

# FOCUS ON UNRWA

## Briefing Papers

Briefing Paper No. 8

June 2021

# Comparing UNRWA to Eritrea and Lesotho

Due to the range of services it provides to Palestinian refugees, UNRWA has often been characterised as a “state within a state”. This briefing paper will examine African nations with comparable population sizes and GDPs, Eritrea and Lesotho, in order to consider how UNRWA may function similarly. It will compare governance, health and education services, and standing in global society.

## OVERVIEW

Previously under colonial rule, Eritrea gained independence in 1993 and Lesotho in 1966. They are ranked 180<sup>th</sup> and 165<sup>th</sup> respectively on the Human Development Index.<sup>1</sup> Eritrea is an ethnically diverse country with 8 main native tongues, whilst the Basotho people make up the vast majority of Lesotho’s population.

	Population (millions)	Median age	GDP / 2021 Budget (USD billion)
Eritrea	3.5	19.2	2.065
Lesotho	2.1	24	2.376
Palestinian refugees / UNRWA	5.7	20.8	1.081

## GOVERNANCE

### Eritrea

- Eritrea has been a one-party state since the 1993 electoral success of the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). It is illegal for other parties to form.
- The Executive branch of the government contains President Isaias Afwerki and the 24-member State Council, which includes a

cabinet of 16 ministers. The Legislative body is made up of the unicameral 150-member National Assembly, which establishes the domestic and foreign policies of the government, regulates the State Council’s execution of these policies, and approves the country’s budget.

- The country is divided into six administrative regions.

### Lesotho

- Lesotho supports a constitutional monarchy. The All Basotho Convention leads a coalition government in the National Assembly, the lower house of parliament. The upper house is composed of 22 principal chiefs whose membership is hereditary and 11 appointees of the king, acting on the advice of the prime minister.
- Lesotho is divided into 10 districts.

## HEALTH SERVICES

### Eritrea

- The Ministry of Health runs Eritrea’s health system. There are 272 medical facilities in Eritrea as of 2019, including 22 hospitals; all but one is managed by the Ministry of Health.

### UNRWA in Focus Project

The UNRWA in Focus project is an Exeter University student-centred activity, led by Professor Mick Dumper, designed to provide a platform for the publication of the students’ research on one of the UN’s largest institutions. UNRWA in Focus Briefing Papers are short and concise and aim to provide useful overviews on a range of issues relating to UNRWA, with the aim of exploring the notion of UNRWA as a significant political actor in the Middle East. Other Papers in the series can be found here:

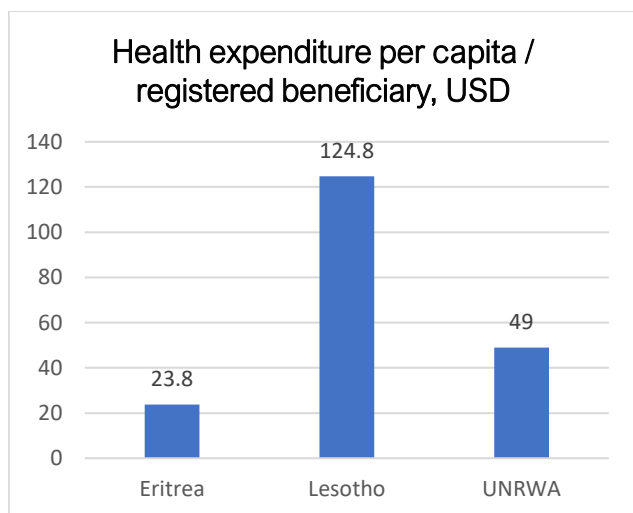
<http://sites.exeter.ac.uk/unwrafocus/briefing-papers/>

<sup>1</sup> [Latest Human Development Index Ranking | Human Development Reports \(undp.org\)](https://data.undp.org/)

- As of 2016, there are only 0.063 physicians per 1000 people compared to a global average of 1.57.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2018 Eritrea's health expenditure was an estimated 4.1% of its GDP.<sup>3</sup>

## Lesotho

- The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, in conjunction with various donors and non-governmental and private agencies, maintain a network of hospitals, clinics and health centres which provide basic facilities throughout most of the country. The country is divided into a number of key institutions for the delivery of health care services, each based on a government or mission hospital.
- There are 286 health facilities in Lesotho, which are divided into three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. This includes 20 general district hospitals and one tertiary hospital. Patients requiring services beyond what is offered at the tertiary level are referred to Universitas and Pelonomi hospitals in South Africa at the government's expense.
- The Government of Lesotho is the largest healthcare provider in the country. The NGO Christian Health Association of Lesotho operates 61 primary healthcare centres and eight general hospitals, completely financed by the government's Ministry of Health through a



Note: data on Eritrea and Lesotho is from 2018, UNRWA from 2021. Sources: [Eritrea and Lesotho](#), [UNRWA](#)

<sup>2</sup><https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MED.PHYS.ZS?locations=ER-LS>

