

Humanitarian access to and within the Gaza Strip: five months into the recent hostilities

OVERVIEW

The Hamas attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 have triggered hostilities in the Gaza Strip for five months. Israeli armed forces have responded with heavy bombardment and military ground operations in Gaza, killing over 30,500 people and injuring around 71,900 as at 4 March 2024 (OCHA 04/03/2024). 7,000 people remained missing as at 23 February (UNRWA 23/02/2024).

Humanitarian access is critical to allow aid delivery. The scale and severity of humanitarian needs in the strip surpasses the current capacity of humanitarian responders. **Even with improved humanitarian access and increased aid assistance, people will have long-lasting needs and will require years to recover** (KII 26/02/2024). A permanent ceasefire, along with reduced bureaucratic impediments and increased commercial access, is necessary for Gazans to be able to meet their needs and rebuild their lives. It is important to note that to scale up assistance, both access into and within Gaza must be improved and sustainable. Indiscriminate bombardments and attacks, physical threats to the safety of humanitarian workers, lengthy bureaucratic obstacles, the denial and delay of missions, communication constraints, and intermittent border closures heavily constrain the humanitarian response (OCHA 01/03/2024 and 05/02/2024). Access impediments into and within the Gaza Strip predate the escalation of hostilities on 7 October, resulting from the 16-year blockade of Gaza by Israel, but they continue to aggravate current access constraints (KII 26/02/2024).

On 29 February 2024, Israeli forces killed more than 110 Gazans and injured over 750 as people crowded around humanitarian trucks to seek food assistance in northern Gaza, which has been largely inaccessible since the hostilities started (CNN 29/02/2024). On 18 February, at Wadi Gaza checkpoint, hungry crowds also surrounded the first WFP convoy to enter the Gaza Strip after a three-week disruption. The second convoy was looted and a driver beaten. The remaining flour was distributed in Gaza city amid tensions (WFP 20/02/2024). There are testimonies and social media information on people looting food assistance trucks before they arrive at their destination because of the desperate situation Gazans face when it comes to meeting basic needs (WFP 20/02/2024; KII 03/03/2024). The absence of sufficient assistance and lack of access to what is available are degrading social cohesion and pushing people to resort to potentially harmful coping strategies, increasing protection risks.

About this report

Aim: this report consolidates all available information on access into and within the Gaza Strip. The aim is to create awareness around access limitations and to support advocacy efforts to scale up the response.

Method: the information was compiled through publicly available data and non-public information shared with ACAPS, including key informant interviews conducted between December 2023 and February 2024.

Limitation: the information landscape is highly constrained and sensitive, and the rapidly changing situation further challenges information-gathering and context-monitoring.

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KEY FINDINGS

- Many humanitarian responders emphasise that several of the requests made to improve access have very easy solutions, including, for instance, re-instigating the supply of electricity into the Gaza Strip to allow for hospitals to function properly.
- An effective scale-up of the humanitarian response will require a ceasefire. Even in the case of a humanitarian pause, however, the access situation is expected to remain precarious because of bureaucratic impediments (KII 04/03/2024 a; KII 04/03/2024 b).
- As at 4 March 2024, the only two functional crossings were Rafah and Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom, which led to Rafah governorate in Gaza, meaning all humanitarian response and coordination were planned and executed from there. Should Israeli ground operations commence in Rafah, it will severely affect the at least 1.9 million multiply displaced Gazans who have moved there and make humanitarian response close to impossible (KII 04/03/2024 a; OCHA 14/02/2024; UNSC 12/01/2024).
- Ramadan is expected to begin around 9 March and will affect humanitarian response capacity. Particularly, the limited working hours during this period may constrain operations taking place outside Gaza, and items transported via humanitarian convoys are procured in Egypt or Jordan (KII 04/03/2024 a). Without a ceasefire, it is difficult to imagine what Ramadan will look like for Gazans, but it will likely result in a further deterioration of access, operations, and people's humanitarian needs.
- Although Rafah and Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossings have been functional, they are not consistently open, and humanitarian movement (convoys and personnel) is subject to extensive bureaucratic processes and physical checks. These limit the number of trucks able to enter Gaza daily, with numbers being inconsistent on a day-to-day basis. In February 2024, the average number of trucks that entered Gaza was 102; the highest number of trucks entering on one day during this month was 220 (on 22 February) (UNRWA accessed 27/02/2024). At the same time, the food and critical supplies entering Gaza through these convoys are still insufficient to meet the needs of the population.
- Rafah is the central humanitarian hub wherein the entire response is run, as other governorates are significantly inaccessible because of insecurity from Israeli ground operations. This means that much of the available information is regarding Rafah, and there are information gaps related to the other affected governorates because of the lack of access and ability to conduct assessments. It is important to note that the entire population of Gaza is in need of assistance, with some specific population groups facing compounding vulnerabilities, such as children under five, pregnant and lactating women, people with disabilities, and older people. Until humanitarian access improves and the response can scale up, the priority is not to undertake assessments but to urgently save lives through humanitarian response (KII 29/02/2024; KII 03/03/2024).

