

POLICYBRIEF

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Strengthening Multilateral Cooperation in Refugee Education: Lessons from UNRWA, UNHCR, and UNESCO

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Highlights

- Fragmented cooperation among UNRWA, UNHCR, and UNESCO in refugee education undermines their effectiveness, mostly due to political sensitivities of the issue, unstable funding, and overlapping mandates.
- Establishing structured and complementary coordination mechanisms among the agencies would improve efficiency and resilience, reduce protection gaps, and ensure positive long-term educational outcomes for Palestinian refugees.
- Multi-year, predictable funding mechanisms are very important in establishing continuity of education, protecting against donor-driven fragmentation, and enabling sustainable planning of educational programs.
- Ensuring transition from non-formal to formal education is crucial to enhance social integration, resilience, and long-term development opportunities for refugee children and youth.

Background

Quality education is widely recognized as a cornerstone of human development and a foundation for social stability. Nevertheless, around 7.2 million refugee children, which is almost half of all school-aged children, are not attending schools, based on a 2024 UNHCR report. More than 120 million people were displaced globally by April 2024, including almost 32 million refugees, and displacement context seriously undermines opportunities of receiving education and integrating successfully (UNHCR, 2024).

Despite global commitments to SDG 4¹ on inclusive and equitable education, access to learning remains one of the weakest areas of refugee protection, particularly in contexts of protracted conflict and displacement, such as the Palestinian refugee situation. Since 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has provided education and protection to millions of Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon regions, remaining a unique agency in its nature. Together with UNRWA, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

(UNHCR) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have developed educational mandates, with UNHCR including refugees in national systems and UNESCO through global standard- and guidelines- setting.

However, despite a shared commitment to inclusive and sustainable refugee education, coordination between UNRWA, UNHCR, and UNESCO remains limited and fragmented. This policy brief builds on a research that investigated how do these three UN agencies cooperate in delivering education to Palestinian refugees, and what factors enable or constrain this collaboration? Focusing on Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, the research examined how institutional mandates, political and funding constraints, operational priorities, and contextual pressures shape inter-agency coordination in refugee education.

Main Section

Methodology

Using a qualitative case study approach grounded in Human Capital, Social Integration, and Social Justice Theories, alongside the Theory of Change, the research examined how UNRWA, UNHCR, and UNESCO collaborate in refugee education and how political, financial, and institutional factors shape their effectiveness. Through applying an institutional analysis framework, it explored cooperation both vertically (between headquarters and field offices) and horizontally (across agencies). Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, as well as documentary analysis of strategies, reports, and UN policy documents.

Thematic coding combined deductive and inductive analysis around three dimensions: (1) effectiveness in meeting educational goals, (2) mandate interaction and inter-agency cooperation, and (3) long-term development outcomes.

Analysis

Institutional Roles

Providing education to refugees requires collaboration across multiple layers of governance, where international agencies and national governments share overlapping yet distinct responsibilities. UNRWA runs around 700 schools, providing direct educational services to almost half a million students and humanitarian aid across Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon (UNRWA, n.d.). As noted by a former UN

Education Official, UNRWA is a unique organization in acting as a direct service provider, which is usually assumed by the national governments (Interview from field work, 2025). It's mandate addresses the unresolved aspects of the Palestinian refugee situation has evolved through a multi-stakeholder approach' (Albanese & Takkenberg, 2021, p.4). In contrast UNHCR's approach promotes the inclusion of refugee children into national schools and systems, focusing on policy support and protection rather than direct service provision. The UNESCO complements those roles by setting international standards for education, supporting teachers training and supporting inclusion of refugees (UNESCO, 2023).

While the mandates of these organizations are theoretically complementary, their operational cooperation on the field is limited. UNRWA's field-based approach differs from UNHCR's strategy of inclusion to the national systems and UNESCO's normative work, which leaves gaps in the continuity of humanitarian response and continuation of educational programs (Bocco 2010). Moreover, the historical division of responsibilities, with UNRWA working with Palestinians in specific regions (Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon), and UNHCR for all other refugees (including Palestinian refugees outside of UNRWA's operation), has resulted in a poorly coordinated model of refugee education governance. This situation prevents long-term planning possibilities and monitoring of the outcomes. In practice, cooperation tends to be ad hoc and context-dependent, seldom evolving into sustained, institutionalized collaboration rarely resulting from collaborative procedures (Dryden-Peterson 2015).

