

**Accountability for Services
to Palestinian Refugees:
A View on UNRWA's Work
in the West Bank**

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Abstract

This paper focuses on UNRWA's role as the key provider of services to Palestinian refugees. Our research question is centred on whether, and through which mechanisms, UNRWA is made accountable to its refugee beneficiaries. Accountability here is problematized by the coexistence, in the Agency, of a quasi-governmental role in service provision, and a donor-funded structure of financing: this might induce orientation to prioritize the needs of Western donors, over those of refugee recipients. As we will state here, UNRWA's accountability is hampered by several roadblocks: the long route, connecting recipients to providers through policymakers, is blocked by flawed information of refugees on the Agency, and by low motivation of the provider towards orientation to beneficiaries. The short route, directly linking recipients to providers, is inhibited by refugees' low power of opting out of UNRWA, and by lacking participation of recipients to decision making. However, we submit that UNRWA can do much to overcome these roadblocks, as it can count on an educated and politically aware pool of beneficiaries, that the Agency itself – through its sharp focus on education over sixty years – was instrumental in creating. Drawing on a refugees' perspective on UNRWA's services, as derived from fieldwork in refugee camps, we propose a set of suggestions to be considered, for the purpose of maximizing the Agency's accountability to its recipients.

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1. Introduction

Originated as far as 1948, with the creation of the state of Israel and the massive human displacement that followed, the issue of Palestinian refugees is still in search of a durable solution. Viewed from the perspective of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Palestinian case is a *sui generis one*: Palestinian refugees, indeed, cannot effect repatriation due to the presence of a hostile national power, rather than out of unwillingness to return to their homeland. As such, the three main solutions devised by UNHCR – i.e. voluntary repatriation, second country absorption, and third country resettlement – are all hardly practicable in this case: the first one is denied by the Israeli government, whereas the other ones clash against the Palestinian sixty-year-old plight for return (Kagan 2009).

The problem, which pertains to the biggest refugee population in the world, has been faced by numerous scholars in its juridical aspects (Akram 2002, Akram and Rempel 2004, Fischbach 2002, Kagan 2009, Shiblak 1996, Zureik 1994). The peculiarity of Palestinian refugees lies in the fact that their plight has been subtracted to the domain of UNHCR: for their protection, indeed, an *ad hoc* UN agency has been created, the only one that focuses on a specific refugee problem in a geographically limited area. This is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA): instituted in 1949, the Agency was conceived for the purpose of emergency relief, for those who had been displaced by the Arab-Israeli war. Yet, the temporary nature of UNRWA's mandate, formally conserved by renewal of the mandate itself on a three-year basis, is questionable on the ground of facts, given that the Agency has been assisting Palestinian refugees for more than sixty years.

UNRWA assists, to the present day, refugee beneficiaries in five fields: the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, i.e. the countries of destination of the large majority of refugee people in 1948. All those who descend from the latter, and who satisfy the need requirement for being served, are eligible to UNRWA's services: as such, the Agency now serves a population of more than 4.7 million, spread over its five areas of operations. The Agency's power is limited, on the one hand, as its mandate does not pertain to effecting the

right of return: on the other hand, the mandate focuses sharply on the delivery of services, for refugees to enjoy service provision as the normal citizens of a state.

This paper focuses on just one of UNRWA's five fields of operations: namely the West Bank, a location where the problems of refugees are coupled with the roadblocks to development induced by Israeli occupation. The paper looks at UNRWA in its key, quasi-governmental role as a service provider: as such, we focus on the accountability of the Agency to refugees, through adaptation of the standard approach of institutional development theory (North 1990, Olson 1997). As such, our research question focuses on the extent to which UNRWA is accountable to its refugee beneficiaries, where *accountability* is intended as the capacity of a principal to exercise decisional leverage on a designated agent (Brett 2003).

The theoretical motivation for focusing on accountability lies in the fact that UNRWA, notwithstanding its quasi-governmental behavior in service provision to refugees, is not a state government indeed: as such, it is not funded through taxpayers, but through the voluntary contributions of foreign donors. As a result, the feedback ring between recipients and providers that government provision involves is broken, because those who pay for services are not the same as those who actually benefit from service delivery. Therefore, downward accountability to recipients may be critical, because a financial incentive is there for UNRWA to operate in a donor-oriented way. Which mechanisms are there for fostering downward accountability in this particular context?

The key finding here is that accountability of the Agency to beneficiaries is flawed in several respects. The long route of accountability, connecting recipients to providers through the mediation of policymakers, is blocked by flawed information of refugees on the Agency, and by low motivation of the provider towards orientation to beneficiaries. The short route, directly linking recipients to providers, is inhibited by low power of opting out of UNRWA, and by lacking participation of beneficiaries to decision making. Yet, we submit that there is much that UNRWA can do to change the situation on field, as it can count on an educated and politically aware pool of beneficiaries: their perspective on UNRWA's services, as derived from fieldwork in refugee camps, has uncovered a set of suggestions to be considered, for the purpose of maximizing the Agency's accountability to them.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2, having described the geopolitical context provided by the West Bank, outlines the Palestinian refugee problem, and states our theoretical justification for facing it from the angle of accountability. Section 3 focuses on methodology, which is mainly grounded on direct interaction with the actors of the service delivery process. Section 4 deals with refugee camp life in the West Bank, and moves on to consider the way in which UNRWA's system of services is inscribed in it. Section 5, the core of the paper, is devoted to analysis: accountability mechanisms available to refugees are assessed, and solutions to overcome the inherent problems are devised on the basis of refugees' feedback. Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature review

In order to analyze UNRWA's service provision to refugees in the West Bank, we need to have a firm grasp of the economic and legal environment in which a system for service delivery has been deployed. In this section, having looked at the geopolitical context of the West Bank, we focus on the issue of Palestinian refugees, as it has developed from 1948 onwards. We then give a theoretical justification for considering the problem under the perspective of the Agency's accountability to its refugee beneficiaries.

2.1. OPT: the uniqueness of de-development

Our study has been conducted in the West Bank, which, along with the Gaza Strip, is part of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT); since the war and subsequent occupation in 1967, these areas have been subjected to the military rule of Israel. From a development perspective, the impact of occupation is powerfully synthesized by UNDP (2010): occupation is, indeed, "overpowering and intrusive" (UNDP 2010: 14), as it influences virtually every side of Palestinian economy and daily life. The current phenomenology of occupation, indeed, limits the decisional power of the Palestinians under a plethora of aspects: a policy that is anti-

developmental in character, if we consider that the purpose of human development is, by definition, that of “enlarging people’s choices”.²

Israeli control over the OPT has been translated, for more than 40 years, in a set of policies of dispossession and hetero-direction, which are focused primarily on the productive factors in Palestine. The confiscation of new land beyond the “green line”, established in 1967, is systematic: from 1993 to 2000, more and more portions of Palestinian land have been destined to settlement expansion, and the number of settlers has nearly doubled (Roy 2001: 10). Similarly, Palestinian water supplies are constantly diverted to Israel: indeed, 80% of the West Bank water supply is appropriated by settlements (UNESCO, cited in Qato 2004: 348).

Human capital, the key factor in the formation and good maintenance of an economy, is systematically prevented from moving freely, due to the system of checkpoints and closures that Israel has set up in the name of security. As a result, even labour is paralyzed: in the first ten months of 2008, 15650 working hours have been lost by Palestinians at checkpoints in the West Bank (UNRWA 2009: 9), while new legal arrangements, coined under the second Intifada, make the Israeli job market *de facto* inaccessible to the Palestinian workforce, by limiting entry into Israel to exceptional emergency cases. Forced integration with the Israeli economy, carried out primarily by control on borders and trade, has rendered the OPT market a dependent extension of the Israeli one (Arnon et al. 1997, Diwan and Ali-Shaban 1999), while the obliged use of the Israeli currency makes the OPT extremely vulnerable to economic shocks in Israel (UNDP 2010: 94).

The Oslo process, started in 1993 for the purpose of enduring peace, had brought a general sense of confidence in a positive solution to the issue. But the transfer of key powers of control and administration, from Israel to the newly-created Palestinian Authority (PA), has not turned into reality, especially within the main sectors in human and economic development. The control of water supplies, rather than being scaled down to the PA, has remained firmly in the hands of the Israeli authority (Selby 2003); decision-making and implementation in healthcare management rests with the occupying power (Qato 2004); the continued military control of borders makes it difficult to encourage foreign investment and implement aid-related projects (Khouri 1999). As a result, the Palestinian economy has

² <http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/>, accessed 16th September 2010.

experienced further damage after Oslo: GDP per capita in the OPT has declined by 20%; consumption has dropped by 15%; unemployment rates among the Palestinians have tripled (Bocco 2009: 241).

Therefore, the socioeconomic crisis that, starting from 2000, has marked an impressive spike in the poverty rate in the OPT (UNDP 2007), has aggravated an already critical situation. As of UNRWA (2007), the crisis is directly related to Israeli restrictions on people and goods mobility: these limitations impede, indeed, both the birth of employment-generating businesses in Palestine, and the access to job opportunities in the Israeli economy. The crisis has been partially coped with by massive influxes of foreign aid, as the OPT, in 1993-2008 UNDP estimates, has been one of the major recipients of aid per capita at the global level (UNDP 2010: 77): yet, to say that with the UNDP, a “poverty of insufficiency” is merely replaced by a “poverty of disempowerment”, which prevents people from generating the very resources for sustaining themselves. Until mobility restrictions remain there, the Palestinian economy will need to rely on external supplies, substituting internal capability of economic empowerment with aid dependency (UNRWA 2007: 4).

Scholars and analysts of the Palestinian economy, over time, have devised several paradigms to frame the problems originated by Israeli control of the OPT. Analysis in the Palestinian Human Development Report (2004) is grounded on the concept of development as empowerment: having observed the Palestinian case through the Human Development Index (HDI), the report argued that traditional development indicators are not suitable for the OPT, as the methodic nature of Israeli intervention configures a unique situation, that cannot be grasped by standard parameters of analysis (UNDP/PAPP 2004: 40). As such, in the report, development indicators and the definition of empowerment have been adapted to the OPT, on the basis of a paradigm that adds normal, endogenous components of underdevelopment to the exogenous components induced by occupation. In the 2010 edition of the report, the focus has been shifted from empowerment to human security: UNDP recognizes, indeed, that it is “security concerns” that dictate pressing, impoverishing restrictions to mobility in the OPT. Hence, the report reframes the concept of security, by moving it from the state-centric vision of Israel to a perspective that

is human-centric and collective: this is, according to UNDP, the only way to envision a future in which Israel and Palestine can live side by side (UNDP 2010: 20-21.)

