

***From Relief and Works to Human Development:  
UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees after 60 Years***

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## Introduction

Sixty-five years have passed since the *Nakba*, the Palestinian reference to the events and war of 1948 that resulted in the displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians. Once it became clear that the plight of these refugees could not be rapidly resolved, the United Nations General Assembly in December 1949 created the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to take over initial relief efforts by local authorities and international non-governmental agencies. From then on, the plight of the Palestinian refugees and UNRWA has been intrinsically linked.

To mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UNRWA, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and UNRWA co-hosted a two-day international conference on 8 and 9 October 2010. The conference explored a number of themes high on the Agency's agenda as it prepared itself for its seventh decade of operations in a situation where a solution to the plight of the Palestinian refugees remained elusive, with little prospect for progress. The substantive and strategic impetus of the conference's focus was a review of some of the main themes being studied by UNRWA at the time relating to the future of the refugee question and the Agency. The conference programme was developed around those aspects of UNRWA's activities that most heavily bear on the Agency's standing to contribute to durable solutions for the refugees – developmental services, protection, governance, participation, camp improvement, and the political horizon. Not surprisingly, a number of these themes also feature prominently in the Agency's Medium-Term Strategy for 2010 – 2015 (UNRWA, 2010).

The essays in this book are updated versions of many of the papers presented during the conference, complemented with several others. The book is divided in six parts: I. Meeting Challenges in Programmes and Service Delivery; II. Protection: From Concept to Practice; III. Governance: The Camps and UNRWA; IV. Civic Participation and Community Engagement; V. Camp Improvement / Reconstruction and Community Development; and VI. Palestinian Refugees and Durable Solutions: A Role for UNRWA. Together they explore how UNRWA has been adapting since the turn of the century, when the outbreak of the second *Intifada* led to the realization that the optimism and subsequent planning for a wind down of the Agency generated by the Oslo peace process had been premature, and that the Agency's continued existence would be required for the years to come. A number of innovations and reforms discussed in the book were triggered at an earlier conference in Geneva in 2004, co-hosted by the Swiss Government and UNRWA.

The book highlights the many and varied challenges that UNRWA faces. Some of these are internal to the organization, such as the persistent budget deficits, which hamper the Agency's drive to raise the quality of its services and the challenge to sustain the momentum for reform. Other impediments relate to the context of occupation, conflict, and an absence of human rights for Palestinians. These include uncertainties about the negotiation process, the blockade in Gaza, the closure regime in the West Bank and, most recently, the outbreak of conflict in Syria.

The latter is a stark reminder of the vulnerability of the Palestinian refugees and UNRWA in the face of external developments. At the time of the 2010 conference, no one could predict that six months later the decades-long stable and favorable living conditions that Palestinian refugees had enjoyed in Syria, would radically change, not only dramatically affecting their safety and security, but also causing a renewed displacement of both Syrians and Palestinians at an unprecedented scale. With these latest developments, Palestinian refugees in all of UNRWA's five 'Fields' of operations – the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria – have had to cope with armed conflict and secondary displacement at some point in time during their exile, in addition to the challenges associated with their original flight, including dispossession and statelessness.

UNRWA and its relationship with the Palestinian refugees is a rich source for academic enquiry and yet the literature on the Agency is very limited. Aside from a special edition of *Refugee Survey Quarterly* (Bocco & Takkenberg, 2009) and the catalogue of a recent exhibition on camp improvement (Misselwitz, 2012) most literature on the Agency is dated. The only specific studies on UNRWA look at its history (Schiff 1995; Altamemi 1974; Pilon 1985; Prittie 1975), administrative structure (Buehrig 1971; Dale 1974; Lindsay 2009; Rosenfeld 2009), core programmes (Blome Jacobsen 2003; Tamari and Zureik 1996), and contribution to peace and stability in the Middle East (Forsythe 1971; Hussein 2000; Schiff 1989; Gottheil 2006; Perlmutter 1971; Viorst 1989; Besson 1997; Stebbing 1985). Focusing on some of the key challenges facing the longest lasting case of forced migration in modern history, this book aims to help significantly filling this void. It is hoped that it will contribute to a better understanding of a unique agency and of the centrality of the Palestinian refugee issue for peace-making in the Middle East.

