

UNRWA: The Urgent Need for an Executive Board

1. The need for reforms in UNRWA's governance structure has assumed greater importance in the context of the financial crisis and unprecedented political attacks on the Agency and Palestine refugee identity. This Policy Brief seeks to answer the important question: *Can a revamp of UNRWA's governance structure put the Agency on a more stable financial and constitutional footing?*¹

Governance Structure

2. UNRWA's governance structure is loosely defined and is based on a non-Executive Advisory Committee (or "AdCom") whose role is set out briefly in UNGA Resolution 302(IV). The AdCom's role is to "advise and assist" the Commissioner General (CG) of UNRWA in the execution of UNRWA's programmes. The CG, however, is accountable to the General Assembly for UNRWA programmes *and not to the Ad Com which has no oversight role in UNRWA's management.*
3. In practical terms, this has meant that sensitive organizational and operational matters, are often set aside if consensus cannot be reached between host countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Palestine) and other AdCom members (including some donors), thereby weakening its effectiveness.
4. It has resulted in the CG having considerable scope to set the strategy of the Agency without the full buy-in by AdCom members. To the extent that the CG must report annually to the UN General Assembly through its 4th Committee, Member States have an opportunity to address any issues arising during the mandate. While the overwhelming majority of Member States support UNRWA, this brings little political support to UNRWA's management or financial predictability to UNRWA itself.

Would a better governance structure make a difference to UNRWA?

5. In the 76 years since the establishment of UNRWA, other UN Agencies have developed accountability processes notably in fields such as oversight, accountability, reviewing funds and programmes, authorizing fund raising, and approving budgets. Prima facie, modernization and tightening up of UNRWA's governance structure would be beneficial to the management of the Agency. Furthermore, it would give assurances to donors seeking greater oversight of the Agency's management leading to
 - greater buy-in and engagement on their part
 - a greater willingness to burden share
 - a strengthening of UNRWA's global standing as a UN Agency.
6. Host countries are wary of such a move as it might deprive them of leverage over aspects of UNRWA's operations. This Policy Brief contends that the better governance of UNRWA will lead to
 - better financial stability for the Agency
 - greater multi-year financial contributions
 - greater synchronicity with UNRWA's multiannual strategic plans.

Ultimately, host countries must address the choice between accepting reform and allowing UNRWA to collapse.

¹ PRPF thanks Richard Wright for the first draft of this Policy Brief and his contribution to the subsequent discussions.

UNRWA governance and funding

7. The Achilles heel of UNRWA has always been its dependence on voluntary funding by Member States. Yet while UNRWA has received overwhelming support within UNGA (in December 2026 151 Member States voted in favour of renewing its Mandate for another 3 years), this has **not** conferred any obligation on UNRWA supporters to back up their vote with financial support to the Agency to enable it to function effectively.
8. This abdication of responsibility by UN Member States has resulted in the whole burden of supporting Palestine refugees being thrust onto an Agency which is then deprived of the financial resources necessary to carry out its core tasks, in a deteriorating political and security environment.
9. Consequently, there is an urgent need to strengthen UNRWA's governance structure which can be done by a simple resolution of the General Assembly to:
 - amend operative paragraph 8 of General Assembly resolution 302(IV), to replace the Advisory Commission with an Executive Board and provide for its membership
 - amend operative paragraph 9 of General Assembly resolution 302(IV) to further define the responsibilities of the Commissioner General; and
 - amend operative paragraphs 9 and 10 of General Assembly resolution 302(IV) to replace references to the Advisory Commission with Executive Board.

Such an amendment would strengthen the legal and constitutional framework for UNRWA's governance and management structure and provide greater confidence to donors and other stakeholders.

A Two Stage process

10. From the donor side, in return for a much greater say in the governance of UNRWA anchored in an Executive Board, they would commit to providing predictable multi-year funding to the Agency. This can be executed in a two-stage process:
 - UNRWA's strategic plans would be prepared with the help of - and endorsed by - Member States represented on the Board, with their staff seconded to the Agency to assist in this process.
 - Once agreed, the key donors concerned would caucus to approve the overall funding set out in the endorsed strategic plans, sharing the costs amongst themselves and agreeing respective tranches to fund UNRWA's operations.

The bottom line is that the **core programme budget must be secured** irrespective of political shifts, by ensuring burden sharing, reducing dependency on a few key donors and diversifying the funding base.

11. In return for their flexibility, Palestine as well as Jordan, Lebanon and Syria will benefit from the increased stability, predictability and sustainability in UNRWA's finances and operations. Maintaining the essential services the Agency provides to Palestine refugees should be the priority. The costs and risks associated with the new governance model outlined here are far less than the costs and risks of allowing UNRWA to collapse.
12. From the side of UNRWA's management, there should be acceptance of greater donor involvement in setting the strategies of the Agency and in overall accountability. An Executive Board would provide assurance as regards accountability of decisions and host country obligations, while protecting the Agency and its personnel with greater political and financial support against the lethal attacks and false narratives.

The way forward

13. Following the renewal of UNRWA's mandate in December 2025, UNRWA's principal supporters and the UN Secretary General should propose that the GA urgently convene and chart a way forward for UNRWA including establishing an UNRWA Executive Board. With UNRWA's impending financial collapse, there is no time to lose.