The dependency paradigm, in which a developed core systematically exploits the resources of an underdeveloped periphery, is discussed by Rosenfeld (2004) with reference to the Palestinian case. On the one hand, the paradigm seems to mirror all the elements of the relation between Israel and the OPT: systematic appropriation policies; benefits extracted from dispossession by the dominant power; long-term negative consequences for the occupied (Rosenfeld 2004: 8). Yet, this paradigm turns out to be unsuitable for the OPT, because it entails a passive attitude of the periphery – which is necessary, for the self-perpetuation of domination – to which the Palestinian case does not conform. On the contrary, the capacity of resistance is one of the distinguishing elements of Palestine: organizational capabilities under military pressure; the systematic use of entrepreneurship for emancipation (Dick 1988); the reaching of high educational attainments for state-building (Assaf 1997), are elements that a nation in the standard periphery does not have.

Sarah Roy (2001, 1999, 1987) is the scholar that, in our view, has given the most determinant contribution to economic analysis of the Israel-OPT situation. Her work (1987: 57-58) adds one reason for not using the dependency paradigm in this respect: indeed, the OPT miss two requisites that distinguish dependent development, namely the capacity of the periphery to industrialize and the presence of interaction between the leading elites of the two powers. In the place of dependency, Roy has coined the concept of *de-development*: which is, by definition, “a process that undermines the ability of an economy to grow [...] by preventing it from accessing or using its critical inputs” (Roy 1987: 56). The systematic dispossession of factors of production; the paralyzing integration of the OPT economy with that of Israel; the deinstitutionalization process carried out in the sovrastructure are the three key components of the de-development inflicted by Israel to the OPT (Roy 1999: 68).

As of UNDP (2010: 54), Oslo has institutionalized, rather than removing, movement restrictions in the OPT. Indeed, as of Roy (2001, 1999), de-development after Oslo has accelerated: the pre-existing structures of domination have been coupled, with Oslo, with new structures, predominantly closure, which is the “defining feature” of the process itself. Closure implies the sealing off of Palestinian territories from Israel, from other countries and from each

other: this institution has marked, indeed, a spike in the OPT poverty rates. To conclude, it is worth to note that the second Intifada stems, in Roy's analysis, directly from closure, as a consequence of the frustration accumulated through its deleterious effects on people's lives (Roy 2001).

The concept of de-development, coined in 1987 with reference to the Gaza strip, suits well the after-Oslo condition of the West Bank: indeed, as we have mentioned above, closure is the root of the economic paralysis that this land has witnessed (UNRWA 2007: 4). This condition, namely de-development in a context of widespread poverty and disillusionment, deeply afflicts the West Bank, which is the geopolitical context of our study. It is, indeed, in this already problematic context that we come to terms with the long-lasting problem of Palestinian refugees.

2.2. Palestinian refugees and UNRWA

UN resolution no. 181 (II) of 29th November 1947, which recommended the partition of British mandate Palestine in two states, one Arab and one Jewish, was rejected by both the Palestinians and the UN Arab member states. May 14th, the date fixed for the withdrawal of English troops from the region, coincided with the creation of the state of Israel, and marked the rise of hostilities between the new state and the armed forces of neighboring Arab nations. As a result of the 1948 war, a massive amount – more than 700000 – of Palestinians have been displaced: this, in effect, contradicts the Israeli predicament, which identified mandate Palestine with “a land without people for a people without a land” (Bocco 2009: 229). As hostilities finished, the humanitarian catastrophe of refugees urgently demanded international intervention, and the UN initiated early recovery operations through the *ad hoc* creation of two new agencies.

UNRWA, whose operations started on 1st January 1950, was endowed with a predominantly humanitarian responsibility: it was about carrying out emergency relief operations for Palestinian refugees, and implementing public works programmes aimed at economic and social reintegration. The Agency's mandate excluded, instead, the responsibility for finding a long-lasting solution to the conflict: this task rested with the United Nations

Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), that was coined for the purpose of enacting refugee return and/or compensation. UNRWA was created as a temporary agency and, potentially for this very reason, it was endowed with a frail and peculiar funding scheme: it depends, almost entirely, from the voluntary contributions of international donors.³

Yet, to the present date, the problem of Palestinian refugees has not been solved, and the mandate of UNRWA – which maintained its temporary nature – has been renewed on a 3-year basis. The nature of the mandate, after 60 years, remains in the domain of humanitarianism; yet, over time, the Agency has realized that a longer-term “development approach” is necessary, given the difficulty of envisioning a long-lasting solution to the issue on the short run (Al-Husseini 2000). This development approach is grounded primarily on a shift of the Agency’s focus, from relief to education and employment opportunities (Rosenfeld 2009): with this, the Agency aims to endow refugees with the means for sustaining their own livelihoods, rather than with a short-term fix out of emergency.

The passage from relief operations on the short run to a longer-term development approach has been registered in several aspects of UNRWA’s work on the ground. Firstly, refugee camp structure has been ameliorated, as refugee camps have shifted from temporary shelters to permanent places of residence (Rueff and Viairo 2009). Secondly, a large share of the Agency’s budget has moved from early recovery to work-oriented education, through the building of schools and the creation of Vocational and Technical Training Centres (VTTCs) imparting market-related skills. Third, primary relief assistance has turned into a very complete system of services for registered refugees: as of now, the Agency’s service provision covers the five broad areas of education, health, social services, microfinance and infrastructure.⁴

According to the UNRWA’s operational definition, for the purpose of entitlement to the Agency’s services, refugees are all the people “whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict”.⁵ This definition, while including the descendents of

³ As of Bartholomeusz (2009: 454), UNRWA’s operations are completely donor-funded, with the exception of some 119 international staff posts: these are financed by the General Assembly through assessed contributions.

⁴ <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=18>, accessed 16th September 2010.

⁵ <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=86>, accessed 16th September 2010.

those who meet it in person, excludes the “not needy” refugees; moreover, it does not formally take into account the very numerous people that have been displaced as a result of the 1967 war and subsequent hostilities. Also, the application of UNRWA’s operational definition involved a “gender bias” (Cervenak 1994): indeed, refugee women could not transmit their status to their partner and children, whereas transmission occurred automatically in the case of male refugees. As of Bartholomeusz (2009: 459-460), both problems have now been solved: the gender bias has been corrected and assistance has been guaranteed, “where applicable”, to the more than 300000 people who were displaced during or after the Six-Day War.

UNRWA’s area of operations covers five fields: namely the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Entitlement to its services is excluded, on the contrary, for the 1948 refugees that moved outside these areas, such as the quite numerous group whose country of post-war exile was Egypt. On the legal side, refugees outside the Agency’s fields are protected under the wider mandate of UNHCR: diversely, on the side of services, these refugees need to resort to local governments in the host nations.

The condition of refugees in the sphere of law and rights is powerfully synthesized by Kagan (2009). Given the lack of a Palestinian sovereign state, and the diaspora of displaced 1948 refugees over several countries, refugees need legal protection to be guaranteed in three respects. First, they need a long-lasting solution to the issue originated with displacement; second, they need to be entitled to the services that, in normal conditions, are provided by national governments; third, they should be guaranteed protection in the field of individual rights.

The first domain – the search of a long-lasting solution – does not belong to UNRWA’s mandate. It was, as we have mentioned above, integral part of the original mandate of UNCCP: however, as of Fischbach (2002), that agency has been progressively deprived of the solution-related mission, as its role has been reduced to evaluating Arab-owned land in Israel. Hence, as of Akram (2002), refugees are left with what UNRWA can provide: as stated in an internal memorial (UNRWA 2008a: 3), the power of the Agency in this area is limited; yet, having worked for refugees for 60 years, it is “uniquely placed to highlight the need” at the international level. To be sure, Israel has little intention to fulfill the recommendations of

Resolution 194, pertaining to repatriation and/or compensation: refusing responsibility for the problem of refugees, it will only accept participation to a compensation fund “on humanitarian grounds” (Peters and Gal 2009: 592), and any contribution would be conditional to the compensation for lands lost by Jews in Arab countries (Zureik 1994: 13).

The second domain – quasi-governmental services to refugees – is the core of UNRWA’s mandate, and the Agency responds to it through the aforementioned system of services, carried out throughout its five fields of operations. Yet, the third domain – the protection of individual rights – is, again, external to the Agency: furthermore, in the case in point, is also external to UNHCR, which only covers for Palestinian refugees in the countries where UNRWA does not operate. As such, Akram (2002) identifies a “legal lacuna” with respect to individual rights, which makes refugees very vulnerable to those civil rights violations, such as arbitrary arrests and detention, which are integral part of Israeli control of the OPT (Qato 2004; DCI 2007). This situation, as far as the West Bank is concerned, makes the “human security” paradigm devised by UNDP (2010) particularly suitable for analyzing the situation.

Our case study focuses on the situation of Palestinian refugees in the West Bank. This specification is important because, as predictable, the context provided by the host country has a deep impact on the condition of refugee communities living inside it (Cook 1992: 271). Host country situations, in UNRWA’s area of operations, range from the better-off position of refugees in Jordan, who are entitled to Jordanian citizenship on a normal basis, to the much worse-off setting of Lebanon, where refugees have virtually no civil rights, and are looked and treated with hostility by the national government (El Sayed-Ali 2006; Shiblak 1996). In the West Bank, where, according to the most recent estimates, 778993 Palestinian refugees are currently registered with UNRWA (the 16.3% of the total – UNRWA 2010a), the problem pertaining to the refugee condition is coupled with the issue of de-development, that afflicts the OPT and the quality of life of its people. As such, the combination of de-development and refugee status puts severe strain over West Bank refugees, and our study is meant to come to terms with the critical context that this combination provides.

2.3. Theoretical foundations: UNRWA's accountability for services

Our objective is that of looking at UNRWA's role as the main service provider, which caters to Palestinian refugees in the Agency's fields of operation: focusing on the West Bank, we aim to assess the extent to which UNRWA is accountable to its registered refugees. It is necessary, as we move on to analysis, to define *accountability* in the context of our research. Adopting a standard principal-agent approach, which is implicit in the perspective of the institutional theory of development (North 1990; Olson 1997), we conceptualize service providers as *agents*, to whom a given *principal* – in this case, the refugee community – delegates a set of tasks to be fulfilled in its own interest. As such, we adopt the conceptualization of Brett (2003), where accountability is identified with the *leverage* exercised by the principal over the agent: that is, the extent to which the principal, through a set of positive and negative incentives, can actually direct the agent's behavior towards satisfaction of its own needs.