## **Part I. Meeting Challenges in Programmes and Service Delivery**

UNRWA was created with the dual mandate to continue the direct relief operation initiated by its predecessors and to initiate a process of socio-economic development through public works schemes with the purpose to integrate the refugees into the economic life of the Near East. The works programmes were met with significant suspicion and skepticism on the part of the host countries and the refugees and never really took off. By the time the Suez Crises broke out in 1956, the ambitious development effort was shelved (Schiff 1996). At the same time, the refugees remained in need of international support and hence UNRWA's mandate was repeatedly extended. From the mid-1950s onward, UNRWA's relief mandate shifted from the emergency assistance it initially provided – food, shelter, clothing, and basic health care – to more comprehensive support for social development of the refugee population. Education rapidly replaced relief as UNRWA's central programme, with the Agency establishing a strategic partnership with UNESCO, adopting the host country curriculum to its schools and successfully introducing vocational and technical training in addition to its basic education programme. A similar partnership with WHO formed the basis for UNRWA's highly cost-effective primary health-care programme. As the refugees gradually attained self-sufficiency, dependence on direct relief dropped so drastically that, by the mid-1980s,

UNRWA was able to replace its general ration programme with a much more selective programme targeting families in special hardship.

UNRWA's pioneering strategy turned out to be a success story. Some 1.5 million pupils graduated from UNRWA's basic 9 or 10 year education cycle, paving the way to economic self-sufficiency for the vast majority of the refugees. Literacy rates among Palestine refugees compare well with regional and global levels and there has been gender equity in enrolment since the 1960s. At present, the Agency operates some 700 schools in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, with an enrolment of nearly 500,000 children. More than 60,000 students graduated from technical and vocational training offered by the Agency's 10 vocational and technical training centres. Approximately two thirds of the registered refugees (some 3 million persons) obtain health services from 137 primary health care centres. Responding to high rates of infant mortality, one of UNRWA's innovations was the introduction in 1957 of a special oral rehydration formula for treating mildly dehydrated diarrheic infants. The results were spectacular and the principle of oral dehydration therapy was later adopted globally by WHO and UNICEF. As a result of these and other approaches, infant, child and maternal mortality rates are amongst the lowest in the region and nearly 100% of refugee households are connected to water networks. And with the exception of recent emergencies, dependence on direct relief assistance reduced dramatically, from nearly 100% at UNRWA's inception to 6% at present. The Relief and Social Services Programme has also been the catalyst for the development of a strong, community-based network of social services, comprising 65 women programme centres, 37 community-based rehabilitation centres for persons with disabilities and 30 youth activity centres.

The outbreak of the first *Intifada* in 1987 and broader regional developments, including a growing acceptance within refugee communities that improving living conditions does not mean relinquishing the right of return, provided an opportunity for a gradual shift towards more developmental approaches resulting in a number of programmatic innovations that were introduced from the early 1990s onwards. These include the introduction of a highly successful microfinance programme that since its establishment in 1991/92 has issued some 180,000 loans for a total value of \$200 million, making it the largest non-bank financial intermediary in the region. UNRWA strives to reach full self-reliance and financial self-sufficiency for the programme as soon as possible, and aims to achieve transformation to full independence by the mid of the current decade, in line with international best practice. Another innovation related to a more sustained and systematic effort on improving the physical infrastructure inside refugee camps. Since the early 1990s, some 13,500 refugee shelters were rehabilitated. From the turn of the century, UNRWA also developed and a participatory camp improvement methodology which is being rolled out throughout the Agency's area of operations. A new infrastructure and camp improvement department was created within UNRWA to increase capacity and develop efforts in this domain.

These two new approaches in UNRWA's work are prominently discussed in this book: microfinance in the essay of Alex Pollock in this part of the book and camp improvement in the four papers that make up Part V. Pollock's essay presents the subaltern context of microfinance that is increasingly overlooked by the 'financialisation' of the sector. He

explains how the subaltern clients of microfinance are interpolated from the margins and hinterlands of social life through the interstices of the modern and pre-modern economy in underdeveloped social formations. In doing so it looks at the comparative development of contemporary microfinance in the context of microenterprise economies and explores the gaps in the microfinance sector and market in the countries aligned along the coast and uplands of the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. It ends with a short reflection of the experience and future of UNRWA's microfinance programme.