<sup>3</sup><https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.CHEX.GD.ZS?locations=ER-LS>

<sup>4</sup> For a review of Lesotho's public health sector expenditure:

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/29344>

<sup>5</sup> [Current health expenditure \(% of GDP\) - Eritrea, Lesotho | Data | worldbank.org](#)

<sup>6</sup> See note 4.

subvention payment. Private company Tsepong operates Lesotho's only tertiary care hospital along with four clinics. The ratio of doctors to the population was 0.9 per 10,000 in 2017.<sup>4</sup>

- Lesotho's total health expenditure (9.28% of GDP in 2018) is relatively high compared to other Southern African states, meaning patients in Lesotho spend less on an out-of-pocket basis than most other SSA countries.<sup>5</sup>
- Donor funding represents another significant funding channel for healthcare in Lesotho, constituting around 32% of total health sector expenditure for the financial year 2015/16.<sup>6</sup>

## EDUCATION SERVICES

### Eritrea

- As of 2012, there were 476 pre-schools, 833 elementary schools, 302 middle schools, 89 secondary schools, one university and seven institutions of higher education in Eritrea.
- Enrolment is low: in the year 2010/11, the number of pupils enrolled in school at the elementary level was 71.6%, at middle school level 52.4% and at secondary level 23.8%.<sup>7</sup>
- The final year of secondary school education takes place in the Sawa military camp. Conscription begins at the age of 18.
- Inadequate teacher supply has resulted in the conscription of teachers on indefinite military service. According to world bank data, the teacher-student ratio at the primary level was 38.7 at the primary level and 35 at the secondary level in 2018.<sup>8</sup>
- The education system receives support from international organisations such as the African Development Bank and UNICEF.

### Lesotho

- There are around 350,000 students enrolled across Lesotho's school system.<sup>9</sup>
- In total, the system comprises 2,204 pre-primary schools, 1,478 primary schools, 341 post-primary schools, 26 technical and vocational schools, and 14 higher education institutions.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> An overview from Eritrea's Ministry of Education can be found here: <http://www.ecss-online.com/data/pdfs/ecss-OVERVIEW-EDUCATION-eritrea.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> [Pupil-teacher ratio, secondary - Eritrea | Data | worldbank.org](#)

<sup>9</sup> Bureau of Statistics (2018). *2018 Education Statistics Report*. Kingdom of Lesotho. Downloaded from [BOS Publications](#) [last accessed 16/05/21]

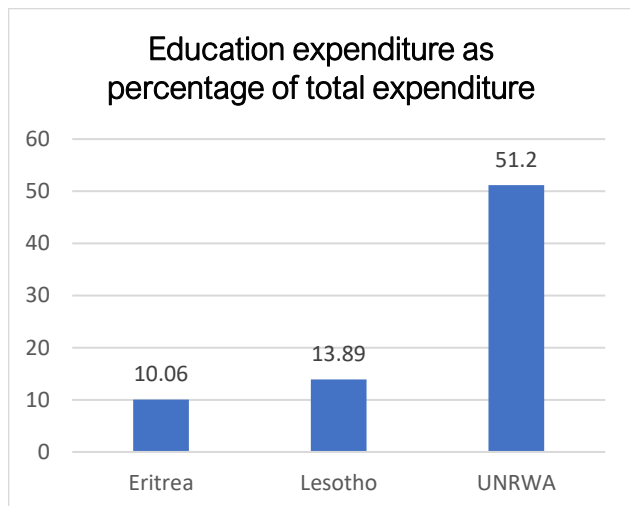
<sup>10</sup> [Microsoft Word - EDUCATION SECTOR PLAN 2016-2026final \(globalpartnership.org\)](#)

- As of 2015, the Gross Enrolment Rate for primary and secondary education was 66.9% and 38.9% respectively.<sup>11</sup>
- In 2018 government expenditure on education was 7% of its GDP.<sup>12</sup>
- In 2014, out of 11,167 primary school teachers, 75.8% were qualified, and 25.2% unqualified. The pupil to teacher ratio was 33:1.<sup>13</sup>

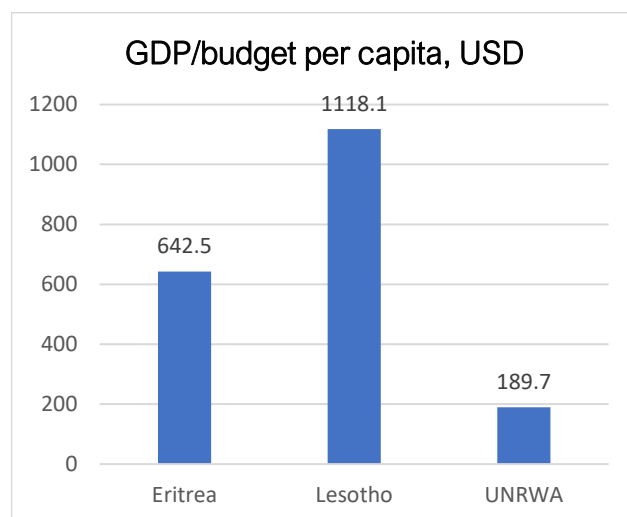
- It holds membership in a number of international organisations, including status as an observing member of the Arab League.
- Eritrea has 31 embassies and consulates abroad; 22 are present within the country.<sup>16</sup>

