

POLICYBRIEF

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Learning Rights, Living Rights: Insights from UNRWA's HRCRT Programme A Multi-Level Approach

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Highlights

- UNRWA's Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT) programme faces persistent contextual and institutional constraints.
- Donor influence, political sensitivities, and limited evaluation mechanisms undermine its long-term transformative potential.
- Teachers' professional development guidance and participatory evaluation are key to improving ownership, accountability, and educational impact.
- A culturally relevant, rights-based approach can strengthen the understanding of human rights as something real and practical and not as a vague and theoretical concept.
- Strengthening community participation and developing robust, inclusive monitoring frameworks are essential for programme sustainability.

Background

Since its establishment in 1949, the UNRWA has been central to the protection and human development of over 5.9 million Palestinian refugees across Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria (UNRWA, n.d.-a). Over the decades, education has become its largest service, absorbing nearly 60 percent of its budget (Michael & Hatuel-Radoshitzky, 2020) and employing more than 22,000 teachers, who constitute the majority of its employees (UNRWA, 2008). Despite constant criticism, Education for UNRWA has been both a humanitarian necessity and a political commitment which ensures that displaced Palestinians receive equitable learning opportunities even in the absence of statehood.

In 1999, UNRWA integrated Human Rights Education (HRE) into its schools to promote non-violence, respect, and tolerance. This evolved into a comprehensive Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT) policy in 2012 as part of the Education Reform Strategy 2011–2015. The HRCRT sought to empower students “to enjoy and exercise their rights, uphold human rights values, and contribute positively to their society” (UNRWA, 2013).

The policy built on international frameworks such as the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005) and UNICEF/ UNESCO's rights-based approach to education. It is structured around four pillars: rights-based learning materials, teacher training, rights-respecting school environments, and robust monitoring and evaluation systems. The initiative has since been implemented across all UNRWA schools, infused into the daily learning experiences of hundreds of thousands of children. Yet its impact is curtailed by political instability and strife, financial fragility, and persistent external constraints.

To discuss whether the HRCRT programme achieves its intended objectives, this policy brief draws on research that examined the extent to which the HRCRT fulfils its goals of promoting respect, tolerance, and civic engagement among Palestinian refugee students, and examines the key factors shaping its implementation.

Main Section

Methodology

The analysis draws on a case study approach, combined with document analysis, a literature review, and expert interviews analyzed to examine HRCRT implementation. This triangulated method captured institutional and contextual factors shaping the programme's effectiveness.

Analysis

1. HRCRT Strengths

The HRCRT programme introduced a unified framework for human rights learning in refugee schools, integrating rights-based materials into curricula and teacher resource packs. It fosters active learning by involving school parliaments and Parent-Teacher Associations to enhance student voice and community engagement. However, the absence of available records for these sessions undermines their implementation and monitoring. Founded on principles of human dignity, equality, participation, and tolerance, it aligns with international human rights norms and UNRWA's neutrality mandate. The programme is a significant institutional benchmark towards consolidating universal values in an environment of fragility and displacement.

2. Structural and Political Challenges

Despite its conceptual strengths, HRCRT faces systemic obstacles that undermine its long-term goals.

a. Donor Dependence and Policy Autonomy

UNRWA's budget relies on voluntary, largely restricted donor funding, giving donors significant influence over programme priorities. Evidence from policy analyses and interviews reveals a pattern of curricular depoliticization, where themes central to Palestinian identity, such as the right of return, downplayed to avoid controversy. Consequently HRCRT content emphasizes a universal, apolitical notion of "global citizenship," which many educators view as disconnected from refugees' lived realities. This reflects a persistent tension between educational neutrality and political relevance, as UNRWA navigates humanitarian goals amid external pressures.

b. Depoliticized Curriculum and Local Relevance

Studies by Albhaisi (2021) and Pinto (2014) note that the HRCRT curriculum can appear idealistic and disconnected from the Palestinian realities. Lessons are described as portraying "the world as it should be rather than as it is." This perceived detachment from reality can erode students' trust in the programme and may even create resentment, especially among adolescents who experience daily human-rights violations. Nevertheless, many teachers may informally adapt lessons on justice and tolerance to local contexts, restoring relevance and encouraging critical reflection.

c. Teacher Training and Pedagogical Gaps

Teacher's capacity and role are central to the HRCRT's success. Although training is mandatory, one-third of teachers report difficulty applying learner-centered methods promoted by HRCRT especially when overcrowded classrooms, heavy curricula, and limited time add further strain (Eskiocak Oğuzertem & McAdams, n.d.). Teachers also face emotional and structural challenges when addressing human rights, as refugees themselves, they face emotional pressure talking about their own experienced violations, and the lack of guidance due to the agency's strict neutrality policy. This policy, shaped by political pressure, has led to the avoidance of context-specific discussions on human rights and violations, leaving teachers cautious and fearful of repercussions for perceived breaches.

d. Limited Evaluation and Accountability Mechanisms

Existing monitoring tools largely measure quantitative outputs that include the numbers of trained teachers, classroom sessions, or student parliaments. There is no measurement of qualitative outcomes such as attitude or behaviour change. While perception surveys provide insight into teachers' and students'

views, no longitudinal assessment exists to evaluate whether HRCRT fosters empowerment, tolerance, or civic participation over time. This absence mirrors a broader global challenge in human-rights education: the lack of robust, participatory evaluation frameworks.

