

PROMISING PRACTICES IN REFUGEE EDUCATION

CASE STUDY



BRINGING HOPE IN TIMES OF CONFLICT: UNRWA Education in Emergencies programme

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

Type of Organization:	UN Agency
Location:	Syria
Target population:	Palestine refugee children (aged 6 – 15)
Intervention type:	Education in Emergencies to protect and promote the education of Palestine refugee children and youth whose access to education is affected by conflict, crisis and poverty
Date started:	October 2012 – present
Beneficiaries reached:	66,413 (between 2012 – 2016)

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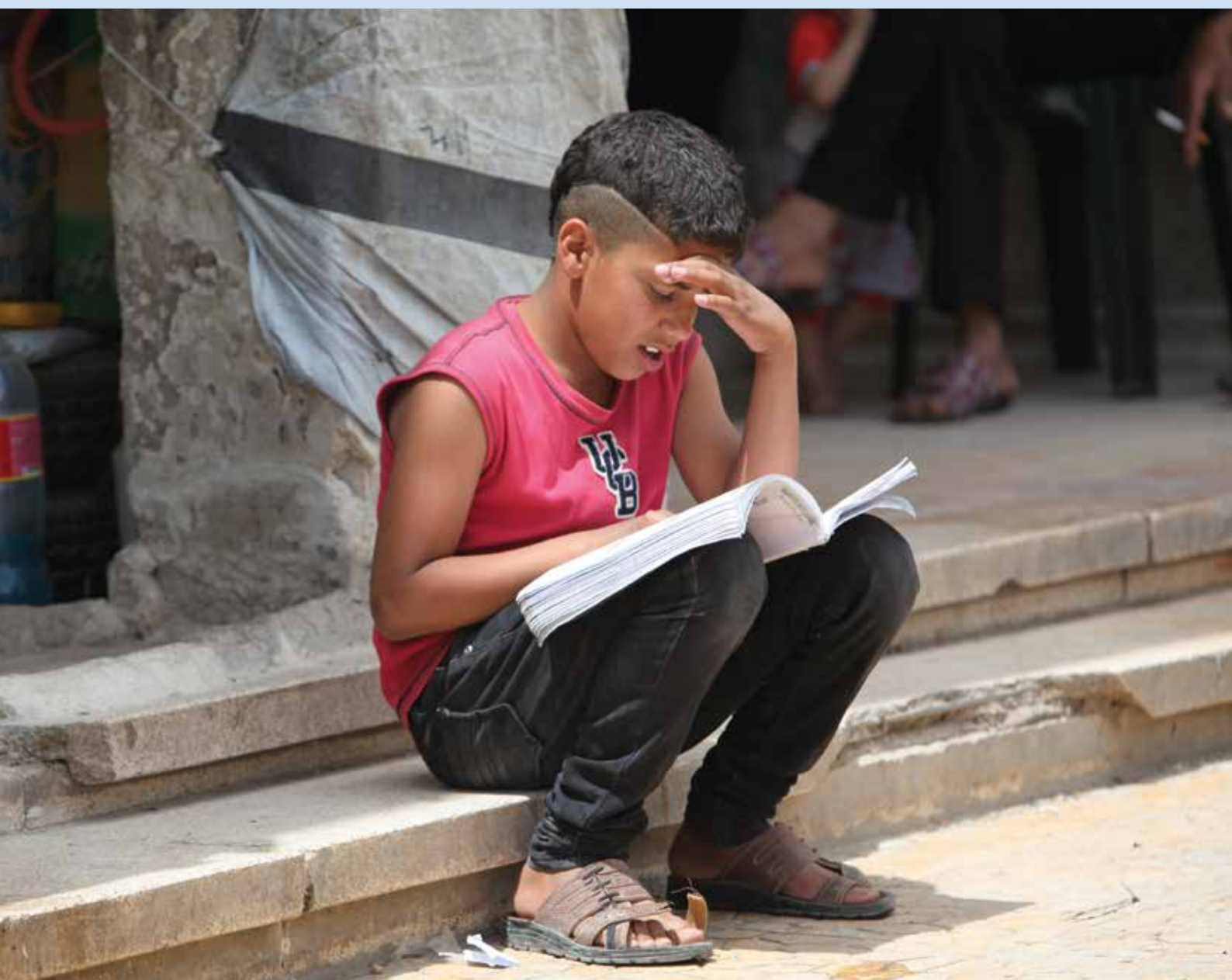