- Between 24–30 November 2023, there was a temporary ceasefire, and humanitarian responders were granted limited access. Specifically, the pause enabled UN agencies and the Egyptian and Palestinian Red Crescent Societies to enhance aid distribution into and throughout Gaza. The pause allowed between 100–200 truckloads of aid to enter Gaza daily through Rafah Crossing, with 300 entering on 28 November (UNRWA accessed 27/02/2024). Following the pause, ground operations began in southern Gaza Strip (KII 11/12/2023; OCHA 25/11/2023 and 29/11/2023; ActionAid 27/11/2023). The duration of the humanitarian pause was too short to reach all the people in need, especially those stuck in the north of Gaza, as the scale of needs was already drastic.

ACCESS LIMITATION 1: LIMITED MOVEMENTS ALLOWED INTO GAZA

Prior to 7 October 2023, access in and out of the Gaza Strip took place through:

- Beit Hanoun/Erez Crossing (bordering and controlled by Israel)
- Rafah Crossing, bordering Egypt
- Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing, where the borders between Israel and Egypt meet (AJ 15/06/2022).

The quantity and type of supplies entering Gaza were extremely controlled and limited as a result of the 16-year Israeli blockade on the strip (UNICEF 30/06/2022). This blockade had already resulted in a shortage of essential items, such as food and fuel, and created long-term challenges in accessing clean water, healthcare, and education, stunting Gaza's socioeconomic development (AJ 14/03/2021).

Currently, it can take two to three weeks for **humanitarian trucks** to acquire permission to enter Gaza (KII 03/03/2024). Trucks are subjected to extensive inspections at the border with Egypt before being allowed entry into Gaza through Rafah Crossing (UNHCR 22/02/2024). Humanitarian trucks have to travel through the Sinai Desert and then be inspected at al-Awja/Nitzana crossing at the Egyptian-Israeli border by Israeli authorities before the aid is reloaded onto separate trucks that travel through northern Sinai to enter through Rafah Crossing (Arab News 26/10/2023; KII 04/03/2024 a). At Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing, humanitarian trucks are also subjected to long inspections. Upon inspection, if any single item or pallet on a truck is incorrectly logged or rejected by the Israeli authorities, the entire truck is denied entry to Gaza through either crossing (KII 04/03/2024 a; KII 04/03/2024 b).

Civilians are not allowed in the Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing area, but this rule has not been strictly enforced. Protesters have been obstructing the flow of aid into Gaza, resulting in erratic entries of trucks through the crossing (NPR 12/02/2024; BBC 26/01/2024).

Map 1. Border crossings and blocked access to Gaza



Source: ACAPS

KEY:

