



Education, Health, Protection, and Innovation for Palestine Refugees

The impact of Australia Assists deployments with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Photo credit: Hiba Judeh, RedR Australia

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“The benefit of having an expert here during this challenging time for the agency has been priceless.”

UNRWA representative

The Work of UNRWA

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has been responding to the needs of up to five million Palestine refugees across the Middle East region since 1950, following the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. It has contributed to the welfare and human development of four generations of Palestine refugees, defined as ‘persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.’ This support includes education, health care, social services, and protection. In undertaking this work, UNRWA employs over 30,000 people, two thirds of whom are teachers and almost all are refugees themselves.

In the absence of a solution to the Palestine refugee problem, the General Assembly has repeatedly renewed UNRWA’s mandate, most recently extending it until 30 June 2020¹. As one UNRWA representative described, *“UNRWA is not the problem or the solution, it is the mechanism in place in recognition of the former and in the absence of the latter.”*

The RedR Australia and UNRWA Partnership

RedR Australia signed a strategic partnership with UNRWA in 2017, the timing of which coincided with reductions in US funding to UNRWA. This resulted in UNRWA losing a large proportion (approximately one quarter, or USD 380 million) of their core funding and necessitating wide-scale staffing cutbacks. It has also been a time of pressing humanitarian need for Palestine refugees. As an UNRWA staff member said, *“we are facing increasing needs with decreasing funds.”*

The Australian Government’s civilian humanitarian deployment program, Australia Assists, has been able to support UNRWA at a particularly critical juncture with the deployment of nine humanitarian experts working in a range of sectors. These include education, youth, health, and donor and project management. Managed by RedR Australia, these experts have been strategically placed throughout the organisation in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, and Lebanon.

Education

UNRWA operates 711 elementary and preparatory schools in its five fields of operation, providing free basic education for some 526,000 Palestine refugee children. Ensuring the safety of students is a priority, but can be challenging across so many sites in often very difficult conditions, such as refugee camps. Australia Assists deployee Jane Fuller, a highly experienced lawyer and human rights expert, worked with UNRWA to train school principals in how best to protect students from violence. Jane developed a training package which is currently being rolled out across all five field sites.

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Australia Assists gives highly skilled humanitarians the opportunity to make a real difference and build the resilience of the world’s most vulnerable people before, during, and after crises and conflict.”



Australia Assists deployee, Jason Power (left), and RedR Australia Regional Manager for Middle East and Africa, Mel Schmidt (right). Photo credit: Hiba Judeh, RedR Australia

1. <https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are>

Youth

UNRWA also works with young people in technical vocational training and higher education, with eight vocational training centres serving approximately 7,700 Palestine refugees. Australia Assists deployee Sarah Shouman was deployed to UNRWA in Lebanon as a Youth and Adolescent Development Specialist. Sarah worked with UNRWA to establish a program designed to address the lack of opportunities for Palestine youth and focus on positive leadership within the most marginal and at-risk populations. One of the outcomes of this work was the establishment of two innovation labs, where young people have the opportunity to develop their creative, digital, and entrepreneurship skills. For UNRWA, the experience in working with young people across various sectors and the networks Sarah brought to the organisation, were invaluable. As UNRWA's Director of Affairs explained, *"this expertise has been very beneficial for taking forward our youth program."*

Speaking with Sarah more than a year on from the opening of the innovation labs, she has been struck by the impact that access to this type of training and facilities has had on young peoples' lives. *"To be treated like an adult and an equal and not be judged, some kids say it's given them confidence to stop things like drugs and smoking."*

Sarah has also seen former students develop and flourish with their businesses after studying at the innovation labs. *"We were able to get a boy, who had been in a wheelchair since his legs were severed in 2006, into a course on innovation, design, and business skills. He was then able to get seed funding to buy a tuk-tuk so he can collect steel and scrap metal to sell. He has been so successful he is now financially independent and supports his whole family."*

The success of the innovation labs has led to a push to try and have them incorporated into high schools so that children as young as 16 can benefit from this integrated approach to education.

Australia Assists deployee Ebony Neil also took the youth program forward in Lebanon in her role as an Education Reporting Officer, with new and exciting ideas. One of these included targeting at-risk youth, and encouraging them to participate in recreational activities, particularly a 'Surf Day' that Ebony, herself a kite surfer, coordinated. This involved the participation

of 80 youth (40 girls and 40 boys) in learning valuable ocean awareness skills and participating in beach games. The initiative particularly aimed to build the skills and confidence of girls at risk of dropping out of school.

Health

For over 60 years, UNRWA has been delivering comprehensive primary health care services to Palestine refugees. Australia Assists deployee Julia McCahey was deployed to provide technical support to UNRWA's important research into health issues for Palestine refugees. In her role as a Health Resilience Officer, Julia focussed on building an evidence base for the organisation's work in health and dignity.

"To be treated like an adult and an equal and not be judged, some kids say it's given them confidence to stop things like drugs and smoking."

Sarah, Australia Assists deployee



Photo credit: Hiba Judeh, RedR Australia

The research will be used by the agency to take forward advocacy for securing essential, ongoing international support for this work, in a challenging funding context. The first paper Julia co-authored, called 'Health and dignity of Palestine refugees at stake: a need for international response to sustain crucial life services at UNRWA', has been peer reviewed and published in one of the world's leading health journals, the Lancet².

Julia also worked on a research paper about a family health program in Gaza. As Julia explained, *"the program provides online training, because of the access and security issues in Gaza, in family medicine for doctors."* She also worked on another paper on improving oral health.

Donor and Project Management

Several Australia Assists specialists were also deployed to UNRWA in 2018, to support the organisation in managing their funding challenges to ensure essential services for Palestine refugees continue. Australia Assists deployee Ebony also worked on a large, European Union funded education program in Lebanon, and secured its extension. The program seeks to integrate approximately 5,400 Palestine refugees from Syria into existing services in Lebanon. These services include schooling, protection, and psycho-social support, particularly targeting youth at risk of dropping out of the education system.

Another Australia Assists deployee, Greg Blaze, used his considerable engineering and project management expertise to improve procurement and logistics processes for large scale infrastructure projects across the West Bank field office sites of operations.

In Jordan, Australia Assists deployees, Angela Gill, Jason Power, and Jacqui Reeves worked with program teams to strengthen UNRWA's work in a variety of ways. This included Programme/Projects Analyst Jacqui helping to create a YouTube video that demonstrated how local staff can do their own self-assessments of the accessibility of important infrastructure such as schools and health clinics for people with disabilities. As UNRWA's Deputy Director of Operations explained, *"Our (project management) deployees have been a real resource, at a time when we really needed it."*

Going Forward

As UNRWA moves into a more stabilised phase, attracting new donors to the organisation, the support of RedR Australia and the Australia Assists program will adapt to fit the changing context. Learning from the experiences of a variety of previous deployments, this support will take a strategic approach, focusing on whole-of-agency roles, piloting innovation, and continuing to build in-house capacity to ensure that UNRWA can continue to provide essential services for Palestine refugees across the Middle East region.

Louise Mooney

Program Quality Advisor

"The program provides online training, because of the access and security issues in Gaza, in family medicine for doctors."

Julia, Australia Assists deployee



Australia Assists deployee, Julia McCahey, with UNRWA Director of Health, Dr Seita, and the research paper she co-authored which has been published in The Lancet. Photo credit: RedR Australia

2. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)32621-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)32621-7/fulltext)