3. Theoretical Insights: Applying the Critical Pedagogy and Human Rights Based Approach to Education

For this research, the theoretical lens of Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and the Human Rights-Based Approach to Education (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2007) were used to provide an interpretive understanding of these dynamics. Critical Pedagogy views education as a process of empowerment and social transformation, emphasizing dialogue, cultural relevance, and awareness of power relations. Thus, when curricula ignore local injustices or silence political realities, education risks reinforcing oppression rather than challenging it. Similarly, the HRBA insists that educational content and delivery embody the principles of universality, participation, non-discrimination, and accountability. In UNRWA's case, meaningful implementation therefore requires not only teaching about rights but also ensuring that students experience those rights through participatory classrooms, inclusive decision-making, and community engagement. Together, these frameworks suggested that for the HRCRT to be truly effective, it must evolve from a compliance-based programme into a transformative educational process, one that empowers refugees to critically analyse and act upon their social conditions.

Conclusion

The HRCRT programme marks an innovative effort to institutionalize human rights education within the challenging environment of long-term refugee settings. Over the past two decades, it has advanced respect, tolerance, and civic consciousness among students. Yet, the programme's broader transformative potential remains limited by persistent structural dependency, depoliticization, and weak evaluation frameworks. Inadequate teacher guidance on the de facto discussions in classroom and poor community participation also bring down school-level implementation. And in the absence of continuous mentorship and class follow-ups, student-centered approaches are poorly executed. Moreover, although school parliaments and Parent-Teacher Associations exist, documentation of community engagement is lacking, and parents seldom influence education planning. Finally, the evaluation systems are activity-centered

and not impact-centered thus constraining learning from experience and accountability to the beneficiaries.

To remain relevant and functional, HRCRT must evolve from rights education to empowering children to exercise and assert their rights. This can only be done through education that is participatory, contextually relevant, and critically reflective. Embedding the paradigm of the Rights-Based Approach and Critical Pedagogy can transform HRCRT from a compliance process into an enabler of human development. Such transformation necessitates greater curricular autonomy, robust teacher empowerment, and authentic community participation. It also depends on diversified, depoliticized funding and comprehensive, impact-oriented evaluation systems. Ultimately, human-rights education in refugee settings is not merely about knowledge transfer but about cultivating agency, dignity, and hope. By aligning policy with practice and international standards with local realities, UNRWA can ensure that its education system not only teaches human rights but also embodies them.

KEY Policy Recommendations

1. Develop a participatory monitoring system that focuses on people's rights - one that tracks the good stuff like tolerance, how engaged people are in their communities and how they resolve conflicts. Get students, teachers, and local community members involved in coming up with the right metrics and sorting through the data so that people feel a sense of ownership and are invested in the process.
2. Create a system that gives teachers a say in their own work, free from interference from funding sources or political interests. When it comes to the course of study, make sure that it takes a completely unbiased view of the real-life experiences of Palestinian refugees. That way we get a genuine and trustworthy approach.
3. Reinvigorate teacher training to put in more time for one-on-one mentoring, peer learning and online support; to make sure that teachers are facilitating knowledge and embedding some key pedagogies like dialogue, critical thinking and learning that's relevant to what's really going on.
4. Help the Parent-Teacher Associations and local community councils to have a bigger say in what we do and help us co-design our human rights education activities.

5. Set up workshops and open days to help us get beyond the classroom and get people working together, so that kids, families and schools all feel a sense of shared responsibility.

6. Track how education impacts long term by using a mix of methods to see what kind of real change we're seeing over time, like decreases school violence, or more girls in the community standing up for themselves, or more young people getting involved in their communities.

7. Find ways to encourage multi-donor pooled funding or private-philanthropy partnerships that grant UNRWA greater flexibility in curriculum design and implementation priorities. Reduced dependency on a small group of politically influential donors can protect educational neutrality while allowing culturally relevant content.

8. Promote collaboration with other refugee education systems and global human-rights education networks. Such partnerships can facilitate exchange of best practices in participatory evaluation, teacher training, and conflict-sensitive pedagogy.

Organizations.

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Endnotes

1 This policy brief is based on research conducted for Anthi Pantazi'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