KEY FINDINGS

The following sets out the key findings from UNRWA's experience of delivering Education in Emergencies (EiE) to Palestine refugee children in Syria:

- UNRWA's EiE approach is distinctive in the sense that it **embeds its EiE Programme** into the overall education system of the Agency, rather than establishing an interim structure, this helps to ensure that the programme's impact is sustainable. The strength of the existing system, combined with innovative responses to challenging needs, has enabled the Agency to sustain the provision of quality education during emergencies.
- The deployment of a **multi-stranded, integrated approach** to providing EiE is how UNRWA has found it can best support the needs of children and education staff impacted by crisis. UNRWA's EiE approach is designed to simultaneously address the multiple barriers to education faced by students in Syria through alternative learning modalities including self-learning materials, safer and more secure learning environments, targeted psychosocial support and recreational activities, and strong engagement with parents and the community.
- UNRWA's EiE **operational capacities** have been enhanced at Headquarters (HQ), field and school level. The Agency has systematically worked to ensure the sustainability of its EiE programming by strengthening in-house capacities across all strands of the EiE response. The success of the EiE programme in capacity building and raising awareness within UNRWA has improved the overall preparedness of the Agency for emergencies and strengthened its ability to respond to, and recover from, crises. It has also crucially raised the profile within the Agency of education delivery during crisis response.

Cover: A young Palestine refugee girl during class in an UNRWA school, Syria. © UNRWA



INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was established in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to over 5 million registered Palestine refugees. Recognizing that education is fundamental to helping children achieve their full potential, UNRWA has worked for nearly 70 years to ensure that Palestine refugee children have access to quality education. For UNRWA, this means quality, equitable and inclusive education that develops and supports each and every child, regardless of their capability, ethnicity, religion, gender and socio-economic background. In 2010, the UNRWA education programme began a major five-year reform to help UNRWA meet the evolving demands of an education system in the twenty-first century. The 2011-2015 Education Reform Strategy aimed to improve services for Palestine refugee students in UNRWA schools, vocational training centres and educational faculties. It was designed to bring about transformational change to classroom practices and thus improve children's learning outcomes.¹

As the education reform was being implemented, the crisis in Syria started (in March 2011) and has continued unabated for more than six years. The conflict is an evolving and unpredictable humanitarian crisis, characterized by widespread conflict-related violence, poverty and displacement. UNHCR estimates that within Syria an estimated 6.1 million people are displaced as a result of the conflict, and over 5 million people are registered as refugees in neighbouring countries.²

“My youngest son was in sixth grade when we were trapped in the fighting in Yarmouk. In the conflict, I lost my husband and two of my sons. For two years, we were repeatedly displaced in Syria. During this time, Samer was not receiving any education for security reasons.”

Samer, mother of a grade 7 Palestine refugee boy

UNRWA provides a critical lifeline to Palestine refugees in Syria, and the Agency considers the provision of quality education for Palestine refugee children from Syria to be a central pillar of its humanitarian response and is critical maintaining hope and normalcy in the face of widespread suffering. Prior to the conflict, UNRWA was providing education services to some 67,000 Palestine refugee students in Syria. Following the crisis, attendance registered at its lowest level in February 2013, reaching 21,962 students, and enrolment in 2013/2014 went down to 43,309 students. Enrolment then stabilized at 45,541 students in the 2015/2016 school year.

With the onset of the Syria crisis, there was a need for a sustained and innovative approach to ensure that the most vulnerable children and youth were not left behind. Within this context, and recognizing that education is a human right, crucial for human development, the Agency developed an Education in Emergencies (EiE) Programme to offer support to Palestine refugee children living in conflict-affected areas. The EiE Programme draws on UNRWA's education system, and the progress achieved through the Agency-wide Education Reform. This has helped to ensure that Palestine refugee children continue to have access to quality education and learning opportunities, even in times of crisis and conflict. The EiE approach is renowned in the region, and beyond, with Host Countries, as well as other UN agencies, replicating its approaches and using the specific resources developed.

The EiE Programme is implemented in UNRWA's five fields of operation (Syria, Gaza, West Bank, Jordan and Lebanon). This Case Study will focus on the implementation of the Agency's EiE response for Palestine refugee children in Syria.