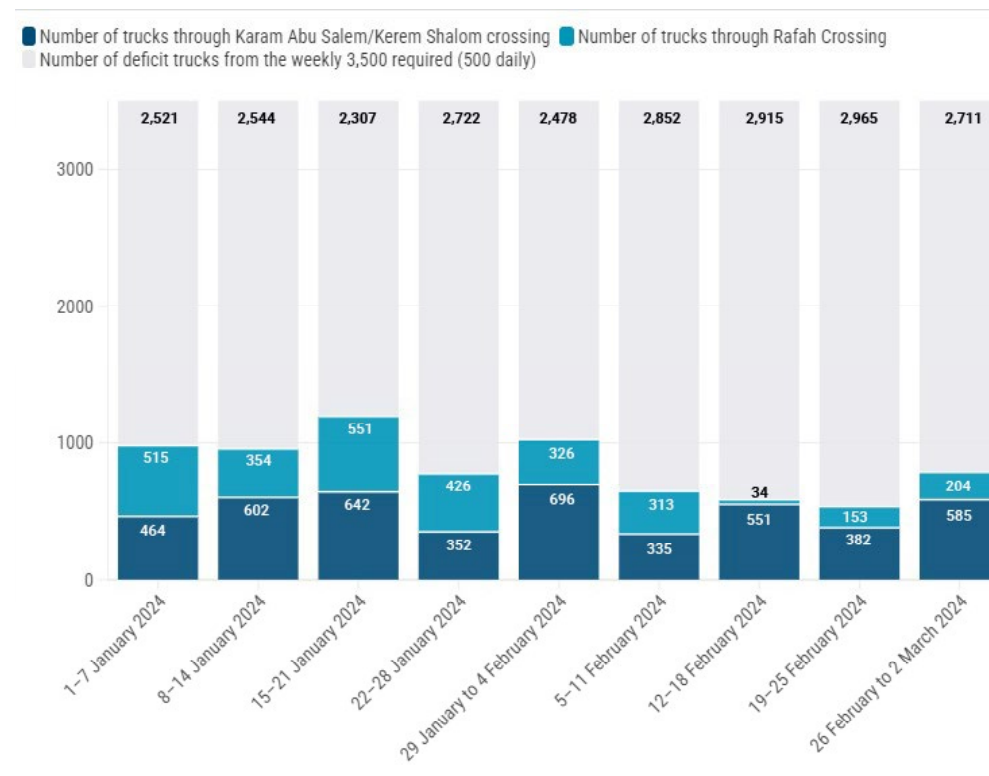
1. **Border fence with Egypt**
Between Gaza and Egypt, there is a 12.6km-long fence dividing the territories and constraining movement (OCHA 14/02/2024).
2. **Rafah**
The Rafah Crossing was closed between 7–21 October 2023, with only a limited number of humanitarian trucks entries and the movement of wounded people out of Gaza to seek treatment being allowed (OCHA 18/01/2024 and 16/01/2024; KII 11/12/2023). As at 6 March 2024, the Rafah Crossing had been open for 124 days (UNRWA accessed 05/03/2024). Although inconsistently open, this crossing has been the main entry point into Gaza since its reopening on 21 October, with 59% (more than 8,600) of the humanitarian convoys passing as at 6 March 2024.
3. **Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom**
Gaza's main commercial crossing, Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing, reopened on 17 December 2023 and had only been open for 63 days as at 6 March 2024 (UNRWA accessed 05/03/2024). Although this crossing has been open, Israeli protesters have been blocking the path of humanitarian trucks entering Gaza for many months, limiting the number of trucks entering (NPR 12/02/2024; BBC 26/01/2024).
4. **Border fence with Israel**
Between Gaza and Israel, there is a 60km-long fence impeding the mobility of people through the border (OCHA 14/02/2024).
5. **al-Muntar/Karni**
On 21 February 2024, the Israeli authorities announced intentions to reopen the al-Muntar/Karni border crossing as a humanitarian depot to allow for the movement of humanitarian trucks into Gaza (Jpost 21/02/2024). This crossing was closed by Israel in 2007, when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip, and was permanently shut in 2011 (AJ 15/06/2022). The Israeli military demolished the remnants of the crossing in 2022 (TOI 04/12/2022). The reconstruction and reestablishment of the crossing are necessary for humanitarian access, which can be expected to take at least a few weeks (KII 28/02/2024).
6. **Beit Hanoun/Erez**
Prior to the hostilities, Beit Hanoun/Erez crossing was used to allow Palestinians with Israeli-issued permits to travel to the West Bank after being subject to multiple checkpoints. This crossing is not equipped for the movement of goods (AJ 15/06/2022 and 14/03/2021; KII 28/01/2024).
7. **Humanitarian access through Jordan**
The corridor to Gaza from Jordan, through Israel, is too long and complex for efficient humanitarian response planning, as it is exposed to multiple bureaucratic impediments, including multiple checkpoints and needed permits (KII 28/02/2024). This route also requires the loading and offloading of humanitarian supplies at multiple points, as trucks are changed at various borders.