Whereas expansion of the microfinance programme's capital base as well as the camp improvement programmes are financed from project funding, UNRWA's traditional core programmes – education, health and relief and social services – are funded from the Agency's human development budget, also referred to as the General Fund. Almost all funding comes from voluntary contributions, and mostly from donor states. The United Nations finances over 100 international staff posts each year from its regular budget. UNESCO and WHO also fund on average 10 posts in the education and health programmes. The United States and the European Union are the Agency's largest donors with total contributions of over USD 239 million and USD 175 respectively in 2011. These contributions made up about 42 per cent of the total income UNRWA received for its core programme budget.

Over the years, UNRWA has faced regular funding crises (Schiff 1996) forcing it to introduce austerity measures and respond to donor calls for efficiency gains that have made the Agency one of the leanest organizations in the United Nations system. Financial support to UNRWA has not kept pace with an increased demand for services caused by growing numbers of registered refugees, expanding need, and deepening poverty. As a result, the Agency's General Fund has begun each year with a large projected deficit. Currently the deficit stands at 67.2 million.

As a result of these financial and other pressures, the decline in the conditions for Palestinian refugees and in the Agency's ability to deliver quality services became increasingly evident in recent years. This was recognized at a major international conference in Geneva in 2004. The Geneva Conference paved the way for a major reform effort that was carried out in two stages, referred to as the Organizational Development process and Sustaining Change.

The Organizational Development process (OD) has laid the foundations of a transformation in UNRWA's management, of which decentralisation and innovation are core themes. UNRWA has reviewed its approach to resource mobilization in response to the Agency's funding constraints, comprehensively overhauled its approach to programme management, and established sound strategic planning processes resulting in a Medium Term Strategy (MTS) which is being translated into action through three cycles of Field Implementation Plans, Headquarters Implementation Plans, and two-year Programme Budgets based on the strategy (UNRWA, 2010). Other elements of OD include the implementation of results-based budgeting by which resources will be linked to the MTS; improved arrangements for knowledge management, in particular the need to build better capacity to gather and use

data on refugees; more robust arrangements for evaluation; human resource management reforms; and stronger risk management and accountability.

Sustaining Change, the second reform initiative, aims at invigorating UNRWA's core programmes, ensuring quality and effectiveness are improved where this is needed most, at the point of delivery. These reforms are discussed in the paper of Miriam Aced and Tjitske de Jong. The authors highlight the different approaches to reform adopted by the different programmes: a comprehensive overhaul of almost every aspect of the education programme, a more pointed and modest restructuring of delivery of primary health care through the introduction of the so-called family health team approach, and efforts towards better targeting of the poor and a move away from food to cash transfers that is meeting significant resistance from beneficiaries and, to a lesser extent, host authorities.

One may argue as Aced and De Jong do, that UNRWA's funding structure – primary reliance on voluntary contributions – is not appropriate to the Agency's mandate of delivering public services, requiring a budget that is able to grow as a function of population growth and inflation. Exacerbated by the global financial crisis the funding outlook is extremely bleak and the Agency and its key stakeholders face stark choices as they commence reflections on the next Medium Term Strategy.

## **Part II. Protection: From Concept to Practice**

The focus on the second set of papers is the protection of Palestinians and Palestinian refugees, a subject that has attracted significant attention in recent years. Unlike UNHCR, UNRWA's creation was not by a statute with express reference to "protection". Nevertheless, as the contribution of Mark Brailsford in this part of the book highlights, protection is an integral part of UNRWA's mandate and in view of the human rights challenges faced by many Palestinian refugees, this aspect of the work has gained greater importance over the past two decades. Protection is defined by the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), as "all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and spirit of the relevant bodies of law (human rights law, international humanitarian law, refugee law)". United Nations General Assembly resolutions referring to UNRWA have consistently affirmed UNRWA's protection role, by referring to the "valuable work done by the Agency in providing protection to the Palestinian people, in particular Palestine refugees" and by encouraging the Agency to "make further progress" in addressing the needs and rights of children and women in its operations, in accordance with respectively, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Building on these foundations, UNRWA has since the turn of the century developed a more explicit focus on protection. The importance currently attached to protection within UNRWA is clear from the central place human rights and protection occupy, as one of four human development goals in the Agency's Medium Term Strategy for 2010-2015, cutting across all programmes (UNRWA, 2010).