CONTEXT

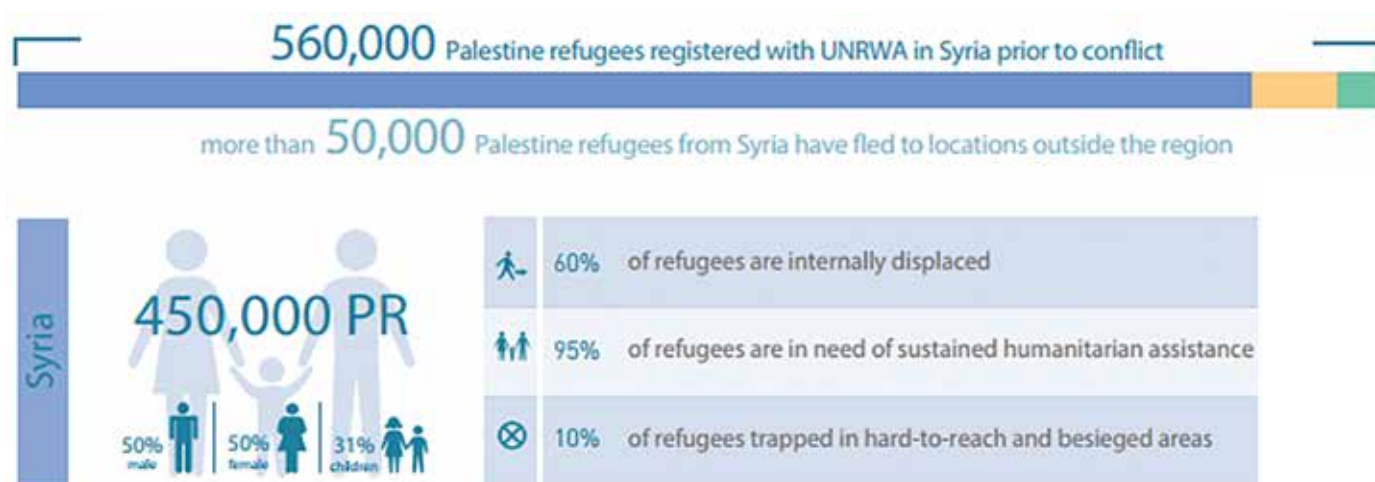
During 2016, the conflict in Syria continued with intensity and unpredictability, resulting in further loss of civilian life and material destruction. Palestine refugees have been significantly impacted, with increased exposure to violence. Camps, and other areas where Palestine refugee communities live, are adjacent to the Syrian population centres which have, at times, been targeted during the conflict. Refugee homes too have been damaged or destroyed; and violent incidents have taken place inside refugee camps and communities. Armed violence has affected humanitarian access and disrupted education and health services. Living conditions in Syria have deteriorated significantly, exacerbated by a sharp depreciation of the Syrian pound and a rise in the cost of basic commodities and services. Many Palestine refugees have become displaced for a third or fourth consecutive time as they have to move away from areas of unrest.

By the beginning of 2017, of the estimated 450,000 Palestine refugees that remained inside Syria, over 95 per cent (430,000) were in critical need of sustained humanitarian assistance in order to survive. Almost 280,000 were internally displaced, and an estimated 43,000 were trapped in hard-to-reach or inaccessible locations such as Yarmouk, Khan Eshieh, and Muzeireb and Jillin in Dera'a. Access to the approximately 43,000 people located in hard-to-reach and besieged areas remains a great challenge.

The Agency's 4,000 staff in Syria are dedicating their lives on the frontline to deliver crucial assistance to those most in need. This has come at an unbearable cost – 20 UNRWA staff have lost their lives since the beginning of the conflict and many more have sustained life-changing injuries.

Six years into the conflict, Palestine refugee coping mechanisms have been all but exhausted by prolonged displacement, unchecked inflation, rising unemployment rates and loss of property. As a result, Palestine refugees continue to rely heavily on UNRWA to meet their basic needs and enjoy a measure of protection.

Delivering vital assistance and services to Palestine refugees remains a major challenge for the Agency. The conflict has rendered 70 per cent of UNRWA schools inoperative, due to damage to school infrastructure, access restrictions or the need for schools to be used as collective centres sheltering internally displaced persons (IDP). UNRWA's longstanding, strong relationship with the Syrian Ministry of Education has been vital to maintaining access to education for Palestine refugees: out of 101 UNRWA schools in Syria, 55 schools are currently operating in government facilities. UNRWA is also actively collaborating with the key actors in the region such as UNESCO, UNICEF and the Norwegian Refugee Council (see section on partnership).



