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Palestine

Country Reference Framework

(Updated version of March 2026)



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Country reference framework Palestine

Background

Country reference framework provide information rather than strategic guidance. The country reference frameworks will be used mainly to support teams of academics when identifying and formulating project proposals, by providing a context analysis focused on Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development and the higher education sector in a given country, and by providing an overview of Belgian actors, their ongoing projects and partners in that country in view of exploration of opportunities for synergy and complementarity.

The country reference frameworks consist of three components:

(i) overview of VLIRUOS projects in the country;
(ii) context analysis focused on the Agenda 2030 framework and the higher education sector;
(iii) overview of Belgian actors (ANGCs involved in thematic or geographic JSFs & Enabel), their local partners and their regional/thematic focus.

Most frameworks have been elaborated based on information available at the time of drafting this actor programme and through consultations with both Flemish and local project promotors and with geographic JSFs, when applicable, to ensure relevant information for coherent project formulation is included. For Palestina, VLIRUOS decided more recently to add the country to its project calls, as of SI 2025, but due to its status of recognition not all information is available. UN sources for instance do not have the same overviews on how Palestine relates to SDGs. This CRF document has been elaborated in October 2025.

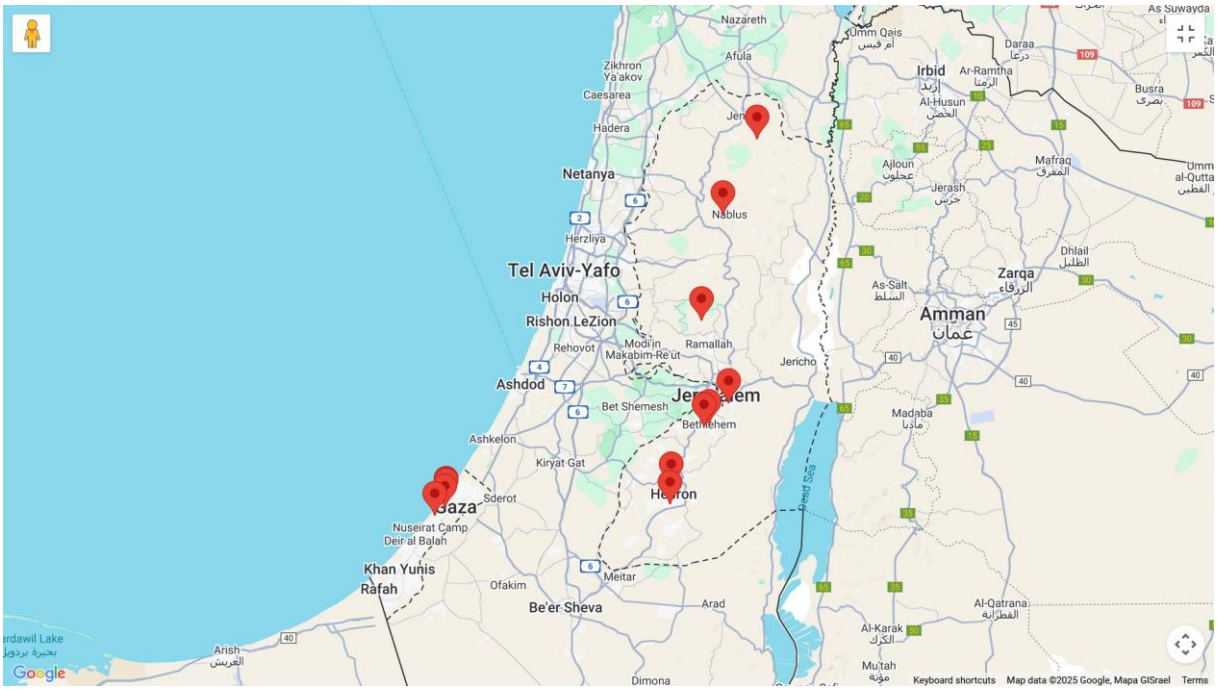
Prior to the launch of competitive calls, the ANGCs active in the country/region will be invited to list a number of research themes/questions that can be addressed by HE&SIs in the framework of VLIRUOS funded projects or scholarships. Synergy and complementarity will be integrated as an element in the selection of project proposals, more in particular when discussing the (developmental) relevance and coherence of the proposals and the extent to which the multi-stakeholder partnership principle has been reflected in the project's implementation set-up. By this mode of operation, the thematic JSF on Higher Education and Science for Sustainable Development links up with the other geographic JSFs.