Brailford's paper discusses UNRWA's approach to protection and examines some of the ways the Agency is currently incorporating protection to its operations. It begins by examining what protection means to UNRWA and how protection has been incorporated into UNRWA's strategic planning. It goes on to outline the components of UNRWA's protection role and provides a range of examples of how UNRWA is in practice providing protection to Palestine refugees. It finishes by looking at some of the challenges and lessons learned.

More than 40 per cent of Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA are below the age of 18. Laurent Chapuis's paper explores UNICEF's challenges and opportunities in operationalizing child protection in the MENA region. It suggests areas for cooperation between UNRWA and UNICEF in view of strengthening the protection of Palestinian children from violence, neglect and abuse. It starts by giving an overview of UNICEF's approach to child protection. In line with the agency's global child protection strategy, the three main pillars of its approach in the MENA region, improving knowledge management, strengthening child protection systems and promoting protective social change are then defined. Non-exhaustive examples of cooperation between UNRWA and UNICEF in Jordan, Lebanon, occupied Palestinian territory and Syria (before the conflict) under these domains are provided, and used as a basis to point at ways to advance the protection of Palestinian children from violence in the region. The piece concludes by highlighting UNRWA's potential to mainstream child protection into its operations and reviews some of the issues the agency might want to consider with regards to an organization-wide child protection policy and the impact this would have on the way it is operating.

The protection needs of Palestinian refugees are substantial. The effort to incorporate protection, into UNRWA operations is still very much an ongoing process. Building on its experience thus far and taking up some of the suggestions by Chapuis for closer alignment with UNICEF's approach to protection, UNRWA is currently elaborating a child protection strategy. The two papers in this book, as well as those included in the RSQ special issue on UNRWA (Bocco and Takkenberg 2009) and others are part of an ongoing debate on protection of Palestinian refugees that includes a range of questions still awaiting definite answers. These include whether there is a protection gap (within UNRWA's area of operations and/or beyond), in what ways is UNRWA obliged to intervene with responsible states to carry out its protection mandate and in what ways it is authorized to carry it out that is has not yet advanced, and to which Palestinian refugees does UNRWA owe international protection. The related question whether UNRWA does have a protection mandate that extends to the search for durable solutions will be discussed in Part VI.

### **Part III. Governance: The Camps and UNRWA**

Approximately one third of Palestinian refugees live in 58 'official' refugee camps and this number has been more or less stable throughout UNRWA's existence. The camps were constructed in two main waves, in the aftermath of the wars of 1948-49 and 1967. Most of the camps initially consisted of tents which were gradually replaced by huts and

subsequently evolved into a situation where most of the camps today are extensions of the urban fabric in which they are located.

Kjersti Gravelsaeter Berg's paper provides a ground-breaking and fascinating insight into the evolution of UNRWA camp and shelter policies during the initial formative years and following the 1967 war. Berg's research, based on the UNRWA Central Registry archive in Amman as well as interviews, explores questions related to UNRWA camp and shelter construction policies and practices over time. This includes inquiries into what an UNRWA camp and shelter was, how it was planned, built and discussed. For how long was it envisioned to exist and why did it deteriorate so quickly? The study of shelter and camp construction as a form of humanitarian temporary relief elucidates how time affects humanitarian solutions in the absence of political solutions. The first part of the paper looks into shelter construction from 1950 to 1966 with the second part focusing on the period of intense construction of emergency camps in the aftermath of the 1967 war.

Sari Hanafi's paper investigates the role that UNRWA plays in camp governance. Because of its mandate, a humanitarian organization like UNRWA has historically understood its role as a temporary relief provider to a temporary group of victims, carefully avoiding taking on a wider governing role. At the same time, most refugees have effectively assigned UNRWA a key role, holding it responsible for problems in the camps that go well beyond its mandate. This generates a lot of misunderstandings that characterize the current status quo. Hanafi argues that the resulting "phantom sovereignty" of UNRWA is based on this fundamental misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities, which leaves a problematic void, contributes to the sense of permanent emergency and exception, and fuels mistrust and suspicion. Decades of internal and international outmigration of the most educated and capable among the camp dwellers – keen to escape the trap of passivity and over-reliance on relief – has left camp communities in vulnerable conditions. While UNRWA theoretically tends to present itself as just service provider, *de facto* in fact it is much more than that.