Syria Crisis, UNRWA Emergency Appeal, 2017



INTERVENTION

OBJECTIVES OF INTERVENTION

UNRWA's response to the Syrian conflict, in line with its Agency-wide EiE approach, seeks to ensure continued access to quality education for Palestine refugee children in Syria whose access to education is restricted, or for whom the quality and continuity of education provision is threatened, as a result of crisis and conflict.

NATURE OF INTERVENTION

Palestine refugee children in Syria can experience a number of barriers that impact on their access to schools, their learning and their psychosocial wellbeing. There has been a continued emphasis on protecting education from attacks, such as physical attacks on students, staff and buildings. In addition to preventing access to school, these security issues are protection risks and impact on children's sense of security at school.³ Children inside Syria have been repeatedly subjected to trauma resulting from prolonged exposure to war, stress and uncertainty,⁴ which impacts on their wellbeing and ability to learn.

To address these interlocking barriers to education, UNRWA has developed a multi-stranded, integrated approach to EiE, which seeks to combine the strengths of the UNRWA education system, with new and innovative ways of delivering and supporting education. The key dimensions of the UNRWA approach to EiE are:

1) Safe and secure learning environments

UNRWA invests in both the physical and emotional needs of children in Syria by providing safe and secure learning environments in which children and education staff are better protected and their resilience strengthened.

“I enrolled Suhaid, my 11-year-old son, in the activities offered at the safe learning space because I feel he is in a safe and healthy environment there.”

Manal, 45-year-old Palestine refugee from Mesraba in Eastern Ghouta, Syria

- A number of activities have been organized, in coordination with the UNRWA Department of Security and Risk Management, to develop **awareness and capacity of education staff and students on safety and security**, ranging from safety training to risk assessments and security drills in schools.
- Due to the crisis, access to regular schools can be compromised for children who live in shelters or far away from schools. To support these children, UNRWA establishes **safe learning and recreational spaces** to provide access to a protected and child-friendly environment for children to learn and play, supported by specialized psychosocial counsellors.

- In light of the negative psychosocial impact of the armed conflict on children and teachers, the Agency's EiE response emphasizes the **provision of psychosocial support**. This is achieved through the deployment of counsellors who cater to the specific needs of both girls and boys, as well as through capacity-building of UNRWA's education cadre for identifying student needs and delivering psychosocial support. The counsellors provide support to children throughout the school year as well as during summer activities. In both cases, children benefit from individual and group counselling, recreational and learning activities, and referral of cases to specialized services as required.

“I enjoy the recreational activities that the counsellors prepare. It allows me to make new friends and play with them”

Dana, 11-year old Palestine refugee girl, Syria

2) Quality teaching and learning

UNRWA helps to ensure that Palestine refugee children in Syria continue to have access to quality learning.

- UNRWA has developed innovative **self-learning materials** in line with the basic skills and concepts of core subjects (Arabic, Mathematics, English, Science). These were designed to support children who cannot regularly access school and include the following:
 - **Self-learning materials** (distributed in hard copy and available online) for Grades 1-6 covering the core subjects of Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science;
 - **Online Interactive Learning Programme** and educational games focusing on literacy and numeracy for Grades 1-9; and
 - **UNRWA TV** educational lessons, broadcast through satellite television and YouTube, featuring multimedia, interactive episodes that provide a fun and engaging approach through which children can learn Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science for Grades 4-9.
- Teachers and community facilitators are trained on the use of the alternative learning resources to support their use with children at home or in safe learning spaces.
- In addition, the UNRWA EiE programme provides **catch-up classes** for children who need additional learning support or who have dropped out of school, and supports the delivery of summer learning programmes to help children make up for lost school time.

To enable students to continue their studies after basic education, UNRWA also facilitates the safe transfer of grade 9 students in besieged or hard-to-reach areas to Damascus to take their national examinations and provides them with accommodation during the exam period.

3) Student, parent and community engagement and participation

Parent and community engagement involves identifying and mobilizing available resources and building support for UNRWA EiE programming within the community.