Evidently, the frameworks will be updated regularly in consultation with the HEI&SI stakeholders and with the respective geographical JSFs and, where appropriate, also with ARES, and especially prior to the launch of competitive calls by VLIRUOS, to be compatible and responsive to evolving/emerging needs and priorities of academic and international actors active in the country/region/sector.

Disclaimer: considering the exceptional situation of destruction and deprivation in the Palestine territories since the war between Israel and Palestinian militants in October 2023, and the destructions and killings that took place since then, it is obvious that all data related to country and its HE context are completely outdated.

1. VLIRUOS in Palestine

1.1. Overview projects & scholarships (2003 – 2025)



Projects 2003-2025		
Type	**Budget (€)**	**Number**
Total	***1.071.257***	***5***
TEAM	618.554	2
SI	414.478	1
Other (Int congres)	38.225	2

Scholarship Type	Finished	Ongoing	Total
ICP	40	5	45
ITP/KOI	27		27
SRS	1		1
Total	68	5	73

From 1999 to 2025 VLIRUOS spent just over € 1 million in cooperation with the Palestine territories. We have to note that it has not been a partner country between 2013 and 2024, only recently returning in the framework of the 2025 SI Call. Currently 5 SI projects make out the activities in the Palestine territories.

The scholarship data is currently under revision. Since 2017, 26 ICP Scholars from Palestine have participated in ICP Master Programmes in Flanders – Belgium, and overall, we have data of 73 scholars since 2003:

More detailed information can be found on our VLIRUOS website vliruostats (statistics).

1.2. Ongoing projects and future calls (2022-...)

List of projects FYP 2022-2027						
Type	**Runtime**	**Title**	**Flemish promoter**	**Local promoter**	**Local institution**	**Total budget (FYP 2) (€)**
SI	2025-2027	Working with communities in mental health care design in Gaza: A collaborative pilot study generating academic, clinical, and policy-supporting capacity	Lucia De Haene (KUL)	Ayman M.S. ELghouty	Gaza University	69904,64
SI	2025-2027	Palestinian Sentinel Surveillance Network and Platform to Enhance Public Health Resilience	Lode Godderis (KUL)	Nuha EL Sharif	Al-Quds University	69996,3
SI	2025-2027	"Education Against All Odds: Strengthening higher education in Palestine through evaluation" [EduGODDs]	Nathalie Holvoet (UA)	Saeda M. Abu Halaweh	Al-Quds Open University	69817
SI	2025-2027	Catalyzing TVET Transformation: Faculty Innovation in Curriculum Design and Stakeholder Collaboration	Ingeborg Placklé (VUB)	Kamel Jebreen; Bilal Younis	Palestine Technical University	69858,8
SI	2025-2027	Empowering for Justice: Rule of Law; Role of Hope	Kim Van der Borght (VUB)	Amir Khalil	Birzeit University	69999,24

Abbreviations (type): SI=Short Initiatives; TEAM projects; ITP=International Training Programs. Abbreviations (Flemish institutions): KUL= Katholieke Universiteit Leuven; UA= UAntwerpen, UG=Ghent University; UH=University of Hasselt, VUB: Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Competitive calls for new projects will be launched and announced on our website. Nationals of Palestine are eligible[1] to apply for scholarships for the International Master Programmes (ICP) and International Training Programmes (ITP).

[1] Admission requirements, application procedures and selection procedures differ across the programmes and host institutions.

2. Palestine and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

2.1. Palestine and the Sustainable Development Goals

The State of Palestine and the European Union are examples of non-UN member states that have also prepared and presented VNRs. The latest VNR 20024VNR2018PalestineNEWYORK.pdf / Palestinian VNR highlights Palestine's efforts in integrating the SDGS by organising all of them under five themes; People, Prosperity, Planet, Peace and Partnerships.

The key strategic planning document https://andp.unescwa.org/plans/1216 2022, titled "Putting Citizens First" outlay the development vision and priorities of the state of Palestine, focused on three pillars; political and economic independence, governance reforms and sustainable development. On the SDGs the focus is 8 goals; No Poverty (SDG 1), Quality Education (SDG 4), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11), and Climate Action (SDG 13).

Considering the global aspect of the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Report of 2025[2] assesses where each country stands with regard to achieving the SDGs. Since Palestine is not an official UN country no data is available, nor country profile. However, the State of Palestine and the European Union are examples of non-UN member states that have also prepared and presented VNRs.

