

# UNRWA–United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East: NPM Organizational Development Approach

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## Abstract

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly pursuant to General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 8 December 1949 and commenced operations on 1 May 1950. UNRWA was established in response to the Palestine refugee crisis to provide emergency and relief services for Palestine refugees who were displaced to neighboring countries. The mandate of the UNRWA has evolved since its establishment. The Agency role extended to become a quasi-governmental role, providing health, education, socioeconomic development, and other services for its audience. The Agency was subject to many reforms in response to the developments in the political, operational, and financial context. The Agency began a comprehensive reform process that aimed at restructuring the UNRWA management system. The UNRWA identified several areas for reform, with an emphasis on its organizational structure as the main area of intervention. Organizational reform aimed to establish a new system of policies and practices, which aimed to adopt new policies and practices in different areas such as staffing and recruitment, performance management, compensation and rewards, and staff training and development. The new policies were meant to provide the Agency with an integrated system for staff management with an underlying message of implementing new practices. The uniqueness of the organization as a non-political IGO with a developmental and humanitarian service role provides an appropriate setting for this research study that can bring insights on deploying new policies and practices in an IGO context. This paper aims to address the role of the UNRWA, its functions, funding, and the implications of implementing the new practices and investigating their impacts on its operations.

**Keywords:** UNRWA, Reform, Quasi-governmental

**DOI:** 10.7176/DCS/13-7-04

**Publication date:** December 31<sup>st</sup> 2023

## 1. Introduction

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is an international relief and human development agency. The UNRWA is a subsidiary organ of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), created under Article 22 of the United Nations Charter to become the main public service provider to 1.3 million Palestine refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. UNRWA services include education, health care, social services, and emergency aid. In 2006, UNRWA began a comprehensive reform program to strengthen its management capacity (UNRWA, 2006b). Within the reform process, the top priority of the organization has been building a new human resources management (HRM) system based on the notion that the organizational workforce is the organization's main asset. Implementing a new system would improve the Agency staff's capacity to deliver better-resourced programs and services to the organization's stakeholders (UNRWA, 2006b). Accordingly, one of the main achievements of the reform process is the deployment of new HRM system that covers the main HRM activities including: staffing and recruitment, performance management, rewards and recognition, staff development and training (UNRWA, 2006b).

Another important criterion for the UNRWA is its quasi-governmental role. The UNRWA began its operations in 1950 with only three years mandate to provide emergency relief (food and shelter) to refugees. In the same year, the UNRWA's mandate was extended to include governmental and developmental services, such as education, health, welfare, and urban planning (Rosenfeld, 2009). In the following sections, further details on UNRWA as an organization, its functions and funding are presented to show the uniqueness of the Agency as an IGO providing public services for over one million beneficiaries. This overview aims at highlighting the quasi-governmental role of the organization and underlining the most recent deployment of HPWS, which makes it a proper setting for this study. This overview begins with brief discussion on the historical events that led to the creation of UNRWA, followed by a description of UNRWA's organization, current programs, and functions. The overview ends with a section addressing key trends in UNRWA's human resources management reforms to further our understanding of the research context.

### *1.1 UNRWA Overview*

UNRWA is the largest agency of the United Nations, employing over 29,000 staff in its eleven offices located in New York, Geneva, Brussels, Cairo, Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The Agency was established in 1948 and has evolved to become one of the biggest employers in the Middle East region, with a considerable bureaucracy and major infrastructure, maintaining schools and clinics and providing a host of social services, special programs, and emergency benefits (Kushner, 2008). Despite its size and importance in the UN system, the literature on UNRWA is relatively rare and there is no significant analysis within social science research focusing on UNRWA (Lindsay, 2009). The majority of publications that address the Agency are internal UNRWA reports, which contain important material on the evolution of the Agency's activities, as well as numerous evaluation and policy reports focusing on specific aspects of its work. Despite its uniqueness as the main provider of public services for over 1.3 million refugees, management practices within the organization have been largely overlooked by researchers (Bocco, 2010).

