

POLICYBRIEF

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Caught Between Politics and Need: Sustaining UNRWA's Social Protection Delivery in the West Bank

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Highlights

- UNRWA's social protection work in the West Bank remains critical in times of political instability and budget constraints.
- The Relief and Social Services (RSS) programme has managed to keep abject poverty at bay but is impacted by chronic under-funding and mobility constraints.
- Better shock-responsive mechanisms and humanitarian partner coordination will be required to sustain impact.
- Funding diversification and digitalization of registration processes could facilitate service continuity and transparency.
- Protecting UNRWA's working area is crucial for the safeguarding of the rights and socio-economic stability.

Background

UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) plays a key role in delivering social protection services in the territory of Palestine, including the West Bank. This unique region and UNRWA itself have been subject to political pressures. This study focuses on the relationship between this phenomenon and UNRWA's social protection services, implemented through Relief and Social Services (RSS), as well as UNRWA's financial sustainability. It looks at how political constraints influence the financial sustainability of UNRWA and its capacity to fulfil its mandate and deliver RSS. This analysis covers events since 2016, with a focus on the West Bank region. The RSS program is where the social protection services of UNRWA are implemented, promoting development and self-reliance among Palestine refugees. The RSS splits into the Social Safety Net Program (SSNP), which aims to contribute to poverty mitigation among the target population by providing in-kind and cash transfers, and the Social Services Program, focused on enhancing the professional environment of social workers. Moreover, the RSS plays a key role in identifying and collecting relevant data related to the Palestine refugees (UNRWA, n.d.).

The West Bank represents a particularly complex operating environment. About 3.3 million Palestinians live under severe mobility restrictions created by checkpoints, roadblocks, and the separation barrier (Haddad & Ali, 2024), while nearly 700 000 Israeli settlers occupy significant portions of the territory (Anera, 2023). Ongoing discriminatory measures, demolitions, forced displacements, and revenue withholdings have weakened the local economy and increased reliance on humanitarian assistance (Al Hussein and Saba, 2022, OCHA, 2024, Uddin & Alazzeh, 2024).

UNRWA is responsible for delivering services such as basic education, primary health care, RSS, infrastructures and camp improvement, microcredit, and emergency assistance, including situations of armed conflict (Peyró Llopis, 2021), to the Palestine refugees across 5 fields of operations. UNRWA has more than 26,000 people working in the Organisation, being 98% local staff (UNRWA, 2025), and 13,5% are people working in the West Bank. There are about 36,000 SSNP recipients in the West Bank. UNRWA is funded mainly through voluntary donations from UN Member States. Until 2017, the US was the biggest donor, funding almost 30% of the total operational costs (BBC News, 2018). During Trump's administration, the US exponentially decreased its donations until 2021. Since 2016, the donations from the EU and Germany have maintained a certain balance, and Sweden and the UK have been quite consistent. Throughout the years, it is known that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Japan, and France were momentarily among the top 5 donors (UNRWA, donor charts).

In 2016, the UN Security Council (Resolution 2334) condemned and emphasized that Israeli settlements within the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) are lacking in legal legitimacy and are a violation of international law.

On 7 October 2023, Hamas attacked Israeli territory and killed over 1,400 people (BBC, 2024), triggering renewed hostilities in Gaza and surrounding areas. Subsequently, the Government of Israel alleged that several UNRWA staff members were involved, leading major donors to temporarily suspend funding to the agency (Al Jazeera, 2024). In November 2024, the Israeli Government proposed legislation to designate UNRWA a terrorist organisation (Khane, 2024), and in early 2025, the Israeli Parliament voted to end UNRWA operations in parts of the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Ali & Hussein, 2025).

Main Section

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative research methodology, using semi-structured interviews. It utilised a purposive sampling recruitment method, selecting specific participants based on the assumption that they hold specialized knowledge and perspectives related to the research topic, able to provide comprehensive information. The data collected through these interviews was complemented by a desk review of key documents such as International Law treaties, UNGA resolutions, UNRWA Annual Reports, and UNRWA Donor Charts.

Analysis

1 UNRWA's Role and Operational Strengths

Despite chronic financial stress, UNRWA's registration system and RSS delivery mechanisms provide a robust institutional foundation, with features that reflect rights-based social protection despite the circumstance.