As an umbrella organisation that works with calls for proposals, VLIRUOS supports interventions for and through higher education institutes, supporting them in the areas of education, research and uptake and thereby strengthening them in their role as development actor. Doing so, the impact of the interventions supported by VLIRUOS can be found in a large variety of sectors. In line with its major intervention area, VLIRUOS positions itself within the education sector, especially focused on higher education, research and innovation (SDG 4 and 9). However, through its interventions, VLIRUOS intervenes in different sectors as well. VLIRUOS recognises that given the complexity, scale and interconnectedness of current societal challenges, meaningful social, economic and ecological transformations can only be realised by starting from a holistic and integrated approach to the SDGs. When translated into SDGs, the projects that were financed by VLIRUOS in Palestine covered mainly, apart from SDG 4, 8 and 16. Top sectors for VLIRUOS in Palestine are public health, quality of education, TVET and rule of law.

Additional sources on progress related to higher education & science (SDG 4)

- UNESCO-UIS: overview data resources indicators related to SDG4
- Our World in data:
    - Indicators related to educational mobility and inequality
    - Indicators related to tertiary education
    - Indicators related to projections of future education (demand)
    - Indicators related to science and research

[2] Jeffrey D. Sachs, Guillaume Lafortune, Grayson Fuller and Guilherme Iablonovski (2025): Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2.2. Higher education landscape in the Palestine territories

All higher education matters are governed by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education , that regulates institutions governmental, public (NGO based), and private institutions offering programs from diplomas to PhDs. in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In addition to that, other charity associations and NGOs support the education sector in all Palestinian territories Governed by Law No. 6 of 2018, the law ensures the right to higher education, defines institutional legal status, and provides the regulatory framework through which the Council and Ministry issue relevant rules and instructions, For instance UNRWA | United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees operates as an education provider both at secondary and at higher education levels, providing courses free of charge for refugees.

Higher education in Palestine follows a binary system, offering two-year diploma programmes at community and technical colleges or academic degrees at universities. Bachelor's degrees typically take four years, master's programmes two years, and PhD studies at least three years, with admission based on academic performance and varying by institution. A one-year higher diploma also serves as a bridge between bachelor's and master's levels in some cases.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education supervises 73.3% of all schools, with higher coverage in the West Bank (79.3%) than in Gaza (55.5%). Other providers include the Jordanian Awqaf (50 schools in Jerusalem), UNRWA (educating over 339,000 Palestinian refugees), and private or NGO-run schools serving over 144,000 students across the West Bank and Gaza. The higher education sector faces a low enrolment rate with 4.1% of students enrolled in vocational streams during the 2021/2022 year. Additionally, there is a gender gap as 2.5% of girls go for higher education compared to boys at 6.1% of 2022/2023.

The Education Strategy 2025-27 highlights key efforts made by the Ministry of Education during the 2024–2025 school year to strengthen the education sector. These efforts include enforcing compulsory basic education, expanding access for students with disabilities, and establishing 25 Challenge Schools in high-risk areas. The Ministry also improved transportation for students facing harassment, increased school construction and renovation, and enhanced vocational education through the introduction of new tracks, partnerships with the private sector, and targeted support for girls. Additionally, the Ministry provides student loans, grants, and scholarships for higher education.

According to The Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education > the Ministry > about the Ministry > the Higher Education System in Palestine higher education institutions requires passing the Palestinian General Secondary School Certificate (Tawjihi) exam or an equivalent international qualification approved by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Students are placed in university programs based on their Tawjihi branch (scientific, humanities, or vocational), and admission is competitive, with each university setting its own minimum scores depending on program capacity and demand. Some universities also require an English proficiency exam, with students placed in appropriate language courses based on their results.

2.3. Leaving no one behind

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the international community pledged to leave no one behind and to endeavour to reach the furthest behind first. The principle of leaving no one behind can be defined as a three-part imperative: to end absolute poverty in all its forms, to stop group-based discrimination that results in unequal outcomes for disadvantaged populations, and to take action to help the furthest behind.