The UNRWA represents an international governmental organization (IGO) with the functions of a service organization and it relies on donations from the governments of member states to fund its operations. Since its establishment, there have been continuous demands from donor governments for more efficient use of organizational resources and more effective execution of programs. Accordingly, the Agency underwent several structural changes and concentrated revisions of its policies, and regulations. As in other national public sector organizations, these changes and revisions have led to several reforms as part of the UNRWA's organizational evolution. The Agency began a comprehensive reform program to strengthen its management capacity with special emphasis on Human Resources Management (HRM) (Terbeck, 2009). The reform was major, as it extended to other management aspects, such as the program management cycle and financial management. However, the main emphasis was on the human resources management system. This focus on HRM systems was based on the notion, from senior management, that the organizational workforce is the organization's main asset, and that well-managed human resources would eventually lead to higher levels of service for Palestine refugees (UNRWA, 2006b). Palestine refugees who fled from Historical Palestine to neighbouring countries, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip after the 1948 war are the main beneficiaries of UNRWA services. The following section provides historical background on the Palestine refugee crisis, which led to the establishment of UNRWA.

### *1.2 Historical Background*

In 1949, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled from their homes in Historical Palestine, a British colony from which the United Kingdom withdrew in 1948. The UK withdrawal was based on UNGA resolution 181 (II) for the partition of Historical Palestine between its Arab and Jewish inhabitants, creating two independent states. According to the resolution, Historical Palestine was divided into three parts: the first, the independent State of Israel, the second (the West Bank) annexed by Jordan, and the third (the Gaza Strip) seized and administered by Egypt. Arab inhabitants in Jewish-dominated areas refused the UNGA resolution and fled as refugees to other neighboring Arab countries, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, which led to the Palestine refugee crisis (Kats, 1998).

The United Nations grouped Palestine refugees into what has become known as the Palestinian Refugee Camps located in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Under the pressure of the continued Palestine refugee crisis, the UNGA decided to establish the UNRWA as a temporary organization that would assume operational responsibility for providing relief services for large numbers of refugees. On 8 December 1949, UNRWA was created pursuant to UNGA Resolution 302 (IV).

On 1 May 1950, UNRWA began its operations, providing emergency relief (food and shelter) to refugees. Then, its mandate was extended to include governmental and developmental services such as education, health, welfare, and urban planning (Rosenfeld, 2009). The Agency began building its field offices near refugee camps to support the refugees more effectively. The refugee population has changed since the time of UNRWA's establishment. In 1950, there were approximately 750,000 Palestine refugees. Their number has increased by more than six times to 5,115,755 in 2012, with an average annual growth rate of three percent. After six decades of its operations, UNRWA staff provides education, health, welfare and social assistance, microfinance and microenterprise assistance, and housing and urban planning services for one-third (1.3 million) Palestine refugees registered with the UNRWA who live in fifty-eight officially recognized refugee camps. The following section addresses the organization of UNRWA highlighting the geographical distribution of the Agency offices with an emphasis on the different roles of each of the offices.

## **2. UNRWA's Organization**

UNRWA represents an international governmental organization (IGO) with the functions of a service organization. UNRWA is a subsidiary organ of the UNGA and its mandate is renewed every three years. The Agency's headquarters was in Beirut, Lebanon, until 1978, and then resided in Vienna until 1996. Finally, the

headquarters was divided between the Gaza Strip and Amman, Jordan. The Agency has four representative and liaison offices located in New York, Geneva, Brussels, and Cairo. The operations are organized into five field offices located in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and the West Bank (see Appendix O). The Agency employs over 29,000 workers. The majority of staff is host country nationals (HCN), local employees, with expatriates working in each of the field offices, headquarters, and representative and liaison offices.

Gaza headquarters and field office include the Office of the Commissioner-General along with the Finance Department, the Department of Human Resources, the Department of Administrative Support, the Department of Infrastructure, and the Department of Internal Oversight. The Amman headquarters office includes the External Relations Department, the Department of Legal Affairs, and the Public Information Office (UNRWA, 2006b).