According to the model devised by the World Bank (2004), which we will use as a conceptual framework in this paper, accountability for service provision may be obtained through two different channels, which are illustrated in figure 1 below. In the *long route* of accountability, citizens voice their needs to the state: in turn, government policymakers inform the behavior of providers, through a set of rewards and sanctions codified in compacts. Diversely, in the *short route* of accountability, citizens directly inform the behavior of providers: this happens through client power, which is exercised either through the citizens' threat of exit from the system, or through participation, which enables the citizens to actually intervene in service provision. If the long route follows the feedback mechanism that normally pertains to the state, i.e. citizens' voice influencing providers through the mediation of executive policies, the short route, as far as potential exit is concerned, refers to the market, where competition between service providers makes it virtually possible to choose among them.

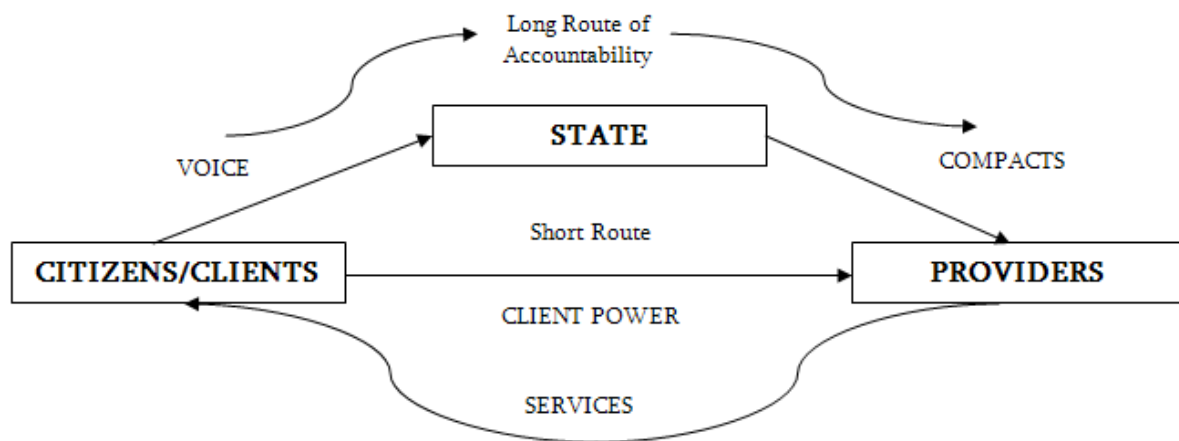


Fig. 1: Routes of accountability in service provision
 Source: adapted from World Bank (2004: 49)

The World Bank (2004) model, elaborated for assessing service provision to the global poor, is relevant to our work on UNRWA under three more aspects. First, the model is grounded on the assumption that service provision is carried out entirely, or almost entirely, by national governments: it is, indeed, the government that has responsibility for human development outcomes among its citizens. Secondly, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that engage in service provision are not subjected to the same incentives of governments: indeed, given the donor-funded nature of NGOs, these organizations may shift away from accountability to recipients, privileging accountability to the donors that finance them. Third, policymakers and providers need to be conceived as two separate fields of analysis, due to the different nature – policy elaboration versus actual service delivery – of the tasks that are ascribed to them.

The reason why these points are relevant here is that, in each of these three respects, refugee camps in the OPT represent a case study that deviates from the theory behind the standard model. Firstly, the model assumes, even in the most underdeveloped nations, the existence of a government in charge of service delivery: yet, this is not the case for the OPT, where the PA only has limited administration powers and no national sovereignty.⁶ To be sure,

⁶ As of Selby (2003), the creation of the PA was one of the significant changes in Israeli-Palestinian relations that the Oslo process has brought about. Yet, the PA's power in terms of legislation, policing, and administration of the territory are still very limited, if we think that, *de facto*, it is the Israel Defence Army (IDF) that decides whether the Palestinian Legislative Council convenes or not (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, cited in UNDP 2010: 47). Israeli domination, as such, deeply affects the capacity of control of the PA, and determines land's fragmentation in three fields according to degree of power of the Israeli authority (see note 7).

the same condition holds for refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon: despite the presence of sovereign governments in these settings, Palestinian refugees are entitled to service provision primarily under UNRWA, and only secondarily – if at all – under national authorities. Hence, in our case study, not a state government, but UNRWA is responsible for good outcomes in service delivery: this is the quasi-governmental role to which several scholars refer with respect to the Agency (Al-Husseini 2000; Cervenak 2004; Farah 2009).

Secondly, despite UNRWA's quasi-governmental task in service provision, the Agency is not financed through taxpayers but through voluntary contributions, like most NGOs. Hence, the Agency needs to be examined under the perspective of accountability to recipients, because its funding scheme entails an incentive to conform to the will of donors, rather than that of beneficiaries (Najam 1996; Ebrahim 2003; Edwards and Hulme 1996). The organization, in effect, subsumes in itself a role that is government-like – i.e. providing services to the population of registered refugees – and a funding scheme that is NGO-like – where the client-provider feedback ring is broken, because those who pay for the services are not those who actually receive them.

Third, as we apply the pattern in figure 1 to UNRWA and registered refugees, the “policymakers” are identified with the executives of UNRWA, while the role of providers is played by the on-field bodies of the Agency itself. Hence, institutional proximity between policymakers and providers is higher than assumed by the World Bank model, because the two roles are played by bodies that are linked through internal hierarchy in the same institution. As a result, communication between policymakers and providers in this case passes through the formal channels of the Agency, and is therefore enabled more easily than elsewhere.

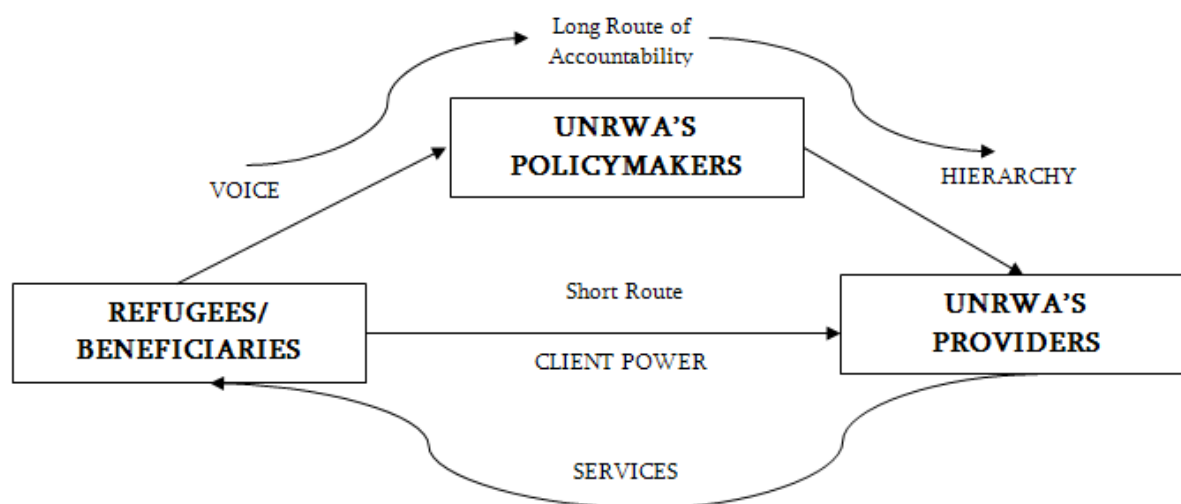


Fig.2: Routes of accountability – UNRWA’s framework
Source: the author

These three points, which are represented through the scheme in figure 2, mark three departures of UNRWA’s pattern of service provision from the standard World Bank model. As such, the case of UNRWA and Palestinian refugees is a *sui generis* one in service provision: this makes it important to look at it, to verify whether routes to accountability may work even under its peculiar setting. Furthermore, the similarity of UNRWA to a solidaristic organization, financed by donors that do not benefit from delivery of its services, provides the theoretical justification for looking at the Agency in terms of downward accountability to beneficiaries.

3. Methodology

Research work for this paper has been led primarily through fieldwork in Aida refugee camp, which is located in the West Bank between Beit Jala and Bethlehem. Semi-structured interviews have focused on UNRWA service provision to camp-based refugees, whereas participant observation has been facilitated by actually living inside the camp during the study. Primary research in Aida camp has been integrated by two complements: firstly, interviews have been conducted in several relevant fields, such as UNRWA posts and other refugee camps located elsewhere across the West Bank. Secondly, internal monitors, press reviews, and official

publications of UNRWA have been collected and analyzed, in order to facilitate the contextualization of fieldwork and the interpretation of research results. The integration of these three streams of knowledge has allowed us to gain a clear picture of UNRWA's service provision in the West Bank, in order to analyze our on-field research findings through the aforementioned accountability paradigm.

Interviews have been led with all the three actors in the system of services. Refugees have been interviewed inside the camps, whereas a policymakers' perspective was accessed through the spokesperson of the UNRWA field office for the West Bank in Jerusalem. UNRWA frontline providers, by contrast, have been interviewed both in registered camps and in the urban settings of Bethlehem and Nablus. It is worth to recall, here, that the study focuses on accountability of UNRWA to refugees *located in the West Bank*: as such, it would be problematic to extend our findings to the remaining four UNRWA fields, which makes it even more important to carry out separated accountability assessments for these settings.

The five camps we have worked in – namely Aida, Dheisheh and Ein-el-Sultan in the Bethlehem area; Balata and Jenin in the northern area of Nablus – provide a quite comprehensive account of the polymorphous conditions of the camps across the field. Yet, one limitation implicit in fieldwork lies in the fact that, due to the dynamics of disillusionment that we have discussed in paragraph 2.1., several refugees showed reluctance towards cooperation, due to a distrust directed to the foreign people operating inside the camps. Hence, fieldwork has entailed a continuous learning process in the direct interaction with refugee respondents: this, coupled with the proactive help of our local peers, has helped us overcoming first-glance suspicion and communication problems. Another potential limitation, relating to the better-off situation of our main research field – Aida camp – with respect to the West Bank average, has been tackled by the aforementioned extension of the study, to four more UNRWA refugee camp settings.

4. Case study

As we look at UNRWA's accountability for services to refugees in the West Bank, the dynamics and outcomes of service provision in refugee camps need to be examined. Fieldwork, integrated

by the analysis of secondary sources, has given us a global picture on this: such picture is provided in this section, focusing firstly on the recipient side – features of daily life in refugee camps – and secondly on the supply side – UNRWA’s system of services to refugees. The analysis of accountability mechanisms linking the two sides will be grounded on the insights reported here.