- Parents are engaged through the development of multimedia advocacy and awareness-raising materials, regular **parents' awareness** sessions and Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), which provide a vital link between the school and the community.
- With regard to **student participation**, School Parliaments, which are in place in every school, and UNRWA's My Voice-My School project, are innovative elements of the UNRWA EiE Programme:
 - **School Parliaments** provide genuine opportunities for students to participate in decision-making and effect change within their schools and communities, while facilitating the practical application of human rights principles.
 - The **My Voice-My School project** empowers youth by giving them a voice and the opportunity to advocate for their right to quality education, builds students' cross-cultural awareness, and develops communication and critical thinking skills. The project pairs UNRWA schools with schools in Europe and the US through a classroom project exploring 'Quality Education' where students jointly share thoughts and ideas on the subject with their peers through Skype.



Photo: Recreational activities in Damascus, Syria. @UNRWA

MONITORING

UNRWA monitors its EiE programme using a range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies that enable the Agency to triangulate findings and to give appropriate support to programme management. Monitoring is carried out through:

- 1) An **Agency-wide Common Monitoring Framework**, which includes a number of outcome-level indicators that measure learning attainment, equity and quality, teaching practices, the prevalence of a human rights culture, community engagement and alignment of the education system with protection standards, among other outcomes.
- 2) **Perceptual data** relating to student psychosocial wellbeing captured in (i) an Agency-wide Perceptual Survey of UNRWA students, teachers, parents and School Principals; and (ii) the Monitoring of Learning Achievement (MLA) tests carried out with 60,000 grades 4 and 8 students in Arabic and Mathematics every three years, with the latest one in 2016. The MLA is an innovative monitoring tool which seeks to measure higher-order thinking skills as well as learning outcomes, and takes into account equity of achievement by focusing on performance levels.
- 3) Specific **EiE project log frames**, which measure outcomes relating to psychosocial support, access to the self-learning programme, safety and security, community engagement and teacher training on alternative teaching, among other outcomes.
- 4) **On-the-ground monitoring through** focus group discussions and key informant interviews with students and education staff, including teachers, School Principals, counsellors and education specialists, as well as school visits.

The Agency is also working to better harmonize its EiE indicators with those of the Agency-wide Common Monitoring Framework, as well as and takes into account equity of achievement by focusing on performance levels education providers in the MENA region. This will be through a regional Monitoring & Evaluation Taskforce and will lead to the development of a harmonized EiE Framework in 2017/18.

KEY MILESTONES AND OUTCOMES

IMPACT

UNRWA's integrated approach to system strengthening and innovative service delivery in conditions of crisis has helped to further build the resilience of Palestine refugees in Syria and to maintain their access to quality education. Between 2012 and 2016, more than 66,000 children have been directly impacted by the UNRWA EiE response in Syria. Through its EiE programme, the Agency has also helped to strengthen its education system and enhance preparedness for emergencies.

- **Low level of drop out:** Despite the hardship endured by UNRWA students living in Syria, UNRWA's 2017 Annual Operational Report highlights their strong performance against key education indicators, with a high percentage of UNRWA students staying in school and good gender equity across all indicators. Other data for the UNRWA Syria education programme also showed promising outcomes, with a very low (0.5%) drop-out rate for both male and female students in the elementary and preparatory cycle (1.21%).



Photo: Damascus, Syria © UNRWA

- **Strong academic achievement:** UNRWA Palestine refugees in Syria achieved one of the highest levels of academic attainment in the Agency-wide MLA assessment of 2016, compared with their peers in other UNRWA fields of operation. In addition to strong academic achievement, student results in Syria reflected greater equity in terms of gender and in having the lowest proportion of students who were at the 'not achieved' level. Further, the students performed well on higher-order thinking questions – that is, questions relating to critical thinking and reasoning skills.

- **Positive perceptions:** The success of the UNRWA students in Syria was reflected in the positive feedback provided by a range of stakeholders on the education programme. Here, survey data taken as part of the 2016 MLA assessment found that students, teachers and School Principals in Syria were among the most positive compared to those of other UNRWA fields of operation, in terms of their perceptions of the provision of education, including aspects of the EiE response⁵.

This performance of UNRWA students and the overall positive perceptions of students, teachers and School Principals in Syria are considered (by the Agency) to be due to UNRWA's strong education system, combined with its innovative EiE approach. This combination of a systemic approach with a responsive innovative programme and dedicated education staff appears to have helped to mitigate the impact of the Syria crisis on Palestine refugee children's wellbeing and learning.