The Commissioner-General is responsible for managing UNRWA's overall activities. His subordinates, Directors of Operations, are in charge of overseeing general UNRWA operations and assigned to each of the five field offices.

Directors of Operations lead UNRWA's programs managed by five main departments:

- Education Department
- Health Department
- Relief and Social Services Department
- Department of Infrastructure and Camp Development
- Office of the Microfinance and Microenterprise Program (UNRWA, 2010).

All field offices have a similar organizational structure but vary considerably in size (see Appendix P). The number of field office staff range from nearly 3,000 in the Lebanon field office to over 10,000 in the Gaza field office, with the other three field offices falling in between these numbers. The majority of field staff are teachers, health service providers, relief and social services staff, and administrative and support staff. UNRWA staff is responsible for delivering essential public services for over 1.3 million refugees, which explains the high operational cost of running the Agency. The following section address UNRWA's funding and its current financial crisis, which led to the most recent organizational reform.

### **3. UNRWA's funding**

Since its establishment, UNRWA's funding comes from voluntary contributions, and mostly from donor states. The main donors are the United States, the European Commission, the United Kingdom, Norway, and Sweden. Only 5% to 6% of these contributions come from non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and individuals. In addition to donor contributions, some UN agencies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Health Organization (WHO), provide funds for education and health programs.

The Agency is underfunded and faces severe financial crises as a result of the growing refugee needs, which affects operational costs, on one hand, and the decline in donations from Western donor countries after the global financial crises on the other (Terbeck, 2009). For instance, in 2010, UNRWA's budget shortfall amounted to \$140 million (Husseini, 2011). The Agency began launching repeated emergency appeals for food, employment, and cash assistance, seeking stable funding mechanisms for its regular programs. In the following section, an overview of these programs is presented to explain the role of UNRWA.

### **4. UNRWA Functions**

UNRWA became operational in May 1950, and was primarily responsible for providing emergency relief services such as food, shelter, clothing, and basic healthcare services to Palestine refugees. According to the UNGA Resolution, the Agency's mandate was to "prevent conditions of starvation and distress among them and to further conditions of peace and stability." However, with the absence of any feasible solution to the Palestine refugee crisis, the UNGA decided to extend the mandate of the Agency and transform its role to human development to pave the way for Palestine refugees to attain self-sufficiency, and independence (Rosenfeld, 2009). The UNRWA became more focused on enabling refugees to become self-supporting and independent. For instance, the Agency moved the refugees from their temporary shelters into permanent urban housing and rural villages. It began implementing public works programs and education. Rather than focusing on emergency and relief programs, UNRWA's central programs became more focused on building a sustainable life for the refugees.

The Agency established partnerships with other UN programs, such as UNESCO and WHO, to form a basis for effective healthcare and education programs to reintegrate Palestine refugees with their host communities (Rosenfeld, 2009). Then it introduced microfinance and microenterprise programs in 1991 to help refugees become self-supporting and economically independent. Finally, the Agency launched its "Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Unit" to become the largest humanitarian operation in the Middle East for over 60 years (UNRWA, 2012). These five programs are the Agency's "raison d'être." A brief overview of each of these programs is introduced in the following sections.

#### *4.1 Education Program*

The education program is UNRWA's largest program, accounting for half of the Agency's regular budget. UNRWA operates one of the largest school systems in the Middle East, with 700 schools and 500,000 students registered with the five field offices. The Agency provides basic education to all registered refugee children free of charge up to around the age of 15. In addition to the primary education, the Agency operates ten vocational and technical training centres and three Faculties of Education Science, one in Jordan and two in the West Bank. UNRWA's curriculum follows that of its host countries so that pupils can progress to further education or employment in these countries. This is part of the Agency strategy that aims to integrate refugees into their host countries (UNRWA, 2007).