4.1. Refugee camp life in the West Bank

Life in Palestinian refugee camps, in the already *per se* problematic context of the West Bank, is significantly different from life in urban settings. Dissimilarity with towns firstly appears in the physical aspect of the camps, even now that permanent home structures have substituted the provisional shelter arrangements of the first years. To start with, roads are considerably narrower, due to the very high concentration of living spaces: this, in turn, is due to the combination between demographic growth (2.1% among West Bank refugees in 2008 – UNRWA 2010a) and the impossibility of expanding camp lands, that have been leased to UNRWA by the Jordanian government. In situations of extreme overcrowding, of which Balata camp constitutes the most dramatic example,⁷ buildings are often modified in order to accommodate more people: house modification involves the addition of floors, and the construction of small bridges between buildings. UNRWA releases permits for house expansion, but does not directly supervise building activity: the general impression, as a result, is that of precarious and unsafe buildings, even as refugee camps are not included in scheduled urban masterplans (Rueff and Viairo 2009).

If overcrowding is a problem at the camp level, it presents several issues at the single-home level too. In-house overcrowding, leading to a high number of people sharing the same room, is remarkably conducive to the spread of diseases: medical studies from Al-Khatib et al. (2003) and Habib et al. (2006) prove the presence of direct correlation, in Palestinian refugee camps, between poor housing conditions and illnesses. Lack of ventilation and clean air, primarily resulting from in-house overcrowding, lead to diseases of the respiratory tract; the

⁷ Balata camp land only amounts to 0.25 square kilometers, and it is home to around 23600 registered refugees. See <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=109>, accessed 16th September 2010.

formation of moulds due to humidity is a worrying vehicle of infection. Furthermore, due to inter-house proximity and subtle walls, privacy settings are almost non-existent, which deprives refugee homes of the value of “border between public and private domain” that belongs to the house in Arab culture (Rueff and Viairo 2009: 340). Problems pertaining to lack of privacy and internal overcrowding lead to stressful conditions of living: as of Al-Khatib et al. (2005), these impact especially women refugees, which spend a significantly higher share of time inside their houses relatively to men.

It must be noted, here, that refugees registered with UNRWA are not necessarily accommodated in refugee camps: in 2009, only 25,4% of refugees lived there (UNRWA 2010a). Movement of people from outside to camps, and vice versa, is constant: people move to camps due to the lower cost of housing, and leave in order to seek more comfortable accommodation, which also abates the cost of commuting to the workplace. These movements are not a problem with respect to entitlements under UNRWA, as refugees, once registered, maintain their status in any place within the Agency’s area of operation. The main reason that pushed UNRWA to create a computerized database of refugees is, indeed, the need to keep track of the movements of refugees, so that status maintenance is ensured in every area.

Water scarcity induced by Israel is systematic, even in West Bank area A, which should be placed under the total control of the Palestinian authority.⁸ This is because, despite the very good performance of the Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) in terms of efficiency (UNDP 2010: 93), the actual supply of water is in the hands of the Israeli Water Authority, which has total discretionary power on service provision (Selby 2003): as such, water may be lacking in the camps for entire weeks – or months. To procure water for household use, people often need to resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as resorting to alternative sources that may be contaminated (Stefanini and Ziv 2004); indeed, very few families have the purchasing power necessary to afford private tankers. Water scarcity is one of the factors that impact refugee life most severely: in several camps, for long periods, UNRWA’s food rations could not be turned

⁸ The Oslo accords have institutionalized the division of the West Bank in three areas, based on extension of Israeli domination. As a result, area A is *de jure* administered by the PA; area B is controlled by the PA in the sole domain of civilian issues; area C, by contrast, remains under full Israeli control.

into consumption, as they consisted predominantly of flour – which needs water for food to be made.

Food consumption, in refugee families, is characterized by high homogeneity: if, at the beginning of UNRWA's operations, this was due to the high dependency on standard UNRWA's rations, now it is Israeli control on imports, coupled with the prohibitive prices of a set of fresh food items, that make it very hard for household to diversify. Furthermore, the recent poverty crisis – that has impacted the OPT as a whole – has impacted refugee consumption severely: a survey presented by UNRWA (2008a: 4) shows that, as a result of the crisis, Palestinian refugees eat less (75%) and sacrifice food quality (89%). Lack of variety in food consumption leads to malnutrition in the refugee population, which in turns leads to widespread diseases such as anemia and asthenia: fresh food, the most relevant one to fight these diseases, is produced almost totally abroad, which makes it very costly on average (UNRWA 2008: 3) and the first one to be eliminated from the consumption basket when purchasing power shrinks.

Weak purchasing power is, of course, related to very high unemployment rates among refugees: in Aida Camp, overall unemployment reaches 43%.⁹ Refugees are, indeed, subjected to de-development in the OPT: local business development is systematically impeded by closure, whereas restrictions of movement deny people access to jobs in Israel. Thanks to the capillary work of UNRWA, in this respect, the educational attainments of refugees are normally higher than those of their non-refugee counterparts (Rosenfeld 2009): yet, the critical situation in the OPT makes it difficult to actually transfer such skills to the job market. Business opportunities in the camps, relating to the micro-commercial sector, are extremely reduced: hence, many people need to commute daily for work outside (Rosenfeld 2004), and as a result, a high amount of working hours is lost at checkpoints (UNRWA 2009: 9).

Precarious homestays, overcrowded houses, water scarcity, a fixed food basket – coupled with unemployment-induced inability of households to increase their own purchasing power – portray, in the microcosm of refugee camps, the phenomenology of the “poverty of disempowerment” that we have referred to in paragraph 2.1. Therefore, the challenge of

⁹ <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=104>, accessed 16th September 2010.

UNRWA, as the key provider of basic-need services to the refugee population, is multifaceted, and calls for a holistic vision that addresses all the dimensions of refugees' pauperization. As such, a systemic approach has been adopted by the Agency, as a consequence of its shift from relief to long-term development: the features of this approach, and its inherent dichotomy between universal and targeted services, will now be analyzed with relation to the West Bank.

4.2. UNRWA: the system of services

As we have seen above, UNRWA's task as a service provider is faced with many simultaneous challenges, related to the multiple needs of refugee beneficiaries. The main discrimination to be drawn, when looking at the Agency's global system of action, is between *universal* services – provided to all registered refugees – and *targeted* ones, reserved to those below the poverty line. In the previous formulation of the Agency's programme, poorer refugees were served as Special Hardship Cases (SHCs), on a status-based determination of general economic malaise: a recent reform has marked, instead, a shift to the Social Safety Net (SSN), a poverty-based approach that determines eligibility through field- and household- specific poverty lines. As a result, relief services oriented to satisfying basic needs are only available to those families that meet specific poverty requirements.

The Agency's choice of establishing stricter criteria, for eligibility to relief services, has been motivated by Ilona Kassissieh, UNRWA's communication officer for the West Bank:

Our purpose is that of serving, as a priority, those at the bottom of the pyramid. In order to do so, we firstly needed to identify clearly who the poor are, which we did through specific poverty lines that substituted the criteria of SHC. The reform [shifting from SHC to SSN] has implied a reduction in the number of served people, but thanks to it, we can identify the poor more readily, and focus our limited resources on them.

Indeed, as of a recent Agency's report, rates of poverty among refugees increased from 2006 to 2007, whereas overall poverty rates for the West Bank decreased (UNRWA 2007). This is, most likely, due to a leakage of assistance to the non-poor, a concern revealed in Kassissieh's words and in the Medium Term Strategy for 2010-2015 (UNRWA 2009a: 16). Hence, whereas universal services are in nature directed to everyone, eligibility to targeted services is now

subordinated to stricter criteria, to actually identify the poorest refugees and provide them with additional resources.

4.2.1. Universal Services

Education is the key pillar of UNRWA's development approach. The programme, to which more than half of the Agency's budget is devoted,¹⁰ consists first and foremost in operating more than 700 schools across the five fields, which impart free education to children from the 1st to the 9th grade. The work of schools is completed by that of VTTCs, where theoretical knowledge is translated into market-relevant skills in several sectors.¹¹ The combination between universal primary schooling and market-orientation of secondary studies was instrumental in creating, as of Rosenfeld (2009), an "educational advantage" of Palestinian refugees over their peers in the Arab world. As a result, a big share of the refugee workforce was able to find jobs in the Gulf over the 1960s and 1970s, helping the purchasing power of their own families by regularly sending remittances back home (Elnajjar 1993, Bocco 2009).

UNRWA's educational mission, according to Al-Husseini (2000: 53), is inherently political, as the Agency has forged through schooling a generation of educated refugees, deeply aware of modern state-building approaches: this is, indeed, a key basis in the effort towards formation of a Palestinian state. Yet, Rosenfeld (2009: 286-289) also argues that the educational effort of UNRWA is constrained by two elements: first, its funding structure, whose frailty is implicit in the dependence from external voluntary contributions; and second, the continuous conditions of humanitarian emergency, which systematically drag resources from regular investments in education. As such, in a limit-case scenario, the Agency may risk to go back to its original role, as a mere provider of emergency relief with little or no focus on longer-term development.

Health services absorb 18% of UNRWA's budget, and consist primarily in operating 137 clinics providing free medical care across the five fields. As argued by Qato (2004), negative effects of

¹⁰ <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=32>, accessed 16th September 2010.

¹¹ For a full account of the industries and objectives on which the VTTCs focus, see <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=9>, accessed 16th September 2010.

occupation in the OPT have an extremely severe impact over health: closures and checkpoints, indeed, often prevent patients in critical conditions from reaching hospitals, and impede doctors and medical staff to reach their workstations. The problem is particularly serious for those patients who, due to the absence of many surgery facilities in West Bank hospitals, actually need to be taken to clinics in Israel for urgent care: crossing the border, even for medical reasons, needs a permit that, as of Stefanini and Ziv (2004: 165), is refused to 40% of the Palestinian patients who apply every day. To partially cope with the problem of closures, UNRWA has created five mobile units in the West Bank, which move according to need and overcome the issue of permits.¹²

Despite the problematic nature of its operational environment, dictated by the high and growing number of refugees and a limited budget in its core fund, UNRWA has reached, by itself, remarkable achievements in the field of health. Most relevantly, as of Khawaja (2004), Palestine refugees served by the Agency have reached an advantage in child mortality levels, as compared to their non-refugee counterparts over the five fields of operation. This achievement has actually translated in a change in the demography of refugee communities: youth and children are relatively more, an effect that is mitigated by the Agency's efforts towards family planning (UNRWA 2010). Remarkable achievements such as these ones, coming back to Khawaja (2004: 464), witness the power of political will beyond the humanitarian plight of the Agency.