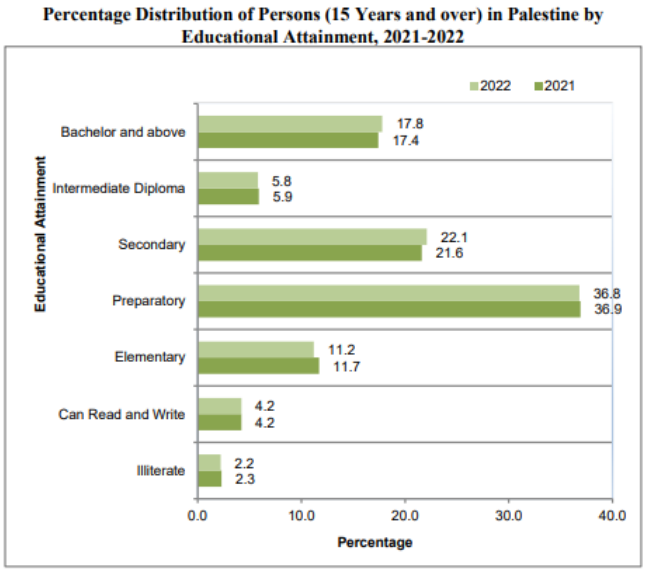
The 20024VNR2018PalestineNEWYORK.pdf and Palestinian VNR highlight Palestine's commitment to the principle of "leaving no one behind" by showcasing government efforts to promote inclusivity across all SDG goals. Special attention is given to vulnerable and marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, women, vulnerable children, and communities in rural areas. However, being able to measure the extent to which the country is able to leave no one behind is a challenge due to Insufficient data granularity that limits the country's ability to monitor progress in this regard. The Palestinian VNR also states that "Leave No One Behind, cannot be realized in a country that the whole world is leaving behind, a country that lives under a protracted and ongoing occupation that imposes restrictions over its government and hinders its access to serve its people wherever they are. A country that is under occupation with no full sovereignty and control over its resources cannot achieve the SDGs and realize its slogan of leaving none of its citizens behind".

Regarding the **economic dimension**, the Palestinian government has taken steps to ensure that no one is left behind. A micro-loan program has been established to support persons with disabilities in launching their own businesses and integrating into the productive sectors of the economy. Additionally, the government introduced incentive legislation aimed at empowering the private sector. This includes reforms in investment laws, intellectual property rights, ownership regulations, and tax policies, particularly in the renewable energy and industrial sectors, along with ongoing labor law reforms to create a more inclusive and dynamic economic environment, reduce unemployment and enhance the economy's capacity to generate job opportunities;

Furthermore, the report addresses the **legal dimension**, highlighting the widespread violence experienced by Palestinians because of the ongoing conflict. It documents extrajudicial killings, crime, and acts of violence perpetrated by illegal forces and settlers who operate with disregard for Palestinian legal institutions. Despite these challenges, the State of Palestine reaffirms its commitment to strengthening the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice for all, to better respond to the needs of its citizens.

In response to **poverty**, which, in the VNR, is defined as a cross-cutting and multidimensional issue that affects progress across all the SDGs the Palestinian government have made efforts to strengthen social protection systems and promote the social and economic integration of vulnerable groups, including persons living with disabilities. In 2017, an estimated 29.2% of Palestinians were living below the poverty line, largely due to ongoing social and political challenges. A key initiative addressing this issue is a poverty alleviation program that provides regular quarterly cash transfers to the most poverty-stricken families, elderly and persons living with disabilities Palestine, offering essential support and serving as a social safety net for those most in need. *Meanwhile with the war between Israel and Hamas and the destructions and killings by Israel in the Palestine territories it is obvious that all data related to poverty and deprivation is completely outdated and the situation is much worse than was presented at the time in the VNR document.*

On **gender inequality**, the State of Palestine has shown progress, particularly after signing the CEDAW law, which led to advancements in women's access to health and education. However, despite these developments, women continue to face significant discrimination in the workforce, with high unemployment rates and a large proportion engaged in unpaid labor. In addition, Palestinian women continue to experience various forms of violence, as documented in the VNR report.

