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From Emergency Relief Assistance to Human Development and Back: UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees, 1950–2009

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Abstract

This article offers a critical review of the historical evolution of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the long-term impact it bore for Palestinian refugees. It draws on two major primary sources: UNRWA's records, mainly the annual reports of UNRWA Commissioners General from the year 1950 to the present, and findings from the socio-anthropological research that the author carried out in Dheisheh Refugee Camp in the 1990s. The article traces UNRWA's historical "re-orientation" from a relief-aid-centred to a social services-centred organization and evaluates the social consequences of the investment in education for second and third generation refugees of both genders in the countries and areas of refugee dispersal. Among other things, it explains how the education system that UNRWA developed contributed to the creation of an "educational advantage" for second generation refugees over their peers in the Arab World, which persisted for several decades, and how superior educational achievements facilitated the mass employment of Palestinian refugees in the professional labour markets of the region, particularly in the oil producing countries of the Gulf. Subsequently the article underscores the detrimental impact on UNRWA of inherent structural impediments and debilitating circumstances, primarily the continued dependence of the Agency on voluntary donations and the Agency's recurring engagement in emergency relief operations in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Lebanon. Together these factors rendered UNRWA's educational enterprise highly vulnerable and hampered its capacity to reproduce the "educational gap" in favour of Palestinian refugees.

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