UNRWA's engagement in more recent years with the improvement of camp living conditions will be discussed in Part V.

#### **Part IV. Civic Participation and Community Engagement**

Palestinian refugees are at the heart of UNRWA. They constitute its *raison d'être* and are the Agency's principal stakeholders, alongside hosts and donors. More than 95% of its staff are Palestinian refugees themselves. Whereas the Agency has well-established mechanisms, policies and practices in place that inform and structure its relationship with donors, host authorities, the media, vendors, and other external parties, its relationship with Palestinian refugees, and in particular those refugees that are beneficiaries of its services, is more fragmented and less strategic in nature. Beneficiary relations are an integral part of the Agency's operations and as such involve more than 25,000 UNRWA front-line staff on a daily basis. Yet, the Agency has no overarching policy on beneficiary relations and accountability.

Recent developments in the humanitarian and human development sectors are suggesting a more systematic approach to issues such as refugee participation and beneficiary complaints handling mechanisms, amongst others. The work of the Inter Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (IASC) is of particular relevance in this domain. At its meeting in December 2011, IASC Principals adopted five Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations (CAAP) which are Leadership/Governance; (2) Transparency; (3) Feedback and complaints; (4) Participation; and (5) Design, monitoring and evaluation. This section of the book explores some of those issues, in particular that of refugee participation.

Terry Rempel's contribution traces the evolution of UNRWA's approach to refugee participation over the past 60 years through a discussion of the Agency's programmes and its relationship with the refugees it serves. The article looks at UNRWA and refugee participation through four different periods: participation in economic reintegration (1950s); participation in the management and delivery of Agency services (1960s-1970s); from participation in the project cycle to political participation (1980s-1990s); mainstreaming stakeholder participation (2000s to date). Rempel illustrates how the evolution in UNRWA's approach to participation represents a significant shift in the Agency's relationship with the Palestinian refugees. While UNRWA traditionally viewed participation as a means of programme implementation, the new approach acknowledges participation as a human right with the primary objective of empowering refugees to realize their rights and improve social equity within the framework of the Agency's mandate, values and other UN principles. The author concludes that the fundamental challenge for stakeholder participation will be to find ways to facilitate the participation of refugees in the search for and realization of durable solutions to their long-standing plight.

Sergio Bianchi applies Rempel's framework to a case study of the campaign about the right to work of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The main aim of his paper is to contribute to the understanding of the interplay between humanitarian action and political considerations in Lebanon, by examining the reform process related to the legal regime regulating Palestinian employment in the country and the advocacy campaign that preceded it. This campaign, in which UNRWA played an active role, has been characterized by the emphasis that was placed on community involvement. In addition to describing the advocacy campaign, the article also highlights the complexities of community participation in a situation where the Palestinian community is significantly fragmented. Together with Lebanese resistance to change its representation of Palestinian refugees, this decreased the effectiveness of the campaign.

The issue of refugee participation arose prominently during the 2010 Conference, not only in the panel where the above papers were discussed, but in nearly every panel. For example, the chair of one of the panels remarked that it was very difficult to facilitate a discussion where practitioners and academics were present at the same time, requiring significant efforts to get an often heated discussion back on track. Whereas the participation panel saw the most in-depth discussion of the issue, speakers on the services panel and comments made in the governance, camp construction, and durable solutions panels showed the centrality of refugee participation issues to UNRWA's general credibility and effectiveness across sectors. Community participation is already a working theme in UNRWA's MTS and

there is clearly an Agency-wide commitment to this principle. Yet, suspicion amongst beneficiaries and the wider refugee community is persistent. Criticism of UNRWA often stems from misunderstanding and resentments – both of which are best mitigated through the early consultative involvement of beneficiaries. While mistrust is a long-standing dilemma and suspicions are in part driven by sub-text over which UNRWA has little or no control (e.g., geo-politics, divisions between the “international” and the “local”), by increasing a sense of ownership in decisions trust can be increased. The inherent political dimensions of UNRWA cannot easily be overcome but improving trust and security through better participation practices should be within the Agency’s control.