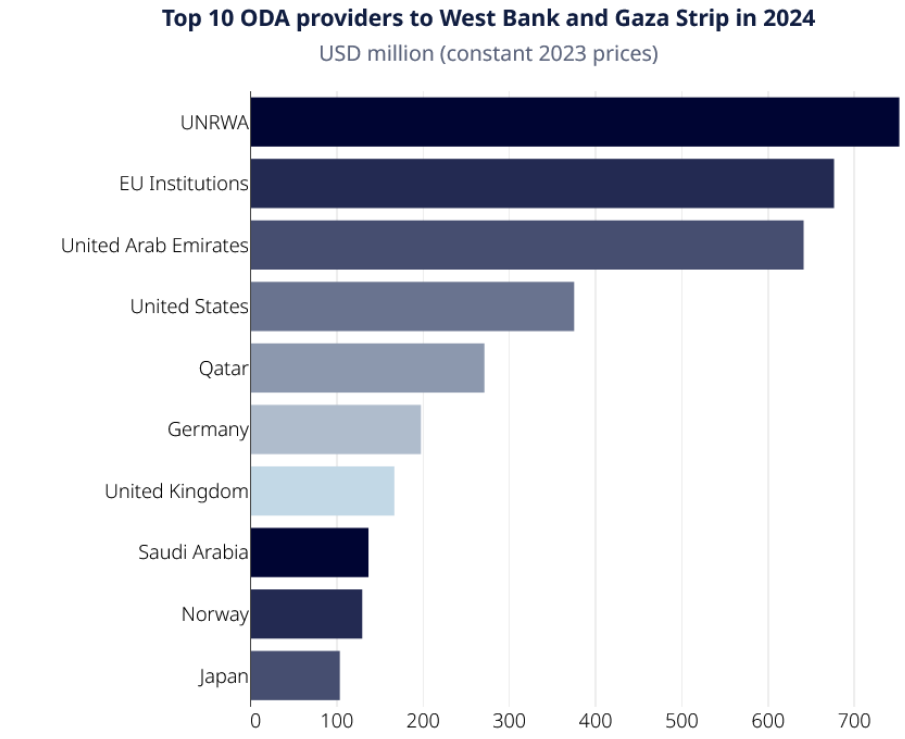


Regarding **education**, The Palestinian government has prioritized inclusive education as a means of resilience under occupation, ensuring no student is left behind. Since 2014, efforts by the Ministry of Education have focused on integrating students with disabilities through teacher training, resource centers, Braille materials, and peer support initiatives. Home-based education is also provided for students with disabilities and those under house arrest, reflecting a strong commitment to inclusive, accessible learning for all. Additionally the government provides scholarships for higher education to promote higher education while policies to integrate vocational and technical training have been put in place to promote intake. *Meanwhile with the war between Israel and Hamas and the destructions and killings by Israel in the Palestine territories it is obvious that all data related to education and higher education is completely outdated and the situation of higher education institutes is one of major destructions of sites in Gaza. In West Bank, the situation has also been severely impacted by the war.*

2.4. Multistakeholderpartnership - Stakeholder analysis

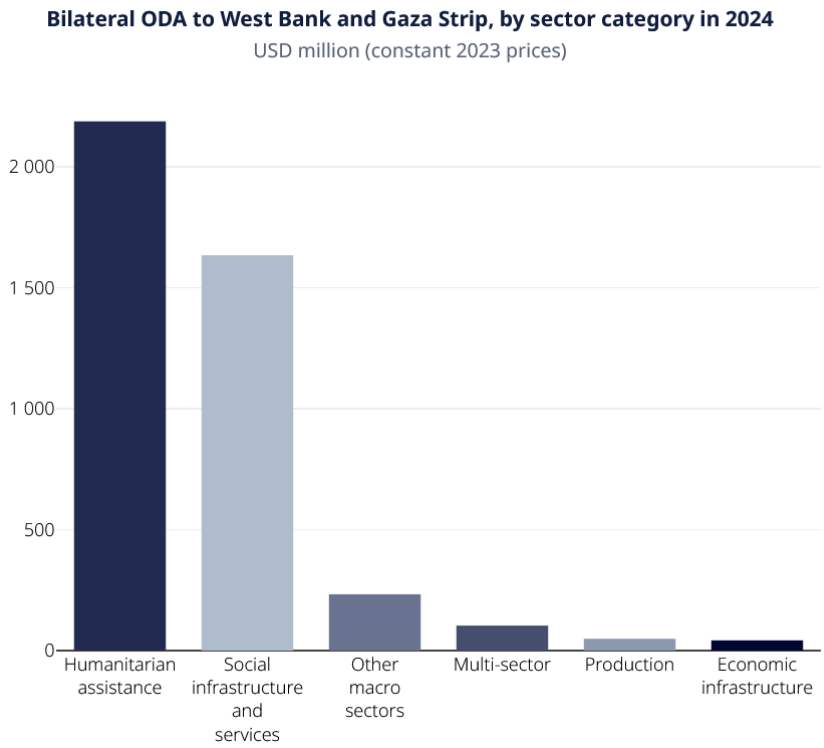
The complexity, scale, and interconnectedness of the current societal challenges that the SDG framework is seeking to address, requires a concerted effort of a wide variety of different stakeholders. As such, the principle of multistakeholderpartnership – which promotes cooperation and partnerships at different stages and spanning the boundaries of civil society, private sector, government, and academia – is ubiquitous across the 2030 Agenda. An analysis of these stakeholders is essential for each partnership.

