Learning in the Face of Adversity
The UNRWA Education Program for Palestine Refugees
Conference Edition: October 2014
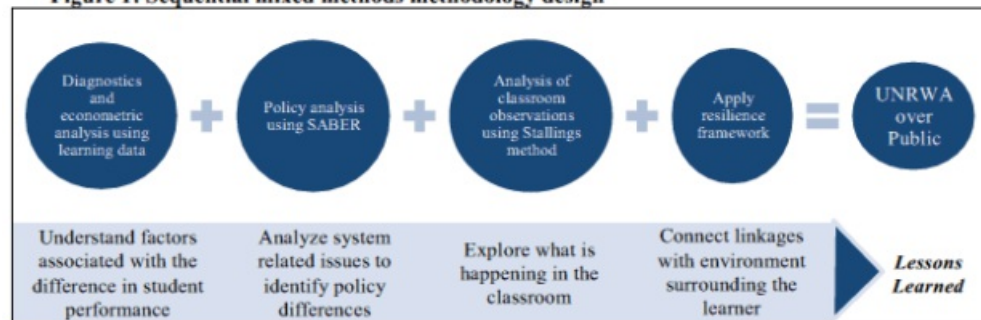**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THE UNRWA STORY**

Palestine refugees are achieving higher-than-average learning outcomes in spite of the adverse circumstances they live under. Their education system—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)—operates one of the largest non-governmental school systems in the Middle East. It manages nearly 700 schools, has hired 17,000 staff, educates more than 500,000 refugee students each year, and operates in five areas, including the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Contrary to what might be expected from a resource-constrained administration serving refugee students who continually face a multitude of adversities, UNRWA students outperform public schools in the three regions—the West Bank, Gaza, and Jordan—by a year's worth of learning.

This study uses a mixed methods research approach', incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research to address the complexity of the research question and its exploratory nature, namely *how do UNRWA schools continually and consistently outperform public schools?* This study was prepared using the following tools, techniques, and data collection:

- Econometric techniques were used to analyze learning achievement data, including international (TIMSS and PISA) and national student assessment data.
- The Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) tools and rubrics were used to assess different system components, such as teacher effectiveness, school autonomy, and student assessments.
- Stallings classroom observations provided a structured method to compare teachers' and students' interactions.
- Qualitative data collected through interviews captured the lived experiences of a sample of UNRWA students.
- These tools were applied through a concurrent research process (Figure 1), constituted through a mixed methods research design that led to integrated findings.

It is important to recognize the methodological and practical limitations of this study to establish its relevance to other education systems and contexts of adversity. The UNRWA system covers five regions, of which this study examines three: West Bank, Gaza, and Jordan. Thus, the findings represent factors that appear to be working within a system, but they do not imply that the system as a whole is achieving positive results. That would require additional data collection and analysis for Lebanon and Syria. Nor do the findings attempt to negate or discount the incidence of falling standards in UNRWA schools in recent years. Moreover, the international assessment data point to UNRWA's performance in relation to the public system in some of the host countries. But the data do not cover the inputs and processes in public school systems, which may differ from those in UNRWA schools, so they cannot be used to pass judgment on what these public systems may face.

Figure 1: Sequential mixed methods methodology design

Diagnostics and econometric analysis using learning data + Policy analysis using SABER + Analysis of classroom observations using Stallings method + Apply resilience framework = UNRWA over Public

Understand factors associated with the difference in student performance | Analyze system related issues to identify policy differences | Explore what is happening in the classroom | Connect linkages with environment surrounding the learner | *Lessons Learned*

Source: Authors.

International assessment data from 2007 was analyzed to assess learning outcomes of these schools while the explanatory data, to which the bulk of this study is dedicated, was collected in 2011. Results of 2011 test scores, however, demonstrated a decrease in learning outcomes for both the public sector and UNRWA schools. While overall standards have decreased, a controlled analysis of these results adjusted for the same range of variables as the 2007 results still illustrates UNRWA's learning outcomes to be significantly higher for the West Bank, Gaza, and Jordan. This situation aligns to our understanding of resilience not as an outcome in itself but as a process in contexts of adversity. Both the 2007 and 2011 data suggest that the UNRWA system is gauging and promoting a set of assets and opportunities which better support its students to 'navigate' the adversities they face. Even in rapidly changing contexts, and with concomitant results, assessing these assets and opportunities is crucial to understanding why outcomes are achieved and how to support such processes.

[1]Please see annex for detailed methodology.