#### *4.2 Health Program*

Since its establishment, UNRWA has been the main healthcare provider for the Palestinian refugee population. The Agency provides all basic health needs through its network of 137 primary care clinics located both inside and outside the refugee camps. The Agency also provides its audience with access to secondary treatment in hospitals as well as food aid to vulnerable groups. In 2010, the Agency's health care workers comprised 3,654 professionals, including doctors, nurses, support services, and administrative staff (UNRWA, 2012). Medical services include outpatient care, dental treatment, rehabilitation for the physically disabled, and maternal and child healthcare. The health program also provides necessary environmental health services in refugee camps, including all infrastructure services for sewage disposal, the provision of safe drinking water, sanitation labourers for solid waste management, and garbage trucks (UNRWA, 2012).

#### *4.3 Relief and Social Services Program*

The relief and social services (RSS) program provides a range of direct and indirect social protection services for refugees in the Agency's five areas of operation. In many countries, Palestine refugees face extreme hardship from local authorities in host countries. For instance, Palestine refugees in Lebanon face many restrictions on entering the job market. Therefore, the program provides social safety-net assistance to the most vulnerable Palestine refugees in these countries (UNRWA, 2010). Under the Social Safety Net Program, UNRWA provides relief and social services to Palestine refugee households below the abject poverty line. Social Safety Net Program services include basic food support, cash subsidies, and an additional family income supplement. The program also offers Cash for Work (CFW), which is one of the most important programs within the RSS. In addition, it offers direct aid during emergencies caused by violence and political unrest, along with shelter rehabilitation in coordination with other departments (UNRWA, 2007). Finally, as part of its developmental role, the RSS program promotes community-based action within the Palestinian refugee camps through developing the institutional capacity of community-based organizations (CBOs) within the refugee camps. These CBOs organize a wide range of social, cultural, and recreational activities, as well as skills training and rehabilitation that enable vulnerable refugees to become more self-reliant. They also help refugees addressing their most pressing socioeconomic needs through advocacy and awareness campaigns (UNRWA, 2010).

#### *4.4 Department of Infrastructure and Camp Development*

Of over five million Palestine refugees registered with the UNRWA as beneficiaries, one-third (1.3 million) live in fifty-eight officially recognized refugee camps. Responsibility for these camps is distributed between the five field offices located in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip (see Appendix O). These camps were supposed to be temporary "tent-cities" and were characterized by concentrations of poverty and extreme overcrowding. During its last 60 years of operations, these camps have transformed into hyper-congested masses of multi-storey buildings and are considered to be among the densest urban environments in the world, displaying extreme poverty and overcrowding (UNRWA, 2012). The Department of Infrastructure and Camp Development is responsible for designing and implementing all infrastructure interventions to improve the quality of life within refugee camps. The main function of this department is to promote environmentally sustainable neighborhoods through developing housing, and environmental health facilities. Therefore, the department implements all infrastructure projects, such as the provision of water, storm water runoff, and wastewater management systems. Additionally, the department carries out all interventions related to the development and maintenance of all other UNRWA facilities, including clinics and schools (UNRWA, 2010).

#### *4.5 Microfinance and Microenterprise Program*

The Microfinance Department (MD) is an independent financial unit within UNRWA, established to promote economic development and alleviate poverty among Palestine refugees. The program provides microfinance services offering income-generating opportunities for the Agency's audience. It works in two main functional areas. First, it provides small loans at an affordable cost for small entrepreneurs through its microcredit services. Second, it provides complementary services such as microenterprise training to households and businesses

(UNRWA, 2007). These two areas of intervention allow the Agency to create self-reliant and independent entrepreneurs who contribute to the socioeconomic development among the refugee population. According to Agency records, the department has provided over 202,100 loans across its areas of operation, valued at USD \$224.29 million, with the broadest regional coverage of any microfinance institution in the Middle East (UNRWA, 2010).

