

## **The emergency meeting of the Council of Educational Affairs for the Children of Palestine**

**Julia Dicum**

Thank you, Mr. Chair. Excellencies; Distinguished guests,

I would like to begin by thanking you for inviting me today to this emergency meeting to speak about a most urgent issue – the status of education in Gaza, UNRWA’s work, and our education response plan.

Prior to October 7, 2023, among UNRWA’s five fields of operation, our largest education effort was in Gaza, where we were providing basic education to nearly 300,000 students from grade 1 to 9 in 288 schools, and technical vocational education and training to over 1,800 youth in two vocational training centres. UNRWA was the second largest education provider in Gaza after the PA Ministry of Education. Our students’ learning outcomes in Gaza, as evidenced by a World Bank / UNHCR

study<sup>1</sup>, demonstrated an advantage of almost a year of learning compared to their peers in public schools in the host country.

UNRWA's education programme in Gaza already faced significant challenges. UNRWA schools suffered from damage and destruction. 71% of our 188 buildings in Gaza were operating on double shift and 70% of our classes had over 40 students to each teacher. Additionally, we faced an ongoing teacher shortage, chronic underfunding for more than a decade, and during the last three years prior to October, 2023, with COVID-19 and incursions of a shorter less destructive nature, our students had already faced severe interruptions to their learning.

Our students, as all children in Gaza, were suffering from high levels of trauma and distress, because of the 17 years of land, sea, and air blockade, the different escalations over the years, and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic, thus requiring significant and sustained mental health and psychosocial support services<sup>2</sup>. And although UNRWA students tested well compared

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank & UNHCR, 2023, The Global Cost of Inclusive Refugee Education.

<sup>2</sup> Trapped: The impact of 15 years of blockade on the mental health of Gaza's children, Save the Children, 2022

to their peers in host country schools, male students were producing lower learning results compared to girls, mirroring a worrying regional and international trend.

**Your Excellencies, since October 7, the right to education of 625,000 students in Gaza has been completely denied and the children of Gaza are even more deeply traumatized than they were before. Today, they spend their days scavenging in the rubble and waiting to collect water in blistering heat. They are at risk of violence and exploitation, including recruitment by armed groups.**

As of 30 July 2024, according to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education – State of Palestine, 9,211 students and 397 education staff members have been killed, while more than 14,237 students and 2,246 teachers have been injured. UNICEF's data in February shows that at least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated from their parents. This corresponds to 1% of the overall displaced population - 1.7 million people. In January, Save the Children

announced that more than 10 children a day were losing one or both of their legs on average. In June, doctors revealed that at least 3,000 children are new amputees, and more than 8,000 children have been diagnosed with malnutrition. Almost all of 1.2 million children are in need of mental health and psychosocial support. In the last week, the UN has announced that Polio has been found in wastewater monitoring and we are now planning an emergency vaccination campaign for children under ten and calling for an urgent humanitarian pause in hostilities to allow it to take place. Children have been exposed to multiple deadly threats to their lives due to the deteriorating health and protection conditions. They are wearing a tremendous share of the scars of this war.

**The massive attacks on schools are devastating. A total of 156 UNRWA school buildings, out of 183, have been damaged or destroyed.** As of July, the OPT Education Cluster was reporting that an estimated **93% of all school buildings** in Gaza need to be completely rebuilt or significantly reconstructed.

Over the first six weeks of the conflict, UNRWA worked with the OPT Education Cluster partners to develop an **Education in Emergencies Plan** aimed at addressing the impact of the conflict on the education system. But in the absence of a ceasefire and limited humanitarian access, it became clear to us that we had to think creatively to adapt to this unprecedented level of destruction. We have developed interchangeable “scenarios” under which we believe we can deepen attention to learning while strengthening psychosocial support and recreational activities to a frightened and distressed population of children and young people. We believe this approach will allow for a minimum of learning continuity in core subjects such as literacy, numeracy and science.

In the current scenario, and throughout the ongoing conflict, restrictions in the humanitarian space, continued forcible displacement, and among many other challenges have limited what we can achieve and yet we have persisted:

- More than 800 UNRWA school counsellors and assistant counsellors have been **providing psycho-social support services**, including individual and group counselling, Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) and recreational activities **to over 500,000 children** with the support of **recreational kits and supplies**.
- Two sets of **learning materials**, including Learn through Play materials and Semester 1 core curriculum subjects for grade 1-9 **have been prepared to be distributed to 462,000 children** together with individual **Back to Learning kits**. These materials have been designed to be done by children on their own or through facilitated groups led by teachers.
- **Informal learning has started as of the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, across all areas of Gaza in any available spaces within UNRWA schools**. The kick-start of the learning activities is implemented by 1,270 UNRWA teachers, education staff and the community around them, who have been asking for a resumption of learning as soon as possible. Today, more than 8,400 students are participating in learning activities

every day in 42 UNRWA shelters, and we aim to reach 28,000 students in the next phase starting 1<sup>st</sup> of September.

UNRWA is also prepared to expand our support and services as soon as the situation permits. As part of the second scenario, we plan to enhance the delivery and distribution of education supplies and expand the implementation of informal education in Temporary Learning Spaces (TLS). These two essential elements will aid in establishing more stable routines, sense of normalcy, and learning. It will also allow a greater number of children and adolescents to benefit from our interventions. At the same time, we will be able to provide more Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), including more specialized services, for those in more need of support.

Once hostilities cease, there will be predictable stability in at least certain areas of the Gaza strip, UNRWA will be able to support rebuilding the education system, starting with enhanced MHPSS and providing learning activities in the Temporary

Learning Spaces, and then gradually transitioning to more formal structures, among other improvements. In this scenario, we will work with partners in identifying the best way to recover learning loss, to support the transition back to formal education, including the repair and rebuilding of school infrastructure, but also addressing the children and adolescents needs in other aspects such as health, protection, and nutrition.

Our priority today is to work with all education partners in Gaza to bring **all children back to learning as soon as possible**. But to do so, we need a significant improvement in humanitarian access to the Gaza Strip, one that includes allowing the entry of psychosocial kits, learning materials, and basic school supplies. We've been able to do what we're doing so far because in Gaza we have committed, well-trained school counselors, assistant counselors, teachers, and school principals. They are using all of their creativity to make the best use of whatever is available to them, but to maintain what is happening now and build on it, we need to be able to replenish their supplies. To get us there,



UNRWA is working with key regional partners and global education leaders – and all members of the OPT Education Cluster including the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

Let me take this opportunity to call on each one of you to work together to support UNRWA and the OPT Education Cluster members working to support the children of Gaza **in resuming learning and in ensuring the right to education in Gaza is not forgotten** in no small part because more than half the population of Gaza is under 18. We have a commitment as UN member states to secure the conditions needed for all children in Gaza to go back to education and to avoid a lost generation.

I want to pause here to acknowledge particularly the support and partnership of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education of the Palestinian Authority both in Ramallah and in Gaza, and especially that of Minister Barham and his deputy ministers. Because of their collaboration and work within the Cluster,

UNRWA and the Ministry - the two key providers of education - have very similar response plans and have agreed that for now all children in our respective shelters - regardless of their status as refugees or not - are welcome to join activities being held for them. Of all the distress in this time, this is the time to come together for the sake of the children and we have effectively done that. I hope that this relationship will only strengthen as we move forward in our efforts to reinstate education in Gaza.

Thank you.