In addition to meeting the needs of children, the impact of the UNRWA EiE programme has extended to parents and the wider community. Parents are actively engaged in PTAs and have received targeted support through awareness sessions, and are thus more closely involved in school life. UNRWA safe learning spaces have enabled community members to access a range of services – including education, health and social services – with the spaces used for the integrated delivery of UNRWA services in Syria.

The success of the UNRWA EiE programme in Syria has laid the foundation for UNRWA's preparedness for emergencies. It has also crucially raised the profile of education delivery during crisis response, with education now included in the Agency-wide Emergency Response Framework. The broader impact of the EiE programme on the Agency's education system is discussed more fully in the Sustainability section of this case study.

“I want to ask all my friends who have left school to return – it is better than sitting at home and feeling sad. Every day I come back from school, I have my lunch and then I start studying my lessons in order to get good marks and accomplish my dream to become a school principal.”

Qamar, 11 year old Palestine refugee boy, Syria

PARTICIPATION AND PARTNERSHIP ORIENTATION

UNRWA regards strong beneficiary and community participation as central to delivering an effective EiE intervention:

- Participation is built into every stage of the EiE programme. Programme design is based on strong collaboration between field staff, School Principals and teachers through regular contact and site visits. Staff and students participate in evaluation to guide new iterations of certain elements of the programme, for example with regard to the quality and use of UNRWA TV.
- UNRWA engages students in decision-making through its School Parliaments, which are in place in every school, and its My Voice–My School project, through which students advocate for their right to quality education and communicate with peers across borders.
- Parents and community members are engaged through Parent Teacher Associations, which form an important part of school governance and provide a vital link between the school and the community, and participate in awareness sessions and open days, which seek to engage parents further in their children's education.

There is active, operational and strategic cooperation with the Ministry of Education in Syria. UNRWA also works closely with a wide range of regional partners, such as UNESCO, UNICEF and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). UNESCO has technically and financially supported the UNRWA Education Programme since the early 1950s. UNICEF has drawn upon the self-learning materials developed by UNRWA, ensuring their wider distribution to children in Syria and beyond. In addition, UNRWA works closely with the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) to exchange best practices in the area of EiE.

UNRWA is also involved at the regional level in the No Lost Generation (NLG) Initiative, which is a strategic framework for critical interventions in education, child protection, and youth as part of the Syria response.

SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability of the EiE Programme is ensured through the embedding of the UNRWA EiE approach and programme activities into the overall education system of the Agency, rather than establishing an interim or parallel structure. The Programme has helped to place students and staff in a better position to cope with emergencies, improved the overall emergency preparedness of the Agency at HQ, field and school level, and strengthened overall capacity to respond to and recover from crises. The EiE programme has built on and strengthened the UNRWA education system in the following areas:

- **Enhanced organizational capacity:** UNRWA's EiE staff capacities have been enhanced at HQ, Field and school level in the areas of: monitoring and data management, school safety and security, psychosocial support, and capacity to develop quality materials for self-learning. UNRWA intentionally worked to strengthen the sustainability of its EiE programming through its development of in-house capacities in these areas, and embedding EiE elements into existing capacity building programmes.⁶
- **New tools:** Through its EiE programme, UNRWA has developed a number of tools to support field education and security staff in delivering quality education. Notable tools include the Recreational Activities Guide, materials developed for the Self-Learning Programme (Self-Learning Materials, Interactive Learning Programme and UNRWA TV lessons), and the Safety and Security Training Package. The Agency is currently working to develop a quality assurance framework for the development and evaluation of Self-Learning Programme materials; this will help maximize the impact of the EiE approach.
- **Stronger community engagement:** The links between communities and schools have been strengthened through the activation of PTAs and parents' awareness sessions, enabling UNRWA to better leverage community resources in support of its EiE programming, improve lines of communication between staff, parents and community members, and raise awareness on topics related to EiE.
- **Effective partnerships:** UNRWA is able to continue to provide quality education throughout protracted conflict, through the support of its Host Governments and partner agencies in the region. Through the EiE programme, UNRWA has been able to strengthen its partnerships with key regional actors, including Host Governments, UNICEF and UNESCO. In addition, the UNRWA self-learning materials have been used by UNICEF in Syria, with possible scale-up to additional areas in the MENA region.