## **Part V. Camp Improvement / Reconstruction and Community Development**

As Kjersti Gravelsaeter Berg’s paper in Part III made clear, UNRWA has been involved in housing refugees since it commenced its operations in 1950. Interventions in housing and camp infrastructure development have traditionally been limited to four areas: (i) provision of shelter in response to emergencies, (ii) rehabilitation of shelters, which do not meet minimal acceptable standards, (iii) environmental and social infrastructure development and upgrading, and (iv) camp rehabilitation undertaken in response to emergencies.

Despite intervention in shelter, housing and infrastructure, for a long time there had not been a coherent strategy for improving the living conditions of the refugees to acceptable standards. Urban planning and holistic infrastructure development were largely inexistent due to reasons such as the notion of the temporary nature of refugee camps. The Geneva Conference of 2004 changed this by concluding that improving housing and infrastructure in refugee camps should be given higher priority and that this would not compromise the Palestinian refugees’ right of return. UNRWA responded by introducing “a new, holistic, integrated, developmental and participatory approach based on urban planning to improve the built environment in Palestinian refugee camps” (Budeiri’s article in this book). In 2006, this development culminated in the establishment of the Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Programme (ICIP).

ICIP’s new approach is at various stages of being rolled out across UNRWA’s area of operations. It has attracted significant attention (Bocco and Takkenberg 2009; Misselwitz 2012) and is also prominently discussed here. The four papers in Part V explore UNRWA’s camp improvement experience from different angles. Mona Budeiri, Head of UNRWA’s Camp Improvement Unit sheds light on the thinking behind the new approach and discusses some of the challenges facing its introduction. Two other papers represent case studies of the application of the new approach in Palestinian camps in Jordan (Fatima Al-Nammari) and Syria (Nell Gabiam). The fourth paper discussed camp improvement in another camp in Jordan that has so far not benefited from ICIP’s new approach (Lucas Oesch).

Budeiri’s essay provides an overview of the development of the refugee camps from their establishment through the process of urbanization and community dynamics. It goes on to discuss the changing role of UNRWA, from its traditional intervention in the camps towards a more developmental approach that eventually culminated in the establishment of the

Camp Improvement Programme. The paper then describes the new approach in some detail and ends with a discussion of a number of the challenges which the programme faces in pursuing its new direction.

Al Nammari's contribution investigates the challenges of the new approach to camp improvement in a case study on Talbiyeh camp in Jordan. It draws heavily on the author's experience as the project manager and urban planner in the camp. The Talbiyeh Camp Improvement Project was launched in 2008 through the creation of a local assembly referred to as the Work Group, responsible for strategic planning and decision making in relation to the project in partnership with UNRWA. The Work Group identified a number of priority needs including shelter upgrading, education and health improvement, creation of open recreational spaces, income generating projects, and employment. The paper then zooms in on a case study focusing on the assessment, diagnosis and design in respect of a multi-use urban pocket. It reveals the complexities and challenges of employing a truly participatory process and the intricacies of the application of agency by underprivileged groups.

Gabiam's essay provides an analysis of the implementation and outcomes of the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, an UNRWA-sponsored camp improvement project in the Palestinian refugee camps of Ein el Tal and Neirab in northern Syria. This project, predating the establishment of ICIP, has become a pilot for UNRWA's attempt to incorporate sustainable development into its operations in Palestinian camps. Based on fieldwork conducted by the author in Ein el Tal and Neirab, she concludes that the project has achieved some measure of success as far as infrastructural enhancement and improved access to services. On the other hand, the project's social development component, targeting the long-term socio-economic wellbeing of refugees by setting in place structures through which refugees would be able to actively participate in reaching these long-term goals, has, so far, not generated much change on the ground. In order to remedy the obstacles it faces in this area, UNRWA will have to come up with ways of better communicating with refugees and involving them in its decision-making process. UNRWA will also have to do more to overcome the trust barrier that separates it from the refugees it assists.

