

MAS Expert Panel Workshop Series: *UNRWA 2020-2030: Rethinking the Financing of UNRWA*

Workshop 2: Summary of Presentations and Discussion

Topic 1: Increasing the proportion of UN member states' Assessed Dues for UNRWA.

Presentation by Feda Abdelhady-Nasser, Ambassador, Deputy Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the UN. Respondents: Lubnah Shomali, Advocacy Manager at BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights; Odoardo Como, Head of Section EUREP, EEAS West Bank and Gaza.

Increasing UN support for UNRWA from its central funds has many advantages for the agency.

1. It would be a clear expression of the international community's support for the Palestinian refugee issue
2. It would assist UNRWA in fulfilling its mandate more efficiently
3. It provides a discrete and consistent income stream
4. It allows for long-term planning and investment in infrastructure and skills which will cut costs and improve the quality of service
5. It gives UNRWA greater independence from donors in deciding spending priorities
6. UNRWA would be spared the costs, time and labour involved in constant fundraising
7. It offers security and protection for UNRWA staff

However, these advantages need to be balanced by the risks to both the political dimension of resolving the Palestinian refugee issue and to the current advantages of voluntary contributions by member states.

1. A more centralised funding model would allow stronger UN member states and states less sympathetic to the Palestinian refugee issue and UNRWA greater control over both amounts and purposes of funding
2. Voluntary contributions allow member states to act unilaterally in their support of UNRWA
3. Fundraising activities are also exercises in mobilising international support. Funding UNRWA provides a vehicle for a wider circle of state and non-state actors to be directly involved, thus extending the support for UNRWA's activities into the wider global community.
4. Diverse forms of funding provide some protection from sudden switches in the policies of some member states (eg 2018 Trump administration cuts)
5. Diverse forms of funding also allows UNRWA greater flexibility in responding to new and unexpected demands or emergencies.
6. Palestinian political representatives and UNRWA retain an influential role in channelling financial and political support which they would not have if funding for UNRWA was simply a line item in the central UN budget
7. The resistance to switching to more centralised UN funding, even from supporters of UNRWA and the Palestinian refugee rights, is widespread amongst UN member states. Attempts to reverse this will risk alienating important member states whose support on other key Palestinian issues is important.

General Discussion

Specific points regarding funding:

1. We should accept that the full UNRWA budget is unlikely to be covered by the central UN budget
2. A strong case can be made for specific expenditures to be covered by central UN funds: eg. Human Resources, internal oversight, communication, security, etc. while relief and assistance to be covered by voluntary contributions
3. Multi-year agreements between UNRWA and key donors is ongoing, but their number is small
4. The potential for support from the Palestinian diaspora is significant: UNICEF is able to raise millions around the world through mobilising private/individual support.

More political issues touched on were:

1. UNRWA's primary funders are also those who are responsible for the absence of a political solution to the problem.
2. A distinction between humanitarian and political aspect of the issue should be more clearly made: international responsibility for financing relief for Palestinian Refugees is related but still separate from the international responsibility for the Palestinian Refugee question as a political issue.
3. It should not be assumed that international responsibility for funding will continue indefinitely.
4. The issue of changing the mandate of UNRWA to include wider responsibilities that have emerged since its establishment is contentious. While the mandate as it is currently formulated may not be fit for purpose and requires greater clarity regarding the responsibility of member states and of UNRWA, there is a strong possibility that unsympathetic member states will take advantage of any proposed changes to erode UNRWA's scope and purpose.

The session provided a greater understanding of the value of a funding model which needs to be diverse and have the political dimensions to the fore.

Topic 2: What are the "core services" of UNRWA?

Presenter: Sam Rose, Director of Planning, UNRWA, Officer-in-Charge Gaza Operations. Respondents: Jalal Hussein, Associate Research fellow at the Institute Francais Proche Orient; Oroub al-Abed, Centre for Lebanese Studies.

Defining a core service implies that some services are not core and therefore are not a priority. This is a complex judgement to make and it is more helpful for UNRWA to use the term "mandated services". This includes a geographical dimension across its 5 fields of operation and an eligibility dimension comprising those Palestinians who lost homes and livelihoods in the creation of Israel. (Some Palestinians did not specifically meet these criteria but were later determined to be eligible.) The services themselves include universal Education, universal primary Health, emergency Relief for those deemed especially vulnerable, and Protection - all of which have evolved and responded to demographic changes and conditions on the ground.

In addition, to these mandated services, the last 20 years has been characterised by ongoing emergency appeals and programmes. Scale of these programmes, especially following episodes of acute conflict, has been even bigger than regular programmes. The most central expense for the

UNRWA is on 30,000 staff who run the programmes which leaves little flexibility for UNRWA to make cuts when faced with funding shortages. The pressure from donors to prioritize in light of funding shortfalls is constant. UNRWA needs to work closely with the donors to ensure that it can balance maintaining those services it uniquely placed to deliver without compromising its UN mandate and the rights of Palestinian refugees. In the current UNRWA strategy, there is a focus on modernization and digitalization and increased emphasis on rights-based approaches.

Different views were expressed over whether the broad scope of these services accurately revealed the quality of the mandated services provided. Some argued that it masked a deterioration that was quite profound while others highlighted that in relation to comparative services in the region, UNRWA was performing exceptionally well. The question was raised that fieldwork often reveals a mismatch between the official performance indicators and the perceptions by refugees themselves. Vocational education was cited as a prime example of a service which is strategic and would empower refugees but is inadequately funded.

At the same time, the on-going commitment by the EU and its individual member states in supporting UNRWA's work was not only an important recognition of the quality of these services but also the political stability they provided and the longer-term developmental nature of these services.

There was also discussion on whether the focus on humanitarian aspects of UNRWA's work led to a depoliticization of the pathways to a resolution. Gaza requires re-constructing (and therefore further UNRWA emergency appeals) because of the Israeli bombardments. This depoliticization is connected to the distrust that emerges between UNRWA senior management, some of its Palestinian staff and the refugees.