Beyond education and health, whose universality is of paramount importance in a quasi-governmental scheme of services, universal tools are available for small business generation – which, in the context of the OPT, is particularly important, due to the aforementioned effects of occupation on employment. *Microfinance*, managed at UNRWA by a specialized department which is funded independently,¹³ is aimed to provide applicants with earnings from small business creation, and to revitalize the entrepreneurial spirit that has been stifled under the restrictions that the occupation imposes. This programme, as explained by Zaidoun Darwish in

¹² <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=95>, accessed 16th September 2010.

¹³ For a full account of the governments and national aid agencies that take in the funding of the microfinance department, see <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=24>, accessed 16th September 2010.

UNRWA's microfinance office in Bethlehem, has been tailored *ad hoc* on the specific needs of refugees:

What refugees need most, to back applications for loans in general, is documents. This is troublesome for them, especially as they do not own their houses and cannot use property as collateral. Hence, our requirements in terms of documents are minimum: our workers, instead, physically go to people's houses, evaluate their projects, and propose a contract in case of success. But projects are required to be good and viable, to be elected for funding [...] competition is fierce in this sector, and we need sustainability to be maintained.

To ensure that the microfinance programme of the Agency remains profitable, a computerized system of loan tracking has been elaborated: it follows all loans, from origination onwards, and monitors the earnings from each funded micro-business. Another measure taken to ensure profitability was that of extending the programme's reach to non-refugees: this has allowed the Agency to tap the entrepreneurial potential of the whole local community, rather than of the sole refugee component. Microfinance differs from humanitarianism in nature, as profits and competition play a relevant role in its dynamics: yet, it provides people with an opportunity for self-sustainment, which humanitarian operations cannot neglect in the de-development context of the West Bank.

4.2.2. Targeted services

Food and cash assistance to refugees below the poverty line constitute the core of UNRWA's targeted services. The programme related to this consists in delivering, on a quarterly basis, a package of food and cash aid, in order to provide a short-term fix to households in conditions of abject poverty. UNRWA started delivering food rations in its very first years of existence, as an integral part of the emergency relief purposes for which it was created: yet, with the shift of the Agency towards a development approach, a considerable amount of resources have been diverted away from food assistance, in order to finance educational programmes and employment creation.

The programme, as it is tailored in the West Bank, currently reaches 4.6% of refugee households (UNRWA 2010: 20). Each food parcel is made to cover 50% of the caloric needs of recipients, and is distributed along with a cash grant amounting to \$420. The package also

contains a \$35 cheque, to be used for the purpose of buying fresh food: this, which is particularly needed given the high relative price of such items (see paragraph 4.1.), should substitute precedent dynamics, where people sold or bartered part of their UNRWA ration for fresh food (Cook 1992). The programme is tailored, overall, to tackle the overwhelming problem of food insecurity, so that refugees can also orient their consumption towards other needs: indeed, the pattern where the fraction of income spent on food increases in case of crisis, draining households' resources from other priorities, has been already observed several times in the OPT (Roy 2001).

The *Job Creation Programme (JCP)* aims at the creation of short-term job opportunities, at UNRWA itself or at other bodies working with it – mainly NGOs and humanitarian agencies, working in the camps or elsewhere for refugees. The 2010 objective, for the West Bank, is that of creating 2215200 working days for around 40000 refugees (UNRWA 2010: 16), organized in two different employment schemes: unskilled jobs, which last for one month, and skilled ones, which last for three. The high prevalence of unskilled assignments over skilled ones (77400 contracts of the former type, and 2600 of the latter, were offered in the West Bank in 2009) reveal the poverty-based nature of the programme: the poor, quite often, do not reach high levels of education, given that UNRWA offers it for free only until the 9th grade. Hence, they are normally not endowed with the capacity needed to undertake skilled jobs.

The salary for each job assignment is fixed to \$420 monthly; assignments are focused mainly on construction and cleaning for unskilled workers, and on reading and teaching for skilled ones. The program is integral part of the SSN field: as such, it is aimed to provide a short-term fix to households, which is the reason why tasks are brief in time and rotation among workers is ensured.¹⁴ Yet, a developmental nature is envisaged in the programme, given that it creates professional learning which fosters the creation of market-relevant human capital: this is particularly important, in a context of needed economic recovery and employment generation. Hence the JCP lies, in a way, in the middle between short-term relief and long-term

¹⁴ As of UNRWA (2009: 17), to maximize the distribution of job opportunities across households, multiple family members cannot be enrolled in JCP at the same time. Furthermore, one-month assignments can only be renewed once in a year, whereas three-month ones cannot be renewed.

development, and is paradigmatic of the proactive involvement of beneficiaries that lies at the core of UNRWA's principles.

Vulnerable groups are addressed by specific programmes, as explicitly provided by UNRWA's Medium Term Strategy 2010-2015 (UNRWA 2009a: 22). Indeed, in the Agency's network of assistance to the disadvantaged, poverty-based targeted services are coupled with a stream of group-specific projects, each of which focuses on a cluster of socially weak people. In particular, women and refugee youth are addressed by *ad hoc* sets of services, in order to improve human development outcomes with reference to their own collective situation.

It is, in effect, hazardous to refer to Palestinian refugee women as a "weak" group in local society. Their role within the household is often paramount, given the massive rates of imprisonment and unjustified detention among men (DCI 2007): the second Intifada was, in this respect, a moment when women organizations played a key role in the resistance. The situation of refugee women is powerfully summarized by Lilah, an activist in a female NGO based in Dheisheh camp:

Nation-building struggle is the most important thing to us as Palestinians – and in it, women and men fight side by side, overcoming the problem of gender. Yet, gender equality is still to be sought, especially as traditions and the legal setting are strongly hostile to Palestinian women. Empowerment is the end objective of our work, and we pursue it by operating a stand related to legal counseling primarily.

Gender inequality is, indeed, problematic especially under the legal aspect, due to conflicting laws and a weak protection of women against discrimination and abuse. To partially cope with the problem, UNRWA has created 16 Women Programme Centres (WPCs) in the West Bank. WPCs carry out primarily three jobs: they impart courses, to develop market skills in women; they offer classes of awareness on female-relevant themes, such as early marriage and domestic violence; and they offer help on the legal side by gender-specific consultancy services.

The youth, due to ongoing conflict and occupation, are severely pervaded by the impact of violence, in virtually every aspect of their lives. The awareness of the problem in refugee communities is evident if we consider that, out of the numerous NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) working in the camps, those that focus on children are very numerous. In

the words of Ra'ed, the manager of a centre providing cultural opportunities to children in Aida Camp:

[When working with kids,] disillusionment and propensity to violence are the biggest challenges. Relations with each other and with adults, and concentration at school, are difficult, when children have experienced trauma and conflict in the very first years of their lives. Recreation and games in our centre's playground are set up, first and foremost, to give our kids a sense of living a normal childhood.

UNRWA's programme for children and youth, therefore, faces the same challenges when working with kids. It works on both recreation and psychological counseling, in order to face the trauma that, as of Chatty (2002, 2009), characterizes the life experience of most refugee children in the OPT. For this, the Agency sometimes partners with local NGOs: in Balata camp, UNRWA schools and one CBO – the Yaffa Cultural Centre – actually work together for refugee children, with a set of formalized agreements and joint projects.

4.2.3. Emergency Assistance

In this section, we have focused on the ordinary operations of UNRWA, both in the field of universal services and in that of targeted ones for the poor and vulnerable groups. The problem here is that over the five fields, especially as far as unstable areas such as the OPT are concerned, emergency situations – predominantly due to conflict outbursts – systematically happen: this was the case for the second Intifada in 2000, for the embargo in 2007 after Hamas' election victory, and for Operation Cast Lead perpetrated by Israel on the Gaza Strip in 2008. In all these cases, UNRWA needed to adapt its service provision according to emergency, diverting a heavy share of its resources to early recovery and post-conflict reconstruction.

The problem implicit in emergency assistance is powerfully stated in the aforementioned work of Rosenfeld (2009): UNRWA's budget for regular services, already limited by a funding structure that relies entirely on voluntary donations, suffers from being periodically reduced and diverted to emergency needs. If proneness to attack and destruction continues, the vicious circle will most likely go on undisturbed, draining resources from education, health, and relief services to local beneficiaries. As a result, UNRWA will be blocked in the key purpose of its

development approach, rooted on providing a complete, quasi-governmental system of welfare to Palestinian refugees.

5. Analysis

Having reviewed the main features and challenges of refugee camp life in the West Bank, and the channels through which UNRWA attempts to improve the living conditions of its recipients, we now focus on our research question, on the extent to which UNRWA is accountable to its beneficiaries. To do so, we identify the mechanisms underlying both the long and the short route of accountability: we then assess the functioning of each mechanism, as it is devised in the context of refugee camps in the West Bank. As analysis reveals, accountability of the Agency to its beneficiaries is impeded by several roadblocks: in the second part of the analysis, we suggest a strategy to overcome these issues, grounding on the feedback on UNRWA's services that refugees have given us during fieldwork.

5.1. UNRWA's accountability for services

The core research question here is: is UNRWA accountable to its beneficiaries, and through which mechanisms is accountability enforced? As we have noted in paragraph 2.3., the case study provided by the Agency's work with refugees presents three departures from the standard framework of service provision, as it is devised by World Bank (2004). First, responsibility for services to refugees is not held by a national government, but by UNRWA itself, especially as the OPT – where a proper national government is not in place – are concerned. Second, UNRWA acts in a quasi-governmental way as a service provider, but its funding scheme is not government-like: indeed, the Agency is not financed through taxpayers, but through the voluntary contributions of foreign donors. Third, both policymakers and frontline providers to refugees belong to UNRWA: hence, their proximity to each other is higher than the norm, as communication between them is inscribed in the formal Agency's hierarchy. On the basis of

this outline, we now focus on both long-route and short-route accountability mechanisms in our case study.

5.1.1. Long route of accountability

In the long route of accountability, the recipient population communicates its needs to providers through the mediation carried out by policymakers. As such, two flows of interaction are implicit in this route: first, beneficiaries voice their needs to policymakers; second, policymakers inform the behavior of providers according to the feedback they get from recipients. Voice, according to the World Bank (2004: 7), needs *information* in the first place: recipients' demand for better services needs to be based on awareness of the current system, and of the nature and limitations in the powers of the provider. Also, the *organization* of beneficiaries voicing their needs must be good, as changes in the providers' behavior is more likely to be informed by well-articulated, collective requests.