## 5. UNRWA in Transition

Since its establishment, UNRWA has been the main service provider for generations of Palestine refugees. The Agency role became more crucial with the absence of any feasible solution for the Palestinian refugee crises. The brief overview on the five main programs managed and executed by the UNRWA reveals the critical role and mandate of the Agency, which is renewed every three years by the UNGA. For over seventy five years, the UNGA has mandated the Agency to engage in a rich and evolving variety of activities and provided UNRWA with a flexible mandate designed to facilitate the Agency's ability to act and progress. However, over the last 75 years, the UNRWA went into several transitions and adopted a continuous modernization approach to exceed the expectations of its stakeholders, including staff, partners, host countries governments, and donors. This discussion provides an overview on UNRWA transitions over the last two decades, highlighting the main reasons for such actions, and the key achievements towards enhancing the levels of Agency service.

The organization has always been committed to devoting all its resources in the best interests of its beneficiaries through the continuous improvement and modernization of its services. In the 1990s, the Agency began slipping into a severe financial crisis. UNRWA's opportunities to attract extra funding were constrained because of the increasing competition from other humanitarian agencies and the political unrest in the Persian Gulf region (Terbeck, 2009). The significant drop in UNRWA's per capita assistance, which continued for over a decade, had a significant impact on the Agency's levels of service (Brynen, 2003). There were real concerns about the Agency's role as it faced increasing demands against this backdrop. UNRWA began considering different options to face this major challenge and put much effort into overcoming this financial crisis. Among its most recent efforts, the Agency organized an international conference in Geneva in June 2004. The main goal of this conference was to revitalize the partnerships between the Agency and its stakeholders (UNRWA, 2006a, p. 142). The Geneva Conference concluded with many recommendations that aimed at helping the Agency improve its capacity to respond more efficiently to the growing needs of Palestinian refugees. One of the main recommendations was strengthening UNRWA's management framework to develop a stronger operations capacity through building on, or adapting the existing management structure to become more effective. Agency officials concluded that they should adapt new approaches focusing on more efficient service delivery.

In conjunction with the conference, the UNRWA began developing a Medium Term Plan (MTP). The MTP was translated into the Organizational Development (OD) transition plan initiative, which provided the framework for organizational reform with specific guidelines on how UNRWA should operate in order to offer and sustain more effective and efficient service delivery through improved management capacity (UNRWA, 2010).

## 6. UNRWA Organization Development (OD) Reforms

Recently, UNRWA began a comprehensive OD reform process. This reform was financed by specific funding offered by Canada, Australia, the European Commission, Japan, and the US. First, the Agency underwent the Rapid Organizational Assessment (ROA) process by external consultants. The process included an extensive review of all of UNRWA's operational reports and studies; it aimed at critical assessment for organizational management capacity (UNRWA, 2006a). During the ROA, external consultants visited the five field offices and the headquarters so they would be able to identify any existing gaps within the organizational management structures or systems. Accordingly, they concluded that the Agency required a major organizational change. The ROA process ended with several recommendations addressing different areas, such as implementing a results-based management system, decentralized budgeting systems, and new procurement procedures (UNRWA, 2006b).

Among these recommendations, there were real concerns regarding the UNRWA's management system. These concerns included the recruitment process, staff training and development, incentives, and performance appraisal procedures. Additionally the report identified disconnects between responsibility and delegated authority, which led to an inadequacy in internal communication, dialogue, and information flow (UNRWA, 2010).

In this context, UNRWA senior management consulted with staff in all field offices, headquarters, and representative offices about the desire to begin the Organizational Development (OD) reform process. These consultations aimed at gaining support and commitment from staff to overcome any uncertainty or anxiety among employees, which is a natural part of any organizational change. The senior management team, who were ultimately responsible for the implementation of administrative reforms, acted as mediators and focused on

gaining the support, trust, and co-operation of the different stakeholders before and during the reform process (UNRWA, 2006a).