Looking at the international **partners** of Palestine (West Bank and the Gaza strip), UNRWA and the EU institutions are the main donors of gross official development aid ODA in Palestine. With the withdrawal of USAID funds since the Trump administration took over in 2025, this situation is expected to change in the following years.

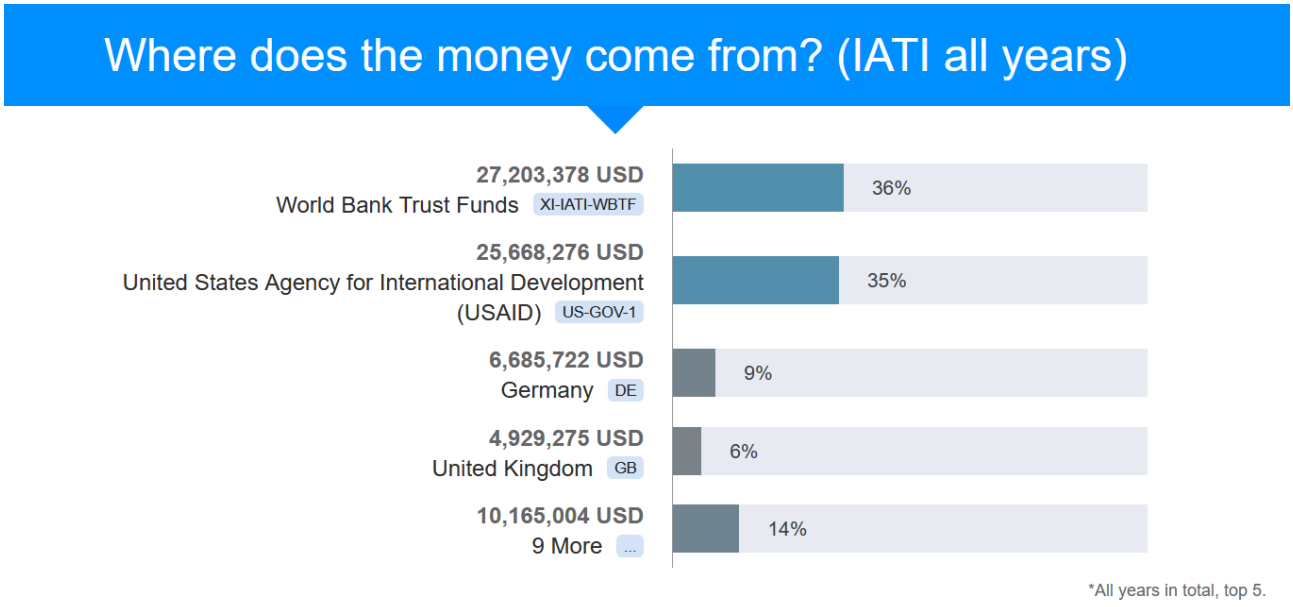


Sources: OECD (2025) , Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions [DAC2a]

The top sector for bilateral ODA is humanitarian Aid.



Based on data from the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), the Worldbank is the main donor in the higher education sector. Following the figure here below it is almost equally supported by USAID but since USAID was abolished early 2025, these funds are no longer available.



VLIRUOS contributes to the 2030 agenda by realizing a societal impact, implying an impact on local communities, civil society, governments, private sector or other higher education institutions. In what follows we list the role and the desired change among the main actors involved in the change process that VLIRUOS envisages to support through *its interventions*.