Barriers to Institutional Cooperation

While UNESCO, UNRWA and UNHCR all share commitment to the SDG4 on inclusive and equitable education, their coordination and cooperation remains limited. As noted in field interviews, as well as in the literature, collaboration among agencies often remains confined to coordination meetings and rarely develops into complementary or joint programming (Interview from field work, 2025 & Bocco, 2010).

Chronic funding instability also undermines inter-agency collaboration. According to the UN report 2024, 'Throughout its 75-year history, and in the context of the continued unresolved plight of almost 6 million Palestine refugees, UNRWA has been confronted with persistent shortfalls in funding that have severely challenged the Agency's ability to fully implement its mandate in providing assistance and protection to Palestine refugees'. As was also confirmed by interviews, UN organizations highly rely on donor contribution, and global shortage of funding and financial instability provoke a competition for the resources rather than partnership (UNHCR, 2024). Donor

requirements induce short-termism and the separation of projects, further perpetuating institutional silos (Lilly, 2019). Differences in mandates can also create gaps in humanitarian response and education delivery. UNRWA is a direct service provider in a specific area, and UNHCR works through the national systems support. Alignment was a theme that emerged from the interviews, and that when institutional logics are not well aligned, refugees face interruptions and restrictions in learning continuity. For example, transitioning from non-formal¹ to formal education², losing access to financial assistance, or losing legal protection when moving between jurisdictions (Dryden-Peterson, 2016 & Dr. Takkenberg).

Conclusion

Cooperation between UNRWA, UNHCR, and UNESCO in the field of refugee education remains fragmented, despite the agencies' shared commitment to inclusive and equitable learning. Divergent mandates and administrative structures limit the development of a coherent framework for joint delivery. While mandate complementarity exists in principle, its practical realization remains limited. Coordination largely depends on individual initiatives and field-level pragmatism rather than systematic frameworks. Institutional silos and differing operational logics obstruct the smooth transition between non-formal and formal education systems, particularly for refugee children who move between jurisdictions.

Political sensitivities surrounding the Palestinian question continue to influence inter-agency relations and decision-making processes. These dynamics often result in cautious engagement, which restricts opportunities for deeper institutional collaboration.

Financial instability emerges as a key structural constraint. The heavy dependence on short-term donor funding reinforces competition among agencies and constrains their capacity to engage in long-term, coordinated planning.

Overall, the research highlights that the effectiveness of multilateral education governance depends not only on shared goals but on political trust, predictable financing, and sustained institutional alignment. Without these, even well-intentioned efforts and programmes will remain fragmented and reactive.

KEY Policy Recommendations

Establish Structured and Complementary Coordination Mechanisms - International organizations, including UNRWA, UNESCO and UNHCR, should institutionalize their cooperation to overcome fragmentation and gaps in humanitarian responses. As mentioned above, overlapping mandates and high political sensitivity of the Palestinian conflict prevent coherent, structured, sustainable and continuing education delivery. Formal mechanisms of coordination, such as active data sharing, joint planning, and monitoring, could increase complementarity and increase programs' effectiveness.

Implement Multi-Year Funding for Refugee Education- Short-term and voluntary donor contribution leads to chronic funding shortage and inability to plan ahead, which also weakens coordination among the agencies. The Education Cannot Wait (ECW) Multi-Year Resilience Programmes (MYRPs) can be taken as a good example of such initiative, which can assist in funding predictability, reduce fragmentation and short time projects, and ensure continuity of educational programs.

Strengthen Transition from Non-Formal to Formal Education - Larger gaps between formal and non-formal education leads to higher chances of drop-outs and unequal opportunities among students. According to Dryden-Peterson (2016), sustainable refugee education is actually dependent on the integration of learners into national systems through acknowledged accreditation and alignment of teacher training. Agencies should create common accreditation programs, as well as standardized curricula and inclusive assessment techniques, to ensure continuity of education and better social integration (Ager & Strang, 2008).

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Endnotes

1 Planned personal and social education programmes for young people that are designed to develop a range of skills and competences outside the formal education curriculum. Non-formal education is intentional and voluntary (Non-Formal Education Portal, 2024).

2 Education that is institutionalized, intentional, planned through public organizations and recognized private bodies and, in their totality, make up the formal education system of a country' (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2024).

3 This policy brief is based on research conducted for Maryia Rud'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