As far as information is concerned, the situation of refugees is, at a first glance, impressive. Semi-structured interviews, conducted with camp dwellers, reveal very high awareness of the refugee condition, especially in terms of its historical and legal dimensions. The war dynamics leading to massive displacement in 1948, the UN resolutions ignored by Israel, the names and features of the villages that first-generation refugees had to flee: information on these points permeates the whole community, especially the youth, who lived as refugees for their entire life. This latter point confirms the findings of Chatty (2002, 2009), pointing to the political awareness of Palestinian youth, and those of Hart (2002), remarking the efficacy of household and community pressures in this respect: indeed, the main source of information to refugee kids is the family, coupled with the historical education received in UNRWA schools.

Yet, information diffused among refugee communities is quite selective on its focus. This has emerged when interviews, from the historical and legal outline of the refugee problem, moved towards more developmental topics, related to status and entitlements under UNRWA's services. Not all refugees, in the first place, have a firm grasp of the situation outside their camps: participatory observation has revealed, indeed, that inter-camp relations are not always

positive, which acts as a roadblock to reciprocal information on services. Furthermore, a significant number of refugees seem to be quite confused about the nature and limitations of UNRWA's powers, as it emerges from the words of Amir, a dweller in Aida Camp:

UNRWA pretends to defend us – but when a military raid comes, they are never there for us. They only come when things have happened already, but this is not what we need [...] what we actually need from them is protection from Israeli raids. How can they not see this? How can they just sit and watch?

Disappointment towards UNRWA's inaction during armed attacks, that the words of Amir reveal, is quite diffused among refugees. The issue here is that security concerns, as of paragraph 2.2., are not part of UNRWA's mandate: the Agency, due to the nature of the power with which it was entitled, cannot act as a defense body in case of attack, and cannot of course engage in armed fight. Why, then, do camp dwellers show frustration and disappointment in this respect? In our interpretation, the lack of a formally established national government plays a key role here: people turn to UNRWA for all their basic needs, and security is one of them, especially in the very vulnerable context of refugee camps. No formal entity is there to defend the refugees, as it dramatically appears when camps are bombed or destroyed by military raids: yet, people feel that they need to turn to the only entity that is, physically and legally, present in the camps to act for their protection. The picture that results is one of confusion about the limitations of UNRWA's power, induced by the "legal lacuna" that leaves refugee protection partial and incomplete on the side of defense.

Inter-refugee organization, diversely, works very well under many aspects. Historical accounts, such as that of Sirhan (1975) and Suleiman (1999), point to the strength of spontaneous aggregation in refugee camps, given the common condition of displacement and the sense of solidarity in overcoming daily problems. Aggregation, which is already very strong at the extended family level, is formalized in a vibrant plethora of NGOs and CBOs, working inside the camps on specific themes and issues: culture, employment generation, the condition of women and youth, are the main sources of grouping and interaction for refugee activists. As of Abeer, a female activist in Dheisheh camp:

When people in a community share the same problem, solidarity among them arises, and they will most likely gather together to face it. This is our case as women, given the hardships that our condition entails

[...] as women, we have achieved a lot through aggregation, in terms of speaking to authorities above us. We have also written and submitted a proposal to the Palestinian Legislative Council, for a women's bill of rights to be approved.

Given their experience in the formation of camp-level pressure groups, refugees seem to be very well positioned to voice their needs in a clear and unitary way. In the view of the World Bank (2004: 13), heterogeneous preferences constitute a problem, as they are likely to weaken the unity of pressure groups: yet, diverse priorities in refugee camps are likely to be overcome by the strength of common purposes, state-building and freedom from occupation in the first place. Underlying camp-level unity among refugees is channeled in the Camp Services Committees, the key means of communication between camp dwellers and the Agency: these groups, which are entitled to make the link between the Agency and its beneficiaries, make a capillary work in assessing people's needs, and transmitting them to the executives. As such, on the one hand, information may be weakened by confusion on UNRWA's powers; yet, Palestinian refugees benefit from very good camp-level organization, which constitutes a valuable asset for accountability to be enforced.

As far as the second communication flow in the long route, from policymakers to frontline providers, is concerned, it is required that the former proactively inform the work of the latter, according to the needs identified and voiced by the beneficiaries. For this to happen policymakers need, firstly, to have an effective power of *control* on providers, through a set of rewards and sanctions that push the latter to take action as required. Secondly, policymakers need to have a sufficient *motivation* to act on providers: this is, in fact, implicit in the framework as devised by the World Bank, as the purpose of being re-elected is inherent in government policymakers. Yet, the presence of motivation is less obvious in our case study, where no threat of substitution is faced by UNRWA, and money is collected from external donors rather than from taxpayers.

Control of policymakers on providers, in the Agency, enjoys smooth functioning, and clear protocols of communication between the two sides. This is due to the third departure of our case study from the standard model: policymakers, indeed, are the executives of UNRWA, while providers work through the on-field bodies of the Agency itself. As such, institutional

proximity between them is very high, and it is ordinary business, for policymakers, to monitor the work of implementing agencies: due to close monitoring, traceability of errors to single people is very high.¹⁵ In the words of Afif Ghatasha, who served for 15 years (1994-2009) as the Camp Services Officer in Aida Camp:

The Jerusalem Field Office always sends somebody in the refugee camps, to monitor our activity. The West Bank is tiny, so the job of monitoring is easy for managers [...] differently from ten years ago, there are now computer systems, that help the managers achieving even more accurate control. Deviating from the procedures is a very strong hazard for local officers.

Formal communication protocols between policymakers and providers, and a good monitoring system of the former on the latter, make the control mechanism very efficient in our case. Hence, UNRWA is well positioned to create, as of the World Bank, “clear compacts” between the two sides, thanks to the hierarchy implicit in the Agency’s structure. But are these compacts likely to be influenced by the feedback given by refugees?

On the one hand, UNRWA was created for the purpose of assisting the refugees, and its evolution towards a development approach has been conceived and elaborated with refugee collective needs in mind. Yet, as noted in the second departure of this case from the standard model, the Agency’s work does not entail the feedback ring that is characteristic of reciprocal service relations: refugees, in effect, do not “buy” their services through taxes, but they receive them as “donations” from external Western contributors. As long as the Agency’s funding scheme remains unchanged, the problem of so-called “multiple accountabilities” to both donors and beneficiaries will remain, as it is devised in the analysis of Edwards and Hulme (1996): for a single agent, there are two principals, both needing to be taken into account and satisfied.

Financial assessments, contained in UNRWA’s Medium Term Strategy 2010-2015, show that the budget of the Agency over time has declined, from \$100 per refugee in 1981 to \$60.6 in 2006: this, according to Terbeck (2009: 629), is due to the combined effect of price inflation and demographic growth, which has not been matched by a corresponding increase in donations.

¹⁵ Indicators of institutional transparency, such as the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), are measured on a country-level basis; hence, they are not available for governance carried out by supranational entities like the UN. As such, measurement of the strength of internal monitoring cannot be stated numerically, but only according to its formal perspective.

Given such constraints in terms of funding, it is even harder for the Agency to plan a shift in focus to downward accountability to beneficiaries: this reduces significantly the motivation of policymakers, to devote additional budget to assessments of refugee needs.

Hence, the policymakers-providers link entails effective control of the former on the latter: yet, this control is negatively influenced by UNRWA's donor-funded structure, inducing the Agency to prioritize patron-related funding concerns. So, this link may work well on a formal and technical basis, but it needs a greater degree of insider motivation to be enacted properly.

5.1.2. Short route of accountability

As of the World Bank (2004: 6), basic-needs service provision normally passes through the long route of accountability: the feedback of citizens, and the correspondent action of providers on services, are linked through the mediation of government policymaking. Yet, when roadblocks to inherent communication flows prevent the long route from working well, a case is there for resorting to the short route, which lies in direct interaction between recipients and providers. This interaction occurs mainly through two alternative channels: namely *choice*, which allows beneficiaries to shift to a different provider when dissatisfied, and *participation*, which lies in direct involvement of beneficiaries in determining the system of services.

Choice, for refugees in the West Bank, is limited in the number of alternatives available. The majority of services has, indeed, only two channels bypassing UNRWA provision: namely, provision from the PA, and market-based procurement through private channels. To be sure, PA services are available to West Bank residents, and also to refugees on a general basis: yet, refugees can only access them as a last resort, i.e. when a given needed service is not reachable through UNRWA's local facilities. PA services, as such, cannot be "chosen" in alternative to UNRWA provision, as they constitute a second-best option when the latter is missing in a given field.¹⁶

¹⁶ The exception here is constituted by water and electricity. Refugee camps' provision is, indeed, dependent on municipal grids, which in turn are subjected to the Water Authority in Israel. As a result, the supply of water and electricity is actually controlled by the occupying force, and, as of Selby (2003), arrangements still entail very low bargaining power on the Palestinian side.

Hence, the only real alternative to UNRWA service provision is constituted by private services. But these services, on a general basis, are extremely costly on the market. This is not only due to price inflation, but also to the very limited purchasing power of refugees: in a context like that of the West Bank, where Israeli government restrictions systematically curtail employment generation, people can hardly afford to exercise this kind of client power. The situation is not necessarily better, indeed, for those who work in “skilled” sectors, as a refugee teacher in a school in Bethlehem told us:

I teach in the morning, and work as a taxi driver in the afternoon. Almost all teachers have two jobs, we cannot afford living on just one stipend [...] low salaries reduce the incentive of school teachers to teach well. Also, graduates who enter teaching get a very low stipend, and salary advancements are very difficult to obtain.

Hence, actual choice between UNRWA and alternative service providers is unavailable to most refugees. Government provision under the PA is, at best, a last resort, and very few households can actually afford to shift to private services instead. To be sure, several NGOs are configured as service providers too, but they do not have the capacity needed to work in terms of the basic needs of people: their services normally focus on group-based needs, like women or youth in the refugee camps context. As a result, it is very hard for refugees, to shift away from UNRWA to fulfill their basic needs.

Participation of refugees in the Agency’s services, at a first glance, tells quite a different story on refugee’s involvement and power. Indeed, as of Bocco (2009: 236), 99% of UNRWA’s staff on the field is constituted by refugee workers, which find themselves in the double position of recipients and implementers of the Agency’s provision policy. Refugees’ positions cover all the pyramid ranging from higher management roles, located in the Agency’s field-based branches, to unskilled tasks in cleaning and construction, made available to poorer recipients through the JCP.