## 7. Discussion and Conclusion

In April 2006, the organization began the OD reform process, embracing a “holistic and comprehensive approach” to bring together all the initiatives designed to strengthen UNRWA’s capacity to serve Palestine refugees effectively and efficiently (UNRWA, 2006a, p. 3). The organization identified four main areas of intervention, referred to in the OD documents as the “levers of change” (UNRWA, 2006a, p. 32). HRM was specifically identified as the “main lever of change” and the organization established a Human Resources Task Force (HRTF) with the goal of drafting a Human Resources Management Strategy for the Agency (UNRWA, 2006a). The HRTF was chaired by the Deputy Commissioner-General and consisted of fourteen staff members from diverse Agency backgrounds, including expatriates and local staff from the field offices. The HRTF was guided by external consultants and advised by a technical team of internal specialists on HRM processes (UNRWA, 2006a).

The HRTF was tasked with considering and making recommendations on reforming the UNRWA’s HRM systems, which appeared to be adopting HPWS practices. The recommendations for reforming UNRWA’s HRM policies and practices were based on the notion that insufficient attention to staff may cause deterioration of service standards across the Agency (UNRWA, 2006a). The Agency began restructuring its HRM system through a clear and concise detailed plan. Below is an overview of the main areas of change within UNRWA’s HRM system based on a review of the reform policy documents.

The main goal of the UNRWA’s new staffing and recruitment strategy aims to sustain a competent, motivated, and adaptable workforce, ensuring that knowledge is retained and enhanced in the Agency. Accordingly, the Agency addressed different issues related to the staffing strategy, which targets recruiting high quality staff while retaining and motivating capable staff. Accordingly, the Agency began drafting plans for succession to ensure that staffing gaps are eliminated or at least addressed in a timely manner. It developed new definitions for the main categories of staff, according to their job occupation. In addition, there was a new direction towards ensuring that capable staff members are promoted to more responsible positions. Changes also included developing high-level job descriptions to include the desired competency profile while defining the different career streams and the contractual arrangements (UNRWA, 2006b).

According to the Rapid Organizational Assessment (ROA), conducted by external consultants, UNRWA’s old performance appraisal system falls far short of being a useful and reliable performance management tool. Earlier, the performance appraisal process did little to evaluate performance based on results and there was a lack of openness within the evaluation process. Therefore, the Agency developed a clear and objective performance management system appraisal meant to be free of bias and abuse (UNRWA, 2006b). The new performance appraisal system is based on employee participation, dialogue, and feedback. In addition, evaluation and performance appraisal are to be consistent with the UNRWA’s strategic objectives, results oriented, and linked to the annual salary increases and promotions (UNRWA, 2006b).

Since its establishment, UNRWA has applied a monetary incentive pay system with the level of incentives for each job in each of the field offices set based on surveying similar jobs in the host country’s government. The review process suggested that the Agency must develop a new system in order to be more “participatory, rewarding and encouraging to increase and maintain morale, satisfaction and confidence within the organization” (UNRWA, 2006b, p. 60). Therefore, during the OD reform process a new compensation system was implemented that is meant to be competitive, motivating, and cost-effective in order to enhance the Agency’s ability to attract and retain competent and highly qualified staff. The new system also aimed at recognizing employee contributions while ensuring that all posts are classified at appropriate levels in accordance with transparent, objective, and equitable principles to reduce turnover as well as encourage Agency loyalty and commitment (UNRWA, 2006b).

Within the Agency, there was no systematic and proactive methodology for identifying staff training and development needs. Therefore, the new direction for the HRM team is to adopt a new methodological approach that facilitates analyzing the training needs of staff regularly and systematically. In addition, the new training and development approach is designed to be linked with the performance evaluation process to provide staff members with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to performing their duties and responsibilities (UNRWA, 2006b).

The last area of focus was employee satisfaction and welfare. A new approach emerging within UNRWA aims at developing and building a more effective HRM team with a proactive, flexible, reliable, confidential, and empowering role. Accordingly, the new approach tends to sustain integrated HRM service delivery in the field offices and headquarters through building the capacity of the HRM team (UNRWA, 2006b).

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