These bureaucratic and physical obstacles limit the number of trucks entering Gaza every day (The Guardian 02/03/2024). According to UNRWA, a minimum of 500 trucks must enter Gaza daily to meet the basic needs of people, which was the daily average number of trucks that entered prior to 7 October 2023. From January–February 2024, the average number of trucks that entered Gaza was only 124, 24.8% of the required amount. The highest number of trucks entering on one day was 236 on 10 January (UNRWA accessed 03/03/2024; UNRWA 21/02/2024). The number of trucks able to enter daily is not consistent and fluctuates significantly from day to day, but overall, it is insufficient to meet the needs of Gazans (UNRWA accessed 29/02/2024).

While more trucks have entered through Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing since January 2024, overall, more trucks have entered through Rafah since 21 October 2023, since Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom did not open till 17 December 2023 (UNRWA accessed 03/03/2024).

The Egyptian Red Crescent (ERC) has been leading the overall entry process for humanitarian convoys to Gaza through the Rafah border (Logistics Cluster 16/11/2023). As a requirement for being part of the ERC-led interagency convoys, humanitarian organisations must register in Egypt, entailing a long process where approval is not guaranteed (KII 29/02/2024; KII 04/03/2024 a). When the hostilities began in October 2023, only five organisations were registered in Egypt (KII 04/03/2024 b).

Figure 1. Number of trucks entering weekly through Rafah and Karam Abu Salem/ Kerem Shalom crossings between 1 January and 2 March 2024, compared to the required 3,500 trucks (considering 500 daily trucks required)



Source: ACAPS

Responders have used **aidrops** to deliver aid to Gazans. On 2 March 2024, the US military dropped over 38,000 meals along the Gaza coastline as part of a series of aidrops in coordination with the Jordanian air force (AJ 02/03/2024). The Jordanian military had previously used aidrops to deliver food parcels and medical supplies (Reuters 27/02/2024; TWP 29/02/2024). That said, aidrops cannot replace increased humanitarian access through the crossings, as the quantities dropped are insufficient to meet the vast needs of Gazans (AJ 02/03/2024; The Guardian 02/03/2024). Aidrops are also not coordinated with local responders and often do not take into account safe distribution, creating protection risks as people are desperate for food assistance (KII 04/03/2024 a). In some cases, aidrops have missed the intended destination, landing outside Gaza or even being ruined in the ocean.

For the **movement of people**, including humanitarian personnel, only the Rafah border crossing can be used. People are also restricted in what they can bring with them; for example, personal body armour is not allowed. Authorisation from the Egyptian Government is required to cross northern Sinai, and authorisation from the Israeli Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) is needed to then enter Gaza using the crossing (KII 29/02/2024). The necessary permits from the Israeli police, military intelligence, national security intelligence, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs can take at least one week to acquire, while coordination into Gaza must take place only on Mondays and Wednesdays (KII 29/02/2024; KII 03/03/2024).

Commercial access into Gaza has been largely blocked, with only a handful of trucks entering through Karam Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom crossing and a limited number of private suppliers transporting commercial goods through Rafah Crossing. The exact number of commercial trucks entering is unclear. Markets within Gaza are not functional because of damage and destruction, displacement, and a lack of commercial goods entering Gaza. This has resulted in extremely high prices for available items (KII 29/02/2024; KII 03/03/2024).

ACCESS LIMITATION 2: DENIED MOVEMENTS WITHIN GAZA

Once humanitarian assistance enters Gaza, the items are reloaded onto other trucks to complete the last-mile delivery, prolonging the process. There are also challenges related to truck availability, because of the lack of both drivers and trucks resulting from the insecurity in Gaza (KII 03/03/2024).

Israeli forces have systematically interfered with mission programmes, often forcing their cancellation (OCHA 05/02/2024). Humanitarian responders require authorisation from the Israeli Defence Forces to move from southern to northern Gaza and provide assistance to people (KII 29/02/2024). Between 1 January and 15 February 2024, the Israeli military denied access to 51% of aid missions planned for the north of Wadi Gaza and 25% of those planned for the areas requiring coordination with the south of Wadi Gaza, such as Deir al-Balah (OCHA 01/03/2024).

