite of recent reforms, Palestinians remain effectively excluded from the formal labour market, and face restrictions in obtaining work overseas.

- In the **West Bank** and **Gaza Strip**, Israel’s occupation and multi-layered system of movement restrictions continues to place major constraints on economic performance and growth, particularly in Gaza, which remains subject to a stringent blockade. Previously, one-third of all Palestinians – around 150,000 persons – worked in Israel; during 2010 an average of 78,100 persons worked in Israel, including a relatively small number of youth who face greater restrictions than older workers in obtaining permits (UNRWA, 2011). The job market in the Arab Gulf – a major employer of Palestinians throughout the 1960s and 1970s – has also shrunk considerably since the 1980s.

- In **Jordan**, a group of around 150,000 registered refugees who fled Gaza following the 1967 war (“ex-Gazan refugees”) are subject to stringent economic restrictions. Unlike other registered refugees, who enjoy the same economic status as Jordanians, they are barred from a number of professions and co-operative associations, and require special approval to start a business.

### Preparing refugees for the demands of increasingly-complex labour markets

Beyond the basic education cycle, UNRWA offers a range of interventions to enhance the employability of refugee youth and to support them in their efforts to find work through core programmes and extra-budgetary activities. Dedicated support is given to refugees from particularly impoverished backgrounds, including school dropouts. The main areas of focus are as follows:

- Technical and vocational education and training;
- A diversified multi-year project to mitigate refugee youth exclusion in Syria: **Engaging Youth**;
- Microfinance;
- Emergency employment creation in Gaza and the West Bank;
- Employability initiatives in Lebanon.

Although the scale and scope of these initiatives has expanded considerably in recent years - in the context of major reforms and an increased focus on quality programmes and on protecting and assisting the most vulnerable - such activities have been an important dimension of UNRWA’s work since operations began.

Vocational training and adult literacy programmes started in 1951, and the Agency opened its first dedicated vocational training

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**Table 4: Unemployment rates amongst youth in UNRWA’s fields, ILO definition, selected years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey year</th>
<th>Male youth unemployment rate</th>
<th>Female youth unemployment rate</th>
<th>Overall youth unemployment rate</th>
<th>Total unemployment rate</th>
<th>Ratio of youth unemployment rate to adult unemployment rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaza</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>61.2%</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bank</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>38.8%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>45.9%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ILO, Key Indicators of the Labour Market; PCBS.

7. Defined here as persons aged 15-24.  8. The adult unemployment rate refers to all persons in the labour force aged 25 and above.
centre (VTC) in Kalandia near Jerusalem in 1953; two additional VTCs opened soon after in Gaza, as did two teacher training centres. This was followed, in 1962, by the inauguration of the first VTC for women in the Middle East. These facilities ensured that young refugees were able to tap into professional employment opportunities offered by the opening of regional employment markets, particularly in the Gulf.

Training programmes were complemented by employment placement centres, whilst the Agency undertook regular market surveys and systematic analyses of labour market needs to inform curriculum content at an ever-expanding network of colleges across the region. To facilitate access to credit, UNRWA offered its first loans to refugee enterprises in 1950 to support “works” projects fostering independence amongst refugees.

Today, the Agency operates ten vocational training centres across its fields of operation, accommodating around 6,500 trainees each year with a range of technical and trade courses, most of whom are aged between 16 and 18; over one third of all students are girls. UNRWA also operates one of the largest microfinance institutions in the Middle East, with unique, regional coverage.

Technical and vocational training (TVET)

UNRWA’s TVET programmes are designed to equip refugee youth with skills and technical expertise relevant to host country job markets. Courses in traditional and modern trades are offered at post-preparatory level and semi-professional courses at the post-secondary level. TVET centres also provide short-term needs-based training courses in partnership with NGOs.

Career guidance and job placement services are a critical adjunct to training, and TVET graduates consistently show high rates of employment. Demand for the 6,700 places in TVET courses is high, with one in three applications accepted, and with special provision to allot places to the poorest refugees.

As economies develop, UNRWA's TVET programme stays relevant through:

- the development of new shorter-term courses.
- the introduction of a new competency-based training (CBT) approach that places greater emphasis on the development of practical skills and on-the-job training.
- Field innovations and pilots:

  In Gaza, UNRWA has partnered with the ILO to develop short-term courses in construction geared to refugees who have repeated two or more years at school, in response to needs arising from the 2008 Israeli military campaign. Apprenticeships and work placements provide direct employment experience.

  In Jordan, UNRWA TVET is targeting those from poor families who leave school early, in the semi-rural setting of Irbid camp as well as Ex-Gazan refugees in Jerash Camp.

  In Lebanon, the Agency has established a vocational training centre close to Nahr el-Bared in the wake of the camp’s destruction in 2007, which now caters to around 200 vulnerable refugees.

  In the West Bank there has been a successful drive towards increased partnerships and exchanges of knowledge and expertise with the private sector, universities, donors and other TVET partners.