CHALLENGES

The ongoing conflict in Syria continues to define the overall operating context for UNRWA schools.

- The implementation of the EiE Programme has faced some difficulties due to the **extremely volatile security situation** and associated restrictions in the movement of personnel and goods. The conflict has rendered 70% of UNRWA schools inoperative, due to damage to school infrastructure, access restrictions or the need for schools to be used as collective centres sheltering internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁷
- **Data collection** in Syria is affected by communication challenges and elevated security concerns in certain areas of the country. As a result, much of the data from certain areas needs to be collected by phone, with limited opportunities for verification. Throughout the region there has been continuous movement of Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) in search of safety and this has further impacted on data collection and the ability of the field offices to regularly follow up on key data, such as school attendance.
- The **financial constraints** facing the Agency present an ongoing challenge. In the 2015/16 school year, UNRWA schools were nearly unable to open, due to the Agency's financial situation. Unpredictable financing for UNRWA's EiE programme presents a further significant difficulty in terms of planning for future programmatic needs. Stable, multi-year support that extends beyond a two-year timeline would allow the Agency to consolidate existing achievements by more strongly institutionalizing the strands of the EiE programme and by extending the planning horizon for programme implementation. For example, there is an increased need for counsellors in Syria, which is currently met by project funding, but for the provision of psychosocial support to be sustainable, a longer-term solution needs to be developed.

Photo: Recreational Activities in Damascus, Syria @UNRWA



LESSONS FOR PROMISING PRACTICE

The following are the key lessons from UNRWA's experience of delivering EiE to Palestine refugee children in Syria:

- UNRWA has built a **strong education system**, based on more than six decades of education delivery in the Middle East, with professionally trained education staff at all levels and students at the heart of education delivery. A strong education system is one which is better prepared for and more able to respond to and recover from an emergency. In 2011, UNRWA embarked on a major reform to better meet the evolving demands of an education system in the twenty-first century. As the Syria crisis developed, the Syria Field Office maintained its commitment to implementing the Reform. This served to support the staff at a key time and to strengthen their capacity at field and school level to deliver quality education within an emergency context. UNRWA considers that it is this strengthening of the education system, combined with new and innovative ways of delivering education, which has enabled the Agency to maintain the provision of quality education during emergencies.
- The deployment of an **innovative, integrated approach** to providing EiE – one that considers the child's needs holistically and draws on the collective strengths of UNRWA's different departments and units – is how UNRWA has found it can best support the needs of children, education staff and the community, and continue to sustain its provision of quality education.
- The **sustainability of UNRWA's EiE approach** is ensured through the embedding of the EiE Programme into the overall education approach of the Agency. At school, field and HQ level, the capacity of UNRWA education staff to deliver EiE has been systematically developed, for example in the area of curriculum development for the Self-Learning Programme and its delivery by teachers, for decision-making on safety and security at the school level, the establishment of safe learning spaces and the provision of psychosocial support. UNRWA has also embedded EiE into existing capacity building programmes. The EiE programme has also crucially raised the profile in the Agency of education delivery during crisis response, with education now included in the UNRWA Agency-wide Emergency Response Framework.

Further lessons learned from UNRWA's experience of delivering EiE:

- **Community awareness and engagement** is a key strand in an effective EiE response. It is essential to engage community members in assessing needs and supporting the EiE response, by drawing on existing mechanisms in the UNRWA education system such as Parent Teacher Associations, community-based organizations, and other groups. Community engagement is key to ensuring effective and widespread student use of the Self-Learning Programme (SLP) materials, enhancing safety and security in and on the way to school and supporting children to cope with stress and trauma.
- It is critical to systematically and adequately **measure the quality and usage of the SLP materials**. The capacity of staff involved in the development of the SLP materials needs to be systematically strengthened to ensure that the materials meet high quality standards. Teacher training on the use of all materials in the SLP is essential in order to enable teachers to know when, and how, to use the SLP and to enhance their effectiveness. Community awareness and engagement in delivery of the SLP is essential for parents to understand how they can help support their children in using the SLP materials.
- **Children need to be empowered as actors in their own safety and security**. This can be achieved through the development of child-friendly training modules on safety and security, as well as through engaging students and School Parliaments in school emergency planning and the implementation of emergency and evacuation plans. This places them in a better position to cope with emergencies and increases their resilience.
- The **provision of psychosocial support (PSS)** is most efficient when an integrated and multi-stranded approach is adopted, through: (1) structured training of teachers and frontline education staff to provide targeted PSS and to build awareness that the responsibility for delivering PSS lies with teachers as well as specialized staff; (2) addressing the psychosocial wellbeing of frontline staff themselves who comprise an essential support layer in the school; and (3) mechanisms for increasing parental engagement in, and awareness of, PSS for their children.