Yet, the concern to be raised here is that, as of Rempel (2005), participation in service delivery should not be confused with participation in decision-making. Refugee workers, in effect, only enjoy the former: rather than being given control on decision making, which remains firmly held in the hands of higher executives, they are involved in implementation, i.e.

the application of what has previously been decided from the higher boards. As such, leverage on decision making, which characterizes accountability, is not conceded to refugees, who enjoy at best a “weak” form of participation rather than a “strong” one.¹⁷

Indeed, the approach of the Agency, which is managed and owned by Western donor nations, remains top-down in character and structure. Decisions are taken by an international staff, largely operating far away from the field: Bocco (2009: 237) defends this decision, noting that international lead is necessary to preserve the Agency from intra-Palestinian conflict. Yet, the top-down structure of the Agency generates widespread distrust in the refugee communities, as Abood, a dweller in Aida camp, powerfully synthesizes:

UNRWA leaders take a lot of money for sitting there and talking – instead of coming on field to take action. As a result, they have no idea of what we need, and if they do, they do not behave accordingly. They should come to the field, to actually hear the story told from our voices.

Hence, in terms of the decisional leverage enjoyed by beneficiaries, participation is weak in UNRWA’s design. Involvement of refugees is limited to service delivery and policy implementation, and does not extend to higher levels of ceded control and partnership with providers. This, coupled with the lack of Palestinian representatives in higher decision-making boards, generates disillusionment and anger in large segments of the refugee community.

5.1.3. Summing up: roadblocks to accountability

Figure 4, highlighting well-functioning mechanisms in green and ill-functioning ones in red, summarizes what has been stated so far. The long route of accountability flows from refugees to UNRWA policymakers through information and organization: if the latter works very well, the former is at best uncertain, especially with respect to the nature and limitations of UNRWA’s power. The long route then links policymakers to providers: if control of the former over the latter is very effective, due to institutional proximity, motivation to act in the name of refugee needs is weakened by the Agency’s donor-funded structure. As far as the short route, linking refugees to providers, is concerned, both choice and participation constitute fields of weakness,

¹⁷ As of Michener (1993, cited in Brett 2003: 5), “weak” approaches to participation involve information and consultation of beneficiaries, whereas “strong” ones involve partnership with them, or actual cession to them of control on development projects.

as there are no real alternatives to UNRWA in basic-needs service provision, and the Agency’s approach to decision making is top-down.

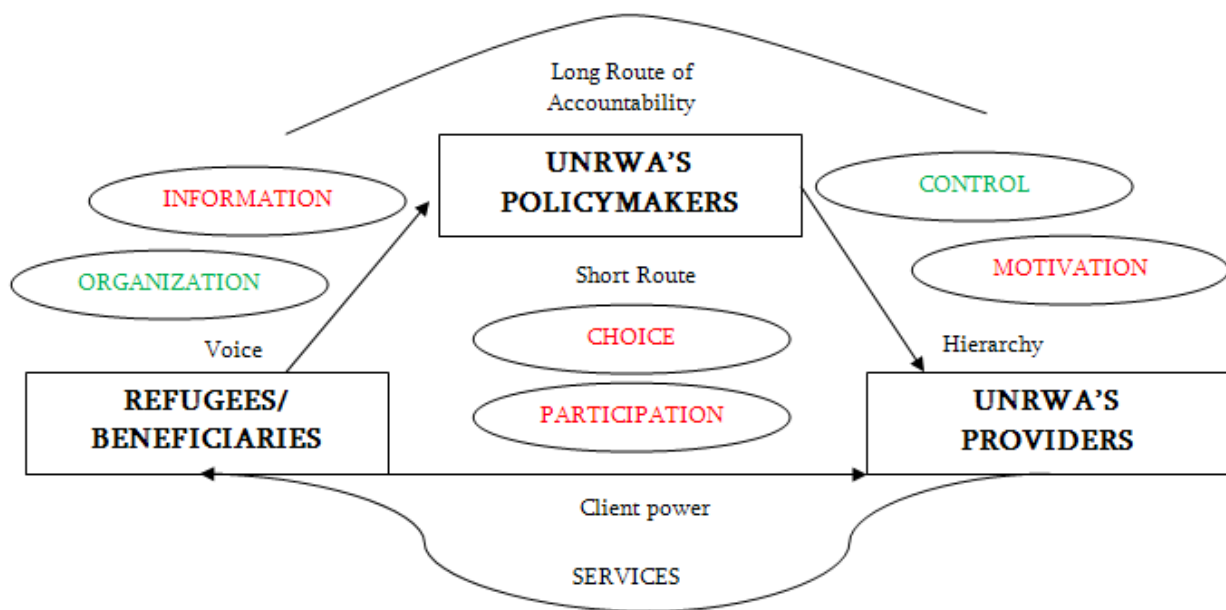


Fig.2: Accountability mechanisms – UNRWA’s framework
Source: the author

These insights are not encouraging, with respect to our research question on accountability mechanisms: the long route of accountability is blocked by faulty information and low incentives to refugee orientation; the short route is obstructed by lack of market alternatives and participatory arrangements. On the one hand, this situation is by and large not the fault of UNRWA: lacking motivation to be oriented to recipients, as well as the top-down approach to decision making, are the direct consequences of a structure funded and driven by the West, even now that the “temporary” nature of the Agency has been going on for sixty years. In effect, the Agency can do little to act on its inherent structure.

On the other hand, UNRWA can do much to shape its behavior on field. The human capital potential on which it can count, in effect, is very high for a less-developed country: refugees are a numerous pool of educated people, endowed with deep awareness of their situation and with the political will necessary to face it. The Agency itself, through its massive investment in education and human development over time, was instrumental in creating this pool: it now has the opportunity to build on this achievement, in order to strengthen its own

accountability mechanisms. In this respect, a refugee perspective on the problem is needed, to seek and evaluate solutions to the faults identified above.

5.2. UNRWA: a refugee perspective

For accountability to be maintained, given that flaws are present both in the long and in the short route, UNRWA should be proactive in monitoring the evolution of refugee needs. Terbeck (2009: 624) refers to this, when she encourages the Agency to strengthen its internal research capacity in order to benefit from evidence-based planning. As such, this is a case for completing the analysis of accountability mechanisms, with an overview of the global perspective that refugees gave us on UNRWA's services.

The feedback we have received can be clustered in three areas, which correspond to three socio-economic groups of refugees. This is not surprising, if we think that the Agency's service provision differs on the basis of economic profiles: the poorest households benefit from targeted services through the SSN, whereas the richest ones have more choice, and can exit the system to resort to private services. Hence, below-poverty-line recipients, relatively richer ones, and average refugees show features and feedback that differ quite much among themselves.

Below-poverty-line refugees are the beneficiaries of SSN targeted services: namely, food and cash assistance provided on a regular basis; eligibility to job opportunities through the JCP; and priority on shelter rehabilitation in case of post-conflict reconstruction. Households in this group often present a common characteristic: most of them, indeed, have lost their main breadwinner, either to unemployment – especially after the closure of the Israeli job market – or to conflict. Several of these households are led by single women who need to provide everything to their children, from economic to psychological support.

Respondents in this group, in effect, are those who experience the highest incidence of UNRWA on their standards of living. This is because alternatives are virtually non-existent for them, even for primary needs like short-term supply of food and cash. As such, the regularity of SSN provision is perhaps the most important thing to them: yet, despite the poverty-oriented

reform of relief services, this aspect still represents a problem in several fields, where regularity has not been achieved. This is what Adil, a below-poverty-line refugee in Balata camp, one of the most affected by poverty, told us:

Food provision is supposed to be quarterly – but last year, it was only delivered once. This is a serious problem, when you have a family on your shoulders [...] we never know what is going to happen with food supplies.

Given the deeply problematic nature of their condition, below-poverty-line refugees are prone to be affected by strong distrust towards institutions. They rely very heavily on UNRWA, and they feel more frustrated than other socioeconomic groups when service provision fails to meet its promises. On the other hand, UNRWA's declining budget per capita makes it harder for relief services to work properly: furthermore, as we have seen above, the Agency has tended to shift its investments from short-term fixes to employment generation, in order to maximize long-term development outcomes. This is, indeed, coherent with the long-term nature of the refugee issue; yet, the presence of a trade-off between relief and development services goes at the disadvantage of those below the poverty line.

Relatively richer refugees, even if they are registered with UNRWA and in some cases live in the camps, were able to build on their skills and/or international connections, to reach an economic situation that is remarkably better off than the average. The presence of these cases, in the problematic context of the West Bank, is peculiar to an extent, if we think that the refugee issue has started sixty years ago, and people who were able to do so had time to transform their destiny. Richer refugees are, indeed, mostly skilled workers for international organizations, or relatives of those who emigrated in the 1960/1970s, on the wave of the oil boom in the Gulf.

These refugees constitute an exception to general camp conditions because, even if they are fully entitled to UNRWA's service provision, they are able to opt out of the Agency and resort to private services. As such, the quality of their life is higher than the norm: their children attend private schools, they can afford relatively expensive private clinics and, in the very likely event of water scarcity, they buy private tankers for their families. As they can afford such standards of living, their concerns are mostly with service quality, which is the

reason why they do not utilize UNRWA's services in the first place. Mustafa, a better-off refugee running an international NGO in Bethlehem, told us:

My daughter [who goes to a private primary school in the city] only has five classmates. This makes the teaching very good, whereas classes at UNRWA schools are crowded with fifty-sixty students per class [...] if we want to build our own state, we need to have a healthy and educated new generation. We cannot save money on this, by turning to low-quality services such as those available through the UN.

As they exercise the power of exit from UNRWA's system of services, these refugees are, by and large, indifferent to changes and drawbacks in the Agency's service provision. It is less surprising, as a result, if – despite their generally high skills and education – it is among these refugees, that we have found the most confused ideas about UNRWA's nature and power limitations. Yet, concerns related to the struggle for nation-building, which emerge from Mustafa's words, are still very strong among these individuals: the need for freedom from occupation is, as of Bowker (2003), deeply embedded in Palestinian identity, and does not become stronger or weaker when moving across socioeconomic groups. Hence, even better-off refugees are politically active and aware, and, mirroring the rest of the refugee community, they place return to the homeland at the top of their life priorities.

Average refugees, an overwhelming majority indeed, are located in a sort of “grey zone” between the two aforementioned groups. Their situation lies in the middle: on the one hand, they are not rich enough to afford private services, but on the other hand, they are not “poor enough” to enjoy targeted ones under the SSN. Of course, this group comprehends several economic levels, ranging from those whose purchasing power is relatively high to those whose living standard is on the verge of abject poverty; quite often, the latter were served by targeted assistance, before the reform that led from status-based SHC to SSN.