  In Syria, as part of the Engaging Youth project (Box 7), the Agency has extended TVET services to all 12 refugee camps. By the end of June 2011, 1,288 refugee youth had been enrolled in these additional courses aimed at vulnerable youth, including some 160 Iraqi refugees.
Youth and microfinance

A central dimension of the economic exclusion of Middle Eastern youth and their chronic joblessness is a lack of access to credit. Deemed “unbankable” because they lack secure employment or sufficient collateral, young people often find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty and dependency, deprived of the means to start a business or purchase a home. In such conditions, microfinance institutions can play an important role in providing financial services to young men and women.

Whilst UNRWA’s microfinance programme has not designed youth-specific products, it has ensured that a significant share of its portfolio has reached out to young men and women, in an effort to bring them within the economic and financial mainstream by providing credit opportunities that enable them to run and develop businesses and improve living conditions. In pursuit of UNRWA’s human development mission, increasing credit services to youth through its microfinance programme has been identified as a significant means of improving the livelihoods of young people.

During 2010 the programme as a whole financed 33,600 loans valued at USD 42.3 million. Around 31 per cent of these loans, valued at USD 10.3 million (around a quarter of the total value of the portfolio) supported youth. Young women received 34 per cent of all loans provided to women clients, with 3,946 loans worth USD 2.41 million, whilst Palestine refugee youth accounted for 20 per cent of all loans financing refugees.

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Box 7: Engaging Youth in Syria

Since its inception in February 2010, the Engaging Youth Project in Syria has made major strides towards tackling issues of youth employment in Syria. To date, around 14,000 young people and adults have directly benefited from the programme’s activities, including Palestine and Iraqi refugees, which include the following four areas of work:

- Providing better support to refugee youth in their academic and personal development, through innovative approaches to delivering regular and support classes and dedicated spaces for youth activities, and capacity-building for UNRWA teachers and youth service providers. Forty-seven youth clubs have been established in 11 project locations and over 3,000 youth regularly participate in improving their skills and career prospects.

- Equipping refugees with marketable vocational skills through expanding the availability of short-term vocational training opportunities for those who have dropped out of school or left with poor grades. These services are offered at the Agency’s Damascus Training Centre and at outlying centres run by other training providers.

- Ensuring that refugees have the skills they need to access employment opportunities in the private sector through dedicated career counselling services in all 12 camps, which provide one-on-one counselling and training sessions for employability skills. By June 2011, a total of 585 refugee job seekers had been registered at these centres, whilst many more had participated in short training courses on employability skills.

- Enhancing entrepreneurship amongst refugees, through building staff capacity, raising awareness of the benefits and risks of entrepreneurship, orientation sessions, intensive skills training, as well as facilitated outreach to youth.

The successes of the project have been built around its engagement of partners and stakeholders, and its firm grounding in promoting the agency of youth themselves.

9. All data on youth clients of UNRWA’s microfinance programmes relate to persons aged between 18 and 30, in common with many institutions working with youth and enterprise.
On a field basis, Syria had the greatest outreach to youth in terms of clients reached (4,556, or over 40 per cent of all loans provided to youth), whilst the value of the portfolio was highest in West Bank (USD 4.22 million or around 41 per cent of the total value of loans provided). Syria also had the best outreach to young women, achieved largely through the WHC product.

In 2010, Palestine refugee youth accounted for 20 per cent of all refugee clients, with considerable variation between fields.

In February 2012, UNRWA broke important new ground in launching a partnership with Silatech to provide financial services to thousands of young Palestinian entrepreneurs. This will support youth in start-up schemes and enhance the youth focus of UNRWA’s lending programme.

### Table 5: Outreach to youth by loan product, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loan Product</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of Loans (USD)</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Micro-enterprise products</td>
<td>The programme’s core product, which provides working capital loans with tenors of less than one year</td>
<td>4,177 (4.95m)</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro-Enterprise Credit (MEC)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,177 (4.95m)</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro-Enterprise Credit Plus (MEC+)</td>
<td>Working capital loans with a tenor of up to 24 months</td>
<td>20 (209,766)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Household Credit (WHC)</td>
<td>A loan product for home-based women’s income-generating and micro-enterprise projects</td>
<td>2,885 (1.26m)</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity Group Lending (SGL)</td>
<td>Gaza-based product for women’s market-based entrepreneurs</td>
<td>247 (156,400)</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer loan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Lending Product</td>
<td>For wage workers and low-income-salaried employees to help create household assets and provide for education, health care and other needs</td>
<td>2,985 (2.98 m)</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Microfinance Product</td>
<td>To help poor and low-income households repair and improve their shelters, renovate their homes, construct new buildings, attach additional rooms, and purchase land for home construction.</td>
<td>101 (728,533)</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,946 (10.28m)</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6: Outreach to youth by field, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Number and value of loans to youth in 2010</th>
<th>Youth as a proportion of total client base in 2010</th>
<th>Number and value of loans to female youth</th>
<th>Female youth as a proportion of all women clients</th>
<th>Number and value of loans to Palestine refugee youth in 2010</th>
<th>Palestine refugee youth as a proportion of refugee clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaza Strip</td>
<td>906 loans (USD 1.46m)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>298 loans (USD 366,400)</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>762 loans (USD 1.34m)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bank</td>
<td>3,109 loans (USD 4.22m)</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>655 loans (USD 654,520)</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>869 loans (USD 1.11m)</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>1,845 loans (USD 2.05m)</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>397 loans (USD 321,610)</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>1,258 loans (USD 1.5m)</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>4,556 loans (USD 2.56m)</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>2,600 loans (USD 1.07m)</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>774 loans (USD 370,245)</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>10,476 loans (USD 10.29m)</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>3,950 loans (USD 2.41m)</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>3,663 loans (USD 4.32m)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Emergency employment programmes in the oPt