“Education will help me achieve my dreams to be an architect in the future.”

Mohammad-Radi, 14 year-old Palestine refugee boy, Syria

PERSONAL IMPACT STORY

Abir, 37, is one of 254,000 Palestine refugees who had to flee the violence in different cities and gatherings across Syria. Originally from Yarmouk, the young mother, her husband, and their two children arrived at the collective shelter at the Damascus Training Centre five years ago, leaving behind everything they owned.

“When the fighting increased and the sound of explosions filled the silence of the ghost town that Yarmouk became, we decided it was time to leave,” said Abir, mother-of-two. She was sitting in the back of the safe learning space at the Damascus Training Centre, quietly observing her two children’s interaction in the classroom. “There was a lot of shooting and bombs, it was terrible. We no longer felt safe, our children were at risk; we had no choice but to leave.”

“When we left, my biggest concern was my children’s education, therefore, I immediately enrolled Zeina, 13, and Mohammad, 11, in one of the UNRWA schools in Damascus. I strongly believe that an uneducated child has no future and no hope,” she explained.

As part of its Education in Emergencies (EiE) response in Syria, UNRWA has set up 22 recreational playgrounds and eight safe learning spaces in communities and shelters for displaced Palestine refugees. These safe spaces provide children with a protected environment to continue their learning and engage in recreational activities, building their social skills and contributing to their overall wellbeing and resilience.

“I have noticed a great level of improvement in Zeina’s behaviour and wellbeing. When we first arrived, she was isolated and refused to interact with other children. She also had violent and aggressive reactions towards people; she was completely traumatized. Then, with the help of the counsellors at the UNRWA schools and at the safe learning spaces, and after having attended some psychosocial support sessions and recreational activities, she started engaging with others, smiling, and succeeding in school,” Abir proudly said.

Abir spoke about the importance of the safe learning spaces, encouraging parents to enrol their children. “Children can benefit from the English, Arabic, French, and Mathematics courses. These courses will help them prepare for the upcoming school year with full confidence. The teachers are very supportive and they provide close follow-up for each student. They invite us for awareness sessions where they give updates on the improvements made by the children and inform us if they have concerns”.

The young mother expressed her happiness that Mohammad and Zeina are now comfortable and have made new friends. “This is the closest I can offer them to a normal life, I’m very grateful.”



Photo: Safe learning space, Damascus, Syria. © UNRWA

Photo: A safe-learning space, Khan Dunnoun, Syria. © UNRWA



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Photo credit: All UNRWA photos by Taghrid Mohammad

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ENDNOTES

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Promising Practices in Refugee Education is a joint initiative of Save the Children, the world's largest independent children's rights organisation, UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, and Pearson, the world's learning company.

Launched in March 2017, the initiative set out to identify, document and promote innovative ways to effectively reach refugee children and young people with quality educational opportunities.

This case study is one of more than twenty promising practices that were selected as part of the initiative.

The practices have been grouped under one or more of six themes.



The practices and the experience of implementing partners have been used to identify ten recommendations, grouped under three overarching pillars, aimed at improving refugee education policy and practice. They are:

Approaching the immediate crisis with a long-term perspective:

1. Strengthen inclusive national systems
2. Commit to predictable multi-year funding for education in refugee responses
3. Improve collaboration and develop innovative partnerships

Understanding different contexts and meeting distinct needs

4. Adopt user-centred design and empowering approaches
5. Establish diverse pathways that meet distinct needs
6. Use space and infrastructure creatively

Improving outcomes for all

7. Support teachers to help ensure quality
8. Prioritise both learning and well-being
9. Use technology as an enabling tool in pursuit of education outcomes
10. Build a robust evidence base

Our reflections on all of the promising practices that we identified and documented and their implications for policy and practice are available in a separate Synthesis Report.

More information including case studies, the Synthesis Report and a series of articles from thought leaders in the field can be found at

www.promisingpractices.online