Actor	Role and interest/influence
Higher Education Institutions in Palestine	HEIs in the Palestine territories are important boundary partners in the realization of VLIRUOS outcomes in terms of its contribution to Agenda 2030, and the potential contribution to local sustainable development. As project owners they are expected to contribute to HEIs' enhanced institutional performance in the core tasks relating to education, research and societal service delivery strengthening the HEI's visibility and recognition as a centre of excellence. In the long-term, partner HEIs are also expected to have a multiplier effect on the higher education system and development sector in the country or region through their engagement in (global) knowledge-driven partnerships with academic and non-academic stakeholders.
DGD (incl. Belgian embassies in partner countries)	DGD has an advisory role in the VLIRUOS selection commissions and follows-up on the VLIRUOS portfolio and the thematic JSF on Higher Education and Science for Sustainable Development. The situation at diplomatic level is not so straightforward, since it is the Belgian Embassy in Jerusalem that could play a role in facilitating the uptake of knowledge, the identification, mobilisation and relation building with other

	stakeholders (e.g. links with European Union, national government, other donors), the contextual updates etc.
Students, professionals, and alumni	Students can be direct (e.g. as a recipient of a PhD scholarship within a project) or indirect beneficiaries (e.g. enjoying improved/innovative didactical approaches) of the projects. As direct beneficiary, their changed role will be about the generation and use of newly acquired knowledge, competences (e.g. global citizenship) and networks in view of sustainable development. Alumni from VLIRUOS-projects in the Palestine territories will be important stakeholders in connecting VLIRUOS projects with each other, with other actors, etc.
Academics/researchers	As direct beneficiaries of the projects, academics and researchers affiliated within Flemish and partner HE&SIs play an important role in co-creating, disseminating and creating conditions for uptake of knowledge relevant to the achievement of the SDGs in line with the needs, policies and priorities of the partner HE&SIs, local/national or regional stakeholders.
Members of the thematic JSF on Higher Education and Science for Sustainable Development	VLIRUOS, ITM and ARES have initiated the JSF on HESD4SD to further unlock the developmental potential of higher education and science cooperation for sustainable development and make it accessible to other local, Belgian and international partners as scientific advisor to other partners' projects, partners or policy bodies, as a platform for sharing state of the art scientific results, information, expertise and experience and for exploration of possibilities for synergy and complementarity. VLIRUOS is again, since 2025, present in Palestine, but ARES and ITM are not.
Belgian Actors of the Non-governmental Cooperation	VLIRUOS continuously tries to identify and encourage synergy and complementarity between Belgian ANGCs and academic stakeholders. Through the uptake of research results, mobilisation of local stakeholders, participation in trainings or courses, identification and communication of relevant research questions/opportunities, hosting of international internships, facilitating student mobility… these actors play a critical role.
Belgian bilateral cooperation (BIO & Enabel)	Palestine is a partner country of Belgian bilateral cooperation through Enabel.
International organizations and other donors (e.g. WHO, UNESCO, World Bank, European Commission…)	Interventions undertaken by international organisations like UN agencies such as FAO or international donors active in higher education cooperation can be complementary in the achievement of the objectives of projects. They can, for instance, play a role in the use and upscaling of new knowledge or practices or serve as seed money for bigger interventions financed by these international organisations.
Academic/science (inter)national and regional networks	Regional or (inter)national academic/science networks are among the potential indirect beneficiary as targeted HE&SIs strengthened in their research/educational capacities can improve the functioning of the networks they are part of through the co-creation, exchange and uptake of knowledge among academic stakeholders. Similar effects can be

	realized in the case of alumni and scholarship networks/associations when former scholarship students act as agents of change within these networks.
Public sector: Local or central government and political community	Engage in evidence-based governance that puts knowledge to the test by being a stakeholder in the co-creation of inclusive (innovative) solutions and effective user of research results to foster good governance for sustainable and coherent policies.
State owned/Private sector	To ensure that the resource-led sustainable industrialization process is both sustainable and beneficial, the government will work closely with the private sector. This includes developing both the private sector and human capital to build an educated, skillful, and productive labour force to drive industrialization.
Civil society, social movements and local communities	Civil society actors, social movements and local communities are expected to co-create, access and use the knowledge and research products generated within the framework of *projects* thereby making a potential contribution to the entire range of SDGs. The VNR 2018 mentions the involvement of Civil societies including youth groups, women groups, unions and local community organisations in a joint effort to implement SDGs. According to Civil Society | ECFR , Palestine have well rooted civil society organisations with strong human rights components. They however face regular arrests limiting the space for civil society participation.