Even upon acquiring authorisation, humanitarian activities, convoys, and sites need to be coordinated with COGAT, the intermediary between humanitarian responders and the Israeli military, for “deconfliction”,¹ an added bureaucratic bottleneck not available to local NGOs, who are often the primary responders (KII 03/03/2024; KII 04/03/2024 a). Despite deconfliction, there is no guarantee that humanitarian staff or assets will be not struck in military operations (IRC 30/01/2024; MAP 18/01/2024; Reuters 25/01/2024; KII 29/02/2024; KII 04/03/2024 a). There has been conflicting technical information from Israeli authorities on how to manage access within Gaza, affecting humanitarian movement and operational planning (KII 29/02/2024; KII 03/03/2024; KII 04/03/2024 a). Delayed response from Israeli forces regarding deconfliction or delays at checkpoints have often forced missions to turn around (KII 03/03/2024; KII 04/03/2024 a).

Road damage and debris from destroyed homes and infrastructure further restrain access to some areas (KII 29/02/2024). Assessments estimate that the amount of debris generated by the destruction of residential housing units will exceed 12,000 metric tons and will take over four years to remove given Gaza’s current capabilities (OCHA 23/02/2024).

¹ Deconfliction is the “exchange of information and planning advisories by humanitarian actors with military actors in order to prevent or resolve conflicts between two sets of objectives, remove obstacles to humanitarian action, and avoid potential hazards for humanitarian personnel” (MSF accessed 04/03/2024).

ACCESS LIMITATION 3: INSECURITY AND MILITARY OPERATIONS PREVENTING THE MOVEMENT OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONDERS

Air strikes and field operations restrict the aid response in Gaza. Insecurity, including the risk of harm to humanitarian staff, constrains access for humanitarian responders (UN 06/02/2024; ICRC 07/11/2023). In many instances, assistance delivery has had to be cancelled because of inconsistent messaging around access coordination or sudden insecurity along the route or at the intended destination (KII 29/03/2024; KII 04/03/2024 a).

Intense fighting in and around Gaza city and Khan Younis has caused many deaths and continues to damage civilian infrastructure (OCHA 04/03/2024). Between 7 October 2023 and 28 February 2024, around 335 reported incidents affected 155 different UNRWA premises and the people inside them, some with multiple incidents affecting the same location, including at least 50 incidents of military use and interference at UNRWA premises (UNRWA 01/03/2024).

Humanitarian workers are not able to reach northern Gaza because of the lack of security from ground operations, and some people remain confined in buildings and remote areas. It is estimated that there are still tens of thousands of people, including children, in the north of Gaza who are unable to travel, many because of sickness or disability (NYT 02/12/2023). WFP food aid in the north of Gaza resumed operations on 18 February 2024 after a disruption of three weeks caused by insecurity (WFP 20/02/2024).

Considering the insecurity and tensions, the Palestinian Civil Police Force would typically accompany humanitarian convoys within Gaza for safety and deconfliction. Since the hostilities, however, the IDF has also been targeting the Civil Police, causing them to withdraw from escorting humanitarian convoys as doing so would also expose humanitarian staff to security risks (KII 29/02/2024; KII 04/03/2024 a). Instead, the Israeli military would escort some convoy movements but withdraw just before distributions would take place (KII 04/03/2024 a). This has exposed Gazans seeking assistance to further protection risks at distribution sites (CNN 29/02/2024).

ACCESS LIMITATION 4: ELECTRICITY AND COMMUNICATION BLACKOUT

Since 11 October 2023, the Gaza Strip has been under an electricity blackout after Israel cut off their supply. As a result, there has been no public electric power within homes to power essential devices, such as mobile phones and household batteries. Attacks have also destroyed phone lines and internet infrastructure. People with solar panels have been offering to charge mobile phones and power banks for a fee, but the high demand and lack of sun during winter have resulted in long queues (MEMO 09/02/2024; Euronews 13/02/2024). There are reports that the Israeli forces have targeted solar panels and generators with air strikes, further cutting off Gazans from electricity and telecommunications (CSIS 11/11/2023; Maktoob Media 04/11/2023).

