Souad Srej is the Principal at Haifa primary school in Beirut, Lebanon. She is a Palestinian refugee from Lebanon currently teaching Palestinian refugees from Syria (UNV, 2016)

UN Volunteer Teachers enable UNRWA to provide education for Palestinian refugees from Syria

UNV has had a longstanding presence in Syria and has maintained its representation in Damascus, although it has had to halt the deployment of UN Volunteers to the country for security reasons. Instead, UNV has focused its response on supporting a marginalized segment of refugees who fled the conflict: Palestinian refugees, now twice displaced from Syria to Lebanon.

An international meeting of United Nations representatives is underway today and tomorrow, January 23-24, in Helsinki to discuss and agree on a comprehensive relief plan to provide aid in strife-torn Syria. UN Volunteers are an essential part of the response to this humanitarian crisis. Highly qualified and largely from developing countries themselves, they provide relief and ensure the delivery of basic social services to refugees, as well as their host communities, and promote peace-building.

The crisis in Syria has impacted millions of Syrian nationals who have been uprooted and displaced by the conflict. It has also affected Palestinian refugees who, 66 years ago, sought long-term refuge in Syria, where they were welcomed and made to feel at home. These refugees had access to public Syrian schools and the labour market, and lived in
conditions similar to Syrian nationals. As a result of the Syrian crisis, these Palestinian refugees have crossed the border into Lebanon, seeking refuge and basic social services in more secure conditions.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) recorded approximately 45,000 Palestinians who fled from the war in Syria to settle in Lebanon, a figure that represents some 12,700 families. These new arrivals joined the 280,000 Palestinian refugees already settled in Lebanon, who became hosts for the Palestinian refugees from Syria. Hence, refugees are hosted by fellow refugees who are already vulnerable.

As part of the response to this situation, UNV partnered with UNRWA to ensure Palestinian children had access to education. Due to the duration of the crisis in Syria, there was a need to ensure a viable education system was offered, not leaving any Palestinian refugee behind and integrating all refugees together. UNRWA welcomed Palestinian pupils from Syria in its schools in Lebanon. As extra teachers were needed to respond to this pressing situation, the UNV contribution was invaluable: in 2016, the organization conducted the selection and recruitment process for over one hundred Palestinian refugees to serve as national UN Volunteer Teachers to teach in schools for refugees throughout Lebanon.

“Really UNV helped us out of a tricky situation in terms of proper conditions for these teachers,” says Matthias Schmale, Director of UNRWA Lebanon. “Over time, we are trying to make benefits of the volunteering aspect of this partnership. [...] I find it quite exciting that through this relationship between the teachers and UNV, they have a quiet strong stimulus to explore what does volunteering mean in their context of Palestinian refugees.”

UNV’s commitment to equal inclusion of qualified candidates with legal refugee status allows refugees to serve as national UN Volunteers in their host country in support of their own displaced communities, as well as contributing to national goals.

Etab Eid, Rachel Saadi and Khaled Kanaan are three Palestinian refugees born and raised in Lebanon who have been assigned as national UN Volunteers Teachers to Syrian-born Palestinian refugee pupils. Khaled lives in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al Bared camp in northern Lebanon. He is a national UN Volunteer Teacher at Haifa school in Beirut. Every day, he needs over two hours to get to the school, where he teaches Arabic as to Palestinian pupils newly settled here from Syria.

Etab and Rachel are both UN Volunteer Teachers at Nablus school in Saïda, southern Lebanon. “Being a volunteer, is all about giving. You learn to give” shared Rachel. Their commitment to serving other refugees is driven by their own status as refugees. “Life might not be able to give us everything, but we can give everything we have,” shared Etab.

The project is now in its second year, as the UN Volunteer Teachers have been extended
for another school year. UNV is also looking into options to replicate in other similar contexts.

147 UN Volunteers are currently deployed in Lebanon, serving with UNDP, UNRWA, UNRCO, UNICEF and UNFPA.

- Lebanon • Syria • UNRWA • refugees • State of Palestine

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 4: Quality education, SDG 10: Reduced inequalities