Disappointment, among the latter, is widespread. UNRWA, as we have mentioned above, has shifted to the poverty-based SSN approach in order to tackle the plight of the poor: by doing so, it aimed to improve the quality of its assistance, also by reducing the number of targeted people. For people who were excluded from SHC services, though, it was not easy to move to a different consumption model, as Rawa – a refugee woman in Aida Camp – told us:

My neighbor has five children – but, according to poverty line calculations, she should have six to enjoy the SSN. Does it make sense to require the poor to have one more baby to be served? [...] UNRWA hides behind the crisis, but people out there could solve it, if only they spent less money on payments to international staff. Instead, they prefer saving money on families who are not able to make their own living.

Economic hardship, coupled with a service provision that is perceived as insufficient, is at the basis of the feeling of distrust towards UNRWA that Rawa's words reveal. Yet, average refugees have been subjected to the Agency's presence and services for their entire lives; as such, they are aware of the means and toolkits through which the Agency operates on field. Talking to them uncovered numerous, creative ideas on how service provision could be improved, and these ideas are, at best, partially affected by uncertain information on the Agency's mandate: information gaps are, indeed, largely covered by knowledge on the practical side of UNRWA's operations.

This last point is not surprising indeed. Refugees can count on direct, life-long experience of interaction with UNRWA, and on the high levels of education and awareness that universal schooling has instilled in them. To this, we need to add the dynamic characteristics that resistance to the occupation has acquired in the West Bank: over time, new phenomena of de-development have been matched with new ideas and mechanisms, to maximize people's capacity of making their own living. Capacity of resistance, through creative ideas elaborated to adapt to the occupation's constraints, is a further point that makes the Palestinians different from other refugee populations (UNDP/PAPP 2004: 17). As a result, refugees are placed in a good position to give practical suggestions to the Agency's staff: their potential is there to be tapped, for services to be tailored on actual refugee needs.

5.3. Overcoming roadblocks to accountability: potential approaches

In the first part of the analysis, we have observed accountability mechanisms between UNRWA and its recipient refugees: out of the six mechanisms observed, four are not able to allow a smooth functioning of the two available routes of accountability. On this basis, we have argued that the Agency, grounding on awareness of faulty accountability structures, should take initiative in monitoring refugee needs. Hence, in the second part, we have observed refugee

feedback on the Agency's services, isolating the behavior of recipients and the main problems that they individuate, according to the features of three socioeconomic groups.

The bottom line here is that accountability, which is faulty under the current setting, can be improved by UNRWA by tapping the high human potential of refugees. The Agency itself was instrumental in the creation of a pool of educated people, whose history of struggle for nation-building makes them politically aware and determined: these characteristics, in a different scenario, would enable them to exercise the leverage that the current setting denies them. As such, we now turn to suggesting a set of directions, through which the present scenario of lacking accountability may be changed: indeed, all the four defects in accountability found above can be tackled, to different extents, for the purpose of a more refugee-oriented service provision.

Problem 1: lacking information to refugees, which inhibits the long route of accountability in the link of recipients to policymakers. Refugees, as noted above, tend to present faulty knowledge of the nature and limits of UNRWA's power: yet, lacking knowledge can be hardly ascribed to missing infrastructure, given that UNRWA facilities, *per se*, are very visible in the camps. Even more hardly can it be ascribed to lacking means, given the high levels of literacy, education, and historical-legal awareness among refugees in the camps themselves. In our interpretation, the explanation for lacking information in this respect is distrust: the anger of below-poverty-line people for irregular provision; the frustration of those who were not included in SSN; the general skepticism towards the Western-led structure of the Agency, all work in the direction of blocking people's willingness to know UNRWA better.

Therefore, pro-trust action should be taken by the Agency, to maximize its credibility to the refugee communities that it has served for sixty years. Partnerships with NGOs, which work at the grassroots level and tend to be perceived as reliable entities by refugees, is a step in this direction: the success story of cooperation between UNRWA schools and the Yaffa centre, in Balata camp, is a powerful example of credibility gains by the Agency. Another means towards this end lies in on-field needs assessments backing service design, which tend to improve service quality (World Bank 2004: 10) and gives a sense of UNRWA's preoccupation with the actual demands of the people it serves. These arrangements, by making UNRWA more

credible, have the potential of reducing the distrust that seems to be at the basis of lacking information.

Problem 2: lacking motivation to refugee-orientation, which inhibits the long route of accountability in the link between policymakers and providers. This problem, in effect, can hardly be ascribed to UNRWA staff, as it stems directly from the donor-funded structure of the Agency, and from budget constraints that lead it to prioritize orientation to donors over other concerns. Indeed, staff cannot modify the structure of the Agency, which is likely to remain unchanged throughout its seventh decade of operations.

Yet, awareness of the drawbacks implicit in this structure can be a key tool to overcome the problem: in effect, the preferences of donors and refugees are not necessarily incompatible with each other. What is more relevant, here, is maximizing the donors' knowledge of the problems that actually affect the beneficiaries: by doing so, they would most likely align their investment indications to the demands of refugees. A practical measure in this respect is that of inviting the donors to invest in evaluation surveys, such as those carried out by the West Bank Research Office over the last few years (Terbeck 2009: 633), which constituted a key source of appraisal on the outcome of programs pertaining to the SSN provision. If the donors obtain a firmer grasp of what is needed on field, they will most likely adapt their behavior, and the problem of multiple accountabilities would be on its way to be overcome.

Problem 3: lacking choice to refugees, which inhibits the short route to accountability by depriving refugees of client power. To be sure, the paucity of alternative channels of service should not bother UNRWA that much: the priority of the Agency lies in maximizing the quality and reach of its own system of services. Instead, the concern lies in the root cause of lacking alternatives, which is to be found in the faulty purchasing power induced in refugee households. As we have seen above, occupation plays a key role in inhibiting purchasing power, through the closures and restrictions of movement that block access to employment opportunities.

As such, UNRWA should focus on maximizing purchasing power in an adverse context: which is, in effect, what the Agency is already doing, both through its recent poverty-oriented

reforms and through its inherent development approach. There are, indeed, no specific suggestions here, given that the Agency has been facing de-development in the West Bank since occupation has started. Until a durable solution is found, the focus on refugee purchasing power should be maintained, to abate the disempowerment that lies at the heart of limitations to people's choices.

Problem 4: lacking participation of refugees in decision-making, which inhibits the participation side of the short route to accountability. This problem derives directly from the top-down structure of decisional power at UNRWA, where decisions are taken by international top staff and implemented by refugees at the local level. Refugees' lack of voice in key decisions on services, motivated by the Agency's willingness to act independently from intra-Palestinian politics, is one of the key sources of the aforementioned distrust and skepticism of recipients towards the Agency's work.

Our insights, in this respect, argue in favor of stronger approaches to participation. Refugees, thanks to UNRWA's work in education and human development, retain a skilled and aware human capital, whose potential in informed decision making is still to be unlocked. As such, we submit that allowing the refugee community access to the 119 international posts, in whose hands UNRWA's decisional processes and outcomes are concentrated, would definitely be worth the experiment. The likely outcome of this structural change would most likely be, over the medium term, a reduction in refugees' overall distrust, which limits their willingness to interact with the Agency in a constructive and cooperative fashion.

This study has dealt with accountability of UNRWA to the recipient Palestinian refugees: as such, we have focused on identifying the accountability mechanisms in place, and on assessing their functioning in the current setting. By contrast, tools and processes for implementation of the policy suggestions that resulted have not been examined in depth: more research is needed in this area, especially to understand how indications towards stronger participatory approaches can be translated into reality. Furthermore, our study is limited to the West Bank, and, given the diversity of the five fields in which UNRWA operates, replicability of our findings outside this area is at best uncertain. As a result, accountability analyses should be undertaken in the

remaining four fields too: a critical area in this respect is Lebanon, where refugees are not endowed with civil rights, which further problematizes UNRWA's relationship with the local state government.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have focused on the accountability of UNRWA to Palestinian refugees, for services provided in the problematic context originated by de-development in the West Bank. Drawing on the standard approach to development provided by institutional theory, we have conceptualized accountability as the principal's leverage in determining the agent's behaviour, and we have identified the key actors – refugee beneficiaries, UNRWA policymakers, and UNRWA providers – involved in the services provided by the Agency. Then, we have identified the mechanisms of downward accountability on the field, in order to assess their functioning and devise solutions to the multiple faults that we have encountered.

The peculiarities of the case-study provided by UNRWA, especially as far as its donor-funded, top-down nature is concerned, have several implications for accountability. The link of beneficiaries to policymakers, on the one hand, is strengthened by the refugees' ability to organize for the purpose of voicing their needs; yet, it is inhibited by imperfect information on the limits of UNRWA's power. Control of policymakers on providers enjoys smooth functioning, due to institutional proximity between the two sides, but the donor-funded model of UNRWA reduces the incentive of policymakers to prioritize refugee needs. Client power of beneficiaries on providers is faulty: refugees, with the exception of few richer ones, cannot afford resorting to providers outside the Agency, and strong participation is precluded by an inherently top-down approach.

Hence, accountability seems to be blocked on both the long-route and the short-route sides. Yet, refugees in the West Bank – endowed with high education, and with vibrant political awareness – seem to constitute a good starting point for the problem to be solved. They are extremely aware of the historical background and legal condition of their community, and, when asked, they devise interesting suggestions to inform the Agency's work in serving their

basic needs. Working against distrust; maximizing donors' knowledge of the refugee situation; facilitating increases in refugees' client power, and involving beneficiaries in strong participatory arrangements, all constitute directions in which UNRWA should work, to maximize accountability to its recipient populations.

We are aware that, when looking at the issue of Palestinian refugees, improving the capacity of UNRWA's operations through better interaction with local beneficiaries does *not* constitute a first-best solution. UN General Assembly resolution 194, of 11 December 1948, calls for return of refugees to their homes, and compensation of those choosing not to return, "at the earliest practicable date". That date, however, has not been reached over the last sixty years, and UNRWA's choice to elaborate a "medium-term strategy" for the next five years is paradigmatic of the fact that a durable solution, while sought in several occasions and agreements, is still not in sight. A first-best option, as a result, would be that of resolution 194 to be effected, and of refugees' return and/or compensation to actually occur.

Yet, the long-term nature of the refugee issue is exactly the reason why research on UNRWA, and on its accountability to the constantly growing population of refugees, needs to be undertaken. Efforts towards effecting return, or for a durable solution to be finally agreed, should not obstruct policy-oriented work on the situation at present, which permeates virtually every aspect of the daily lives of Palestinian refugees. As such, while a solution is sought and advocated for, capacity of UNRWA should be maximized in serving the refugees according to their needs. A proactive capacity of decision making in refugees, which would likely be the outcome of improved accountability arrangements, would arise as a key factor for the purpose of nation-building.

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