Its comprehensive refugee registry ensures efficient targeting and continuity of assistance. Additionally, UNRWA social workers receive regular training, and complementary programmes, such as psychosocial support and livelihood training, which enhances resilience beyond direct cash transfers. Moreover, field coordination with humanitarian and civil-society partners has improved data exchange and reduced duplication of aid.

2 Political and Structural Constraints

Political pressures increasingly shape operational feasibility. This includes access and movement restrictions which impede delivery (closures, checkpoints, and permit denials delay staff travel and supply chains). Administrative hurdles, including limits on visas for international staff, further reduce capacity. Additionally, Israel's legislative initiatives in 2024–2025 to restrict or abolish UNRWA operations in East Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank pose existential risks to continuity. At the same time, funding dependency on voluntary contributions exposes UNRWA to donor cycles and political conditionality. Western funding cuts following allegations in 2024 forced emergency reallocations and deepened structural deficits. Only 6 percent of total programme expenditure currently covers RSS, despite its centrality to refugee livelihoods.

3 Service Delivery Challenges

The research highlights several implementation bottlenecks. Starting with the targeting methods. These methods are based largely on classical poverty thresholds which blocks capturing households affected by sudden shocks such as demolitions or displacement. Exclusion errors persist particularly during crises, when registration updates lag behind real-time needs. Not to mention how social workers operate under extreme workload pressures and security risks. Nevertheless, findings show that frontline staff continue to deliver with professionalism and responsiveness, often bridging institutional limitations through informal coordination and community trust.

KEY Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen a shock-responsiveness RSS mechanism: It is essential to strengthen and optimize social protection programs to decrease gaps in the safety net. UNRWA can foster the development of a shock-responsiveness RSS mechanism to increase its capabilities for response, especially during emergency events (i.e., armed conflict, displacement, food insecurity), bridging the poverty and severe poverty gaps;
2. Investment in complementary programs: although the RSS has proven to be an efficient method to fulfil the Palestine refugees' needs, it is notable the potential in investing in complementary programs, minimizing risks in emergencies, strengthening vertical and horizontal responses. and increase economic independence. Therefore, UNRWA and its partners can invest more in anticipatory actions, enhance microfinancing programs, and keep providing effective training and expertise to the local staff;
3. Improvement of coordination between UNRWA and its partners: Streamline current social assistance programs, and increase partnerships between Humanitarian and Civil Society Organisations to strengthen the overall Social Protection delivery in the West Bank. Through effective coordination, it is also possible to make a useful management of UNRWA's comprehensive data to minimize current issues and leverage UNRWA's internal risk assessment and security measures. For UNRWA partners, it is recommended that their willingness to cooperate with UNRWA, by complementing and supporting the service delivery.

4. Diversification of funding methods: Due to high dependence on voluntary contributions, it is key to consider the diversification of funding methods, reaching out, for example, to International Organisations, Emerging Economies, and, as a complementary support, private donations. Moreover, UNRWA can advocate for long-term donations (e.g., annual donations valid for the whole UNRWA mandate) and must keep providing detailed and up-to-date information to host countries, donor countries, and the overall international community to mitigate risks and higher-level outcomes.

Conclusion

UNRWA's social protection role in the West Bank remains essential, but ever more politicized and unstable on uncertain funding. The RSS has been a source of stability, preventing extreme poverty, enhancing community resilience, and acting as an essential safety net through repeated shocks. But its planning and delivery ability is compromised by movement constraints, political tensions, legal restrictions, and donor dependency, leaving beneficiaries and staff vulnerable to abrupt policy changes. To provide lasting effects from the technical angle, UNRWA and its constituents must improve shock-responsiveness, enhance coordination with humanitarian partners, and modernize registration through digital means which streamline it and make it more transparent.

More importantly however is that maintaining UNRWA's mandate requires renewed international political will; not only in terms of budgets, but by reaffirming the agency's legitimacy, protecting access to its area of operation, and restating its fundamental mandate of serving as an advocate for the protection of Palestine refugees' rights and dignity. It is not only a humanitarian obligation; it is a commitment to peace, stability, and the preservation of a rights based and rules-based international order.

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Endnotes

1 This policy brief is based on research conducted for Joana Gonçalves's Master's thesis, completed during the 2024/2025 academic year at UNU-MERIT, as part of the UNU-MERIT/UNRWA academic research project, under the supervision of Dr. Zina Nimeh