Oesch's paper deals with the issue of camp improvement in respect of a refugee camp in Jordan that thus far did not contribute from UNRWA's new approach but nevertheless went through a remarkable development process. It aims at assessing the different improvement practices and strategies which have taken place in al-Hussein camp in Amman over the past decades. Oesch shows that, albeit particular in its forms and actions, over the years al-Hussein witnessed a genuine urban development process. He explains that management and "planning" are characterized by what he calls a "heterogeneous ensemble of rationality and practices" contributing to the creation of new planning strategies responding to the special conditions of the camp. Whilst not arguing that the urban planning process is undermining the specific characteristics of the camp, he suggests that such characteristics are evolving over time, resulting in planning strategies that whilst maintaining the character of the camp also allows for change. He concludes by advocating for a more coherent urban planning process appropriate to the above-mentioned framework.

UNRWA is currently carrying out an evaluation of its camp improvement programme, which will assess the effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability and relevance of the programme holistically with a specific focus on the new approach to service delivery. Furthermore the evaluation is proposed to provide an assessment of the added value of the new approach to UNRWA as an Agency. The evaluation employs both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including interviews with randomly selected camp inhabitants both in camps that benefited from the new camp improvement methodology and in camps that did not. The evaluation report will be publicly made available and the organization of a public dissemination workshop is under consideration.

## **Part VI. Palestinian Refugees and Durable Solutions: A Role for UNRWA**

The refugee issue is unique amongst the so-called permanent status issues in that it is not a bi-lateral issue but involves a number of other stakeholders, including host countries, donor countries and the wider international community. Although UNRWA has no direct role in the political efforts towards a negotiated end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as a key element of its protection mandate the Agency frequently highlights the need for a solution, stressing that the rights and interest of the refugees must be duly reflected in any arrangement that seeks to end their plight. The fact that the refugee issue has remained unresolved for 65 years is leading to profound frustrations among different stakeholders. Refugees' criticism of UNRWA is partly fueled by perceptions that the Agency is not advocating strongly enough for their right of return. On the other side of the spectrum, the Agency is being accused of perpetuating the refugee problem and standing in the way of a solution.

Rex Brynen's essay provides an insight into some of the ongoing controversies surrounding UNRWA by examining the many different ways in which the Agency is perceived. He identifies four main "avatars of UNRWA": UNRWA as the avatar of international responsibility, UNRWA as the avatar of muddling through, UNRWA as the avatar of perpetuating conflict, and UNRWA as the avatar of refugee advocacy. The implications of each of these representations of the Agency—for refugees, the Agency, and the peace process—are highlighted. The paper concludes by suggesting that while many of the avatars rest on weak factual foundations, they nonetheless assume considerable importance (especially in the internet era) in shaping the political environment around the Agency, and cannot be ignored.

UNRWA may be in a position to advise and support where possible, necessary efforts by other actors toward achieving and implementing a solution. Realizing that this constitutes another aspect of its protection mandate, UNRWA's Commissioner-General and other senior staff have been contributing its experience and insights on related matters as appropriate. And while the strategic framework for the next six years, embodied in the MTS, is based on the status quo prevailing, the Agency has also recognized that it must be ready to respond to changes in political and economic contexts, including more fundamental change, leading to a significantly different scenario, should a just solution to the refugee issue emerge.

Leila Hilal's paper elaborates the impediments and constraints on UNRWA playing a meaningful role in resolving the Palestinian refugee issue in the medium-term. In the absence of an effective body with a mandate of securing durable solutions for Palestinian refugees – such as UNHCR in respect of other refugees – or political process, the author argues that a “protection gap” exists for Palestinian refugees, in spite of UNRWA's extensive durable solutions advocacy and increased emphasis on protection, as discussed in Part II. She concludes that pushing UNRWA into the political arena is not a viable option at this juncture. The paper does not end here, however. Should a political settlement be reached on Palestinian refugee rights, the author argues that UNRWA may have a significant role to play. She examines what roles UNRWA may be suited to fulfill in a post-conflict transition and peace-building scenario for Palestinian refugees. She argues that the Agency's decades-long relationship with the refugees and host authorities, its long-standing development activities with refugee communities, and recent institutional reforms could aid the implementation of for Palestinian refugees. Rather than a precipitous winding-down, a targeted transformation of the Agency should be considered for the day when a just resolution is achieved, taking into account its suitable role as a leading implementing partner in a transitional period.

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