3. Synergy and Complementarity with other (Belgian) actors in Palestine

3.1. VLIRUOS approaches to synergy and complementarity

Drawing upon their longstanding common history, VLIRUOS, ARES and the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) jointly developed the thematic Joint Strategic Framework on Higher Education and Science for Sustainable Development (JSF HES4SD). Through cooperation with civil society, private and public sector, the JSF initiators[3] aim to further unlock the huge developmental potential of higher education and science cooperation for sustainable development and make it accessible to other Belgian, local and international partners, in different ways: as partner in a multi-actor partnership, as scientific advisor to other partners' projects, partners or policy bodies, as a knowledge broker for sharing state of the art scientific results, information, expertise and experience and for exploration of possibilities for synergy and complementarity. This reference framework for Palestine will feed into the **platform** that the initiators of the JSF HES4SD plan to create to proactively communicate opportunities and facilitate such cooperation. More precisely, the platform can be used to:

(i) communicate about the launch and results of competitive calls for projects;

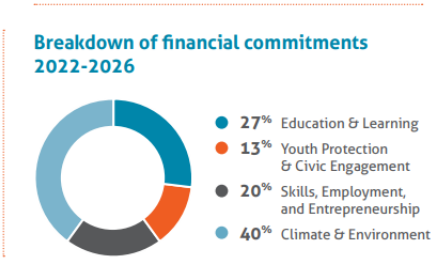
[3] The three JSF initiators represent 60 Belgian higher education institutions (HEIs), being 11 universities, 32 university colleges, 16 school of arts, and ITM.

(ii) communicate other opportunities for projects or scholarships;
(iii) gather/exchange on collaboration opportunities (e.g. requests for scientific advice);
(iv) share information about ongoing projects, events and seminars in the country/region.

3.2. Bilateral cooperation (Enabel) Palestine

The Palestine territories are included as one of the partner countries of the direct bilateral cooperation of Belgium through Enabel.

Belgium - Palestine Cooperation has had well-established cooperation since 1997. Enabel works on education with an emphasis on 21st century skills development, and support to local government. Based on the political and socio-economic context of the country, the 2022-2026 cooperation programme aims to empower young Palestinians to become active and critical citizens by supporting access to improved education, training, guidance and access to employment. At the same time, they promote green and circular economy initiatives and boost the development of sustainable cities. The 2022-2026 Belgium-Palestine cooperation programme totals 70 million euro.



More information can be found via the website Enabel and country brochure.

3.3. Belgian actors of the non-governmental cooperation in Palestine

3.3.1. Thematic Joint Strategic Framework on Higher Education and Science

Together with ARES and ITM, VLIRUOS forms a thematic joint strategic framework on higher education and science for sustainable development (JSF HES4SD): hes4sd.be

However, ARES nor ITM have project activities in Palestine.

Collaboration with the geographic JSF of Palestine will be facilitated by systematically sharing information on projects and grants, by allowing Belgian ANGC to submit their needs in applied research or training, and by encouraging multi-stakeholder partnerships through competitive calls for proposals (VLIRUOS).

3.3.2. Palestine Joint Strategic Framework

	Description of the strategic goal	ANGCs (active members)
SG1	Right to inclusive quality education, training, lifelong learning and job opportunities	APEFE, Solcoc, BD
SG2	Strengthening people-centered health systems to uphold the right to health in the West Bank and Gaza	Viva Salud, Humanity and Inclusion, CDEB, APEFE, Solsoc

SG3	Strengthening civil society to uphold international law, fight impunity, and foster stability	BD, Viva Salud, Oxfam Belgium, Solsoc, Entraide et Fraternité, 11.11.11., ASF, Caritas
SG4	Protecting the right to food, resilient rural livelihoods, and economic sovereignty	Caritas, Entraide et Fraternité, Oxfam Belgium, Solidagro, Solsoc

3.3.3. Other Thematic Joint Strategic Frameworks

Besides collaboration with the thematic JSF on Higher Education and Science, there is also collaboration with the thematic JSF of Decent Work through ANGCs in Palestine that work on 'Decent work' related topics. The ANGC active in this field is Solsoc.

The JSF Decent Work (JSF DW) contributes to the four strategic goals, which correspond to the four pillars of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda: creating jobs and sustainable livelihoods, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection, and strengthening social dialogue. It is important to emphasize that these four pillars are inseparable, interdependent, and mutually reinforcing. Complementing and working in synergy, the CSOs of the JSF DW will contribute to all of the goals, which in turn contribute to social and climate justice and the UN's 2030 Agenda.