Disruptions to communication services because of electricity blackouts and infrastructure destruction significantly affect the humanitarian response as aid workers struggle to coordinate operations or manage access within Gaza (MEMO 09/02/2024; KII 29/02/2024; KII 03/03/2024). These constraints have also affected decision-making and operational planning for INGOs relying on local organisations in Gaza to implement their activities (KII 29/02/2024).

Communication disruptions particularly cut off northern Gaza, and military operations extremely limit humanitarian presence. Only local organisations can access the area in a limited and sporadic way (KII 29/02/2024).

ACCESS LIMITATION 5: SHORTAGE OF RESPONDERS AND FUNDING POLITICISATION

There are not enough responders to the crisis, including humanitarian workers and medical staff in Gaza. From 7 October 2023 to 1 March 2024, the hostilities killed at least 161 UN staff, 340 health workers, 47 Palestinian Civil Defence workers, and 94 journalists (OCHA 01/03/2024 and 08/02/2024; CPJ 06/03/2024). As at 23 February, there were only 15 humanitarian organisations engaged in providing food assistance across the Gaza Strip, and five organisations were conducting screenings for malnutrition among children aged 6–59 months using mid upper arm circumference measurements in shelters and health facilities (OCHA 23/02/2024). These numbers are not enough to cover the number of people in need.

National and local humanitarian staff are also among the affected population, with some having been displaced. Many bear the burden of being the primary responders to the crisis, since most international staff have been repatriated (KII 12/12/2023; KII 27/12/2023; KII 29/12/2023; KII 03/03/2024; KII 04/03/2024 b; OCHA 01/03/2024). Local staff have been unable to reach affected populations because of security concerns (KII 03/03/2024). The lack of security for humanitarian staff, including medical workers, has forced some international and binational responders to leave the Gaza Strip, but evacuation has been prohibited for Palestinian nationals.

Israeli authorities allege that 12 UNRWA workers were implicated in the Hamas assault on Israel on 7 October 2023. Israel also alleges that at least 190 of the 13,000 people employed by UNRWA in Gaza are affiliated with Hamas or Palestinian Islamic extremist operatives (Sky News 13/02/2024; UNRWA 01/03/2024). These accusations have led to a halt in contributions from major UNRWA donors, including the EU, Austria, Canada, Germany, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK, and the US. The withdrawal of the top three supporters of UNRWA – the EU, Germany, and the US – has created a significant funding gap, severely limiting the organisation's response capacity. In 2022, these donors collectively contributed USD 1.17 billion to UNRWA's budget of USD 1.6 billion (AJ 17/02/2024; ICG 07/02/2024; UNRWA 27/01/2024 and 18/01/2022). On 1 March 2024, the EU agreed to refund UNRWA USD 54 million for the response in Gaza once the agency has been audited and its staff screened (Independent 01/03/2024). On 28 February, the US announced continued funding of USD 53 million for Gaza and the West Bank through INGOs and other UN agencies, such as WFP (Devex 28/02/2024). Because of its longstanding presence in the Gaza Strip, UNRWA has been one of the most prominent responders to the crisis. Around 85% of the Gaza Strip population, approximately 2.2 million people, were dependent on humanitarian aid, mostly from UNRWA, as at 20 February (UNCTAD 31/01/2024). UNRWA has been the only organisation providing flour, oil, canned goods, sugar, milk, blankets, and mattresses to the affected population (UNRWA 16/02/2024).

According to the revised Flash Appeal for Palestine, approximately USD 1.2 billion is needed to meet the critical needs of 2.7 million people: 2.2 million in the Gaza Strip and 500,000 in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem (OCHA 06/11/2023). This Flash Appeal was initially for until December 2023 but has been extended till March 2024 because of the continued impediments to the scale-up of humanitarian response (OCHA 06/02/2024).

The UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children appeal required USD 168.3 million in January 2024 to support 2.1 million people, including 1.2 million children, across Palestine. As at 14 February, there was a funding gap of 24%, equivalent to USD 41.2 million, for this appeal (UNICEF 23/02/2024).