## Lesotho

- Lesotho is heavily affected by economic activity in South Africa.
- It is a member of many regional economic organisations, including the Southern African Development Community and Southern African Customs Union.
- There are 10 foreign embassies and consulates in Lesotho, and Lesotho is represented in 17 countries abroad.<sup>17</sup>
- Lesotho receives considerable support from international organisations and states. The World Bank Group has committed USD 344.80 million to support 10 projects in Lesotho.<sup>18</sup> In



Note: data on Eritrea is from 2016, Lesotho from 2018 and UNRWA from 2021. Sources: [Eritrea](#), [Lesotho](#), [UNRWA](#)



Note: data on Eritrea and Lesotho is from 2018, UNRWA from 2021. Sources: [Eritrea and Lesotho](#), [UNRWA](#)

## INTERNATIONAL STANDING

### Eritrea

- At the end of 2016, an estimated 525,000 Eritreans were refugees or asylum seekers, comprising 8% of the global refugee population.<sup>14</sup>
- The signing of a peace treaty between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2018 preceded the termination of UN sanctions against Eritrea. Eritrea was then [removed from the US Counterterrorism Non-Cooperation List](#) and witnessed a sharp increase in international grants that year.<sup>15</sup>
- Eritrea is currently engaged in [conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region](#), which initiated in November 2020. It is facing calls from the international community to withdraw its troops.

2019 Lesotho received USD 146 million in official development assistance.<sup>19</sup>

## HOW MAY UNRWA FUNCTION LIKE A STATE?

- UNRWA provides services in primary and vocational education, primary health care, relief and social services, infrastructure and camp improvement, microfinance, and emergency response.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> [Government expenditure on education, total \(% of GDP\) - Lesotho | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> See note 10.

<sup>14</sup> [Eritrea: Root Causes of the Refugee Crisis | Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission \(house.gov\)](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Grants, excluding technical cooperation \(BoP, current US\\$\) - Lesotho, Eritrea | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

<sup>16</sup> Information on embassies and consulates worldwide can be found here: [Embassies and Consulates Around the World - Embassy-WorldWide.com](#)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> [Lesotho Overview \(worldbank.org\)](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Net official development assistance and official aid received \(current US\\$\) - Lesotho, Eritrea | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

- 3,134,732 refugees are registered to access its health service and over 526,000 students are enrolled in UNRWA's schools.<sup>20</sup> Bearing in mind the population sizes of Eritrea and Lesotho, the scale of UNRWA's services is comparable to a state. These services are not as comprehensive as those of Eritrea or Lesotho but play a vital role in UNRWA's host countries. More information on UNRWA's services can be found [here](#).
- As shown by the bar charts, UNRWA's expenditure differs from Eritrea and Lesotho. Its budget is around half of their GDP. It spends far more on education as a proportion of its budget. However, its health expenditure per capita, which falls between Eritrea and Lesotho, is comparable to a sovereign state.
- UNRWA does not enjoy the same level of representation abroad or in international organisations. Outside its areas of operation, the Agency only maintains a physical presence in New York, Washington DC, Brussels, and Cairo.<sup>21</sup> It does not receive the same financial aid or support that Eritrea and Lesotho receive.
- UNRWA does not perform all the same functions of a sovereign state: for example, UNRWA does not provide an armed or police force, although it does provide firefighters.
- In summary, UNRWA functions relatively similarly to a state in that it provides essential services to 5.7 million people. However, its international standing and expenditure differ to a large extent.

*By Ela Oldfield*

## Useful Links

World Bank data on Eritrea and Lesotho:  
<https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=ER-LS>

For data on demography:  
<https://population.un.org/wpp/>

IMF report on selected economic data for Eritrea and Lesotho:  
[Report for Selected Countries and Subjects \(imf.org\)](#)

Lesotho Bureau of Statistics reports:  
[BOS Publications](#)

2020/21 Mid-Term Budget Review from the parliament of Lesotho:  
[2020/21 MID-TERM BUDGET REVIEW \(www.gov.ls\)](#)

## Further Reading

Aerni-Flessner, J. (2018). *Dreams for Lesotho: Independence, Foreign Assistance, and Development*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Tronvoll, K. and Mekonnen, D. (2014). *The African Garrison State: Human Rights and Political Development in Eritrea*. Woodbridge, GB: Boydell & Brewer.

Shabaneh, G. (2010). Refugees, International Organizations, and National Identity: The Case of Palestine. *New Political Science*. 32:2, 215-236.

<sup>20</sup> [What We Do | UNRWA](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Organizational Structure | UNRWA](#)