UNRWA launched an emergency job creation programme in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in response to the socio-economic crisis precipitated by the onset of the second intifada in late 2000. Since 2001, the programme has provided a range of unskilled and skilled opportunities in both fields, as well as professional positions and graduate training placements in Gaza, with a focus on those from the poorest families.

In Gaza, to date the job creation programme has issued over 260,000 employment contracts, ranging from three to 12 months. More than one in five of these contracts, or 53,789 positions, have gone to men and women below the age of 30. Contractors have been employed in various capacities: teachers, social workers, health staff, sanitation labourers, and guards. Beneficiaries have also been placed in municipalities and community-based organisations.

Further, a graduate training programme in Gaza has provided short-term contracts to almost 37,000 unemployed graduates of universities or technical and vocational colleges, with close to two-thirds of all jobs held by women. Trainees are placed inside UNRWA installations and with external partners, including NGOs and private sector institutions. These temporary placements aim to provide unemployed youth with work experience and build the professional competencies and life skills that will enable them to find employment when the economic situation improves. Research has indicated that these opportunities have also played an important role in furthering gender empowerment, albeit on a temporary basis, amongst educated females who remain particularly vulnerable to unemployment.

In addition, UNRWA provides work placements for the highest-scoring graduates from Gaza’s universities, through a one-year placement in Agency installations, universities, and other partner organisations. In addition to gaining experience and skills in their chosen field of study, beneficiaries will also support the delivery of core UNRWA education services. UNRWA’s outreach and capacity in Gaza enables it to remain responsive to changing socio-economic conditions and market requirements, and to adapt its programme accordingly, as has been achieved in the past.

Employability in Lebanon

In Lebanon, UNRWA and its partners (including the Lebanese government) have worked collaboratively since 2006 to improve the economic and employment rights of Palestinians living in Lebanon, who face myriad restrictions in entering the labour market, and blanket prohibition from a number of sectors. Despite the passage of legislation in late 2010 aimed at easing these restrictions, they remain in place.

UNRWA in Lebanon targets employability initiatives at a number of groups. For example, Grade 9 students at Agency schools receive career advice to help them decide between the vocational and technical streams. Tailored counselling then continues throughout their secondary or vocational careers, to prepare for further study at university or to facilitate entry into the labour market.

In addition, Palestinian students at Lebanese universities and graduates from UNRWA’s VTCs are given access to job coaching and short-term placements, aimed at improving soft and technical skills. The Agency is also strengthening its capacity to analyse labour market needs, with a view to better supporting job-seekers and informing the content of evolving VTC curricula and disciplines.

In collaboration with the International Labour Organisation, UNRWA also runs employment service centres (ESCs) close to Nahr el-Bared camp and in Sidon, to provide better access to employment and self-employment opportunities for residents.
Youth and participatory camp improvement

Providing young people with opportunities to shape their own futures and engage with their communities is an important dimension of the transition to adulthood. UNRWA’s approach to improving living conditions in refugee camps goes beyond physical infrastructure, applying an integrated approach rooted in an understanding of refugees’ needs and aspirations, including those of youth. Projects are implemented based on plans that have been formulated in partnership with camp residents, including young men and women. This engagement serves to counter social problems facing youth in camps, including joblessness, low living standards, and economic and physical isolation.

Observations

Young people are an important target group for human development efforts, since they are often disproportionately affected by poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion. The collective costs of not investing in youth are staggering in terms of lower economic growth, social insecurity and political instability.

With its stakeholders and partners, UNRWA has chosen to increase its traditional focus on vulnerable groups, amongst others by adopting a more strategic and purposeful approach to youth. It will continue to foster a supportive environment in which Palestine refugee youth can realise their full potential. It will also strive to do more to empower Palestine refugee youth to contribute to the development of their communities and their region.

The continued occupation of the Palestinian territory, including the blockade of Gaza, cannot be overlooked as a factor that severely limits the potential of youth and the prospects for peace and prosperity. The need to respond to the concerns of youth and to stress the urgency of creating opportunities for the younger generation of Palestine refugees does not substitute UNRWA’s call for a just solution to the refugee question, which must involve consultation with the refugees themselves.
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