R&R International AISBL
Annual Report 2023

Adopted by the Ordinary General Assembly of 30 June 2024

I. Executive Summary

2023 marked the tenth anniversary of the legal establishment of Relief & Reconciliation for Syria (R&R) and the start of our operations, as well as the tenth anniversary of the disappearance of our co-founder and mentor, Father Paolo Dall'Oglio SJ, who was kidnapped by ISIS on 29 July 2013. Considering that the Syrian people are still suffering from war and displacement, we decided not to celebrate this anniversary, but opted instead for a larger commemoration of Father Paolo in Beirut.

2023 was also a year of emergency response. Our operations in Lebanon continued without interruption, but we had to face the massive destruction of the earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria on 6 February 2023, killing more than 5,900 persons in Syria alone. The city of Salqin in the Idlib Governorate of Syria — where R&R had opened an educational centre in 2021 — was severely hit; according to Al Jazeera, the earthquake damaged or destroyed more than 250 schools across the Idlib Governorate alone, killing dozens of teachers and hundreds of students. In our urgent appeal, we called for at least $25,000 to provide emergency shelters and warm meals for the families of our students who had lost their homes. Following our call for special donations, our Syrian branch provided emergency meals to more than 5,000 persons between mid-February and mid-April 2023.

In the meanwhile, our operations around the main Peace Centre in Bkarzla, in the Akkar Governorate of Lebanon, continued throughout the year. We finished the school year 2022/23 with more than 400 students attending daily classes in one of our four learning centres: the Peace Centre Bkarzla, as well as Kousha, Rahbe and Michmich. With the start of the school year 2023/24, we also relaunched classes in the old Camp School Tell Aabbas, where we had been teaching already from 2013 to 2019. The interreligious youth network of our scout leaders consolidated in 2023, and we started to harvest the fruits of the investments made possible by the GIZ grant of the previous year. The Children's Rights Charter, drafted by our youth leaders, was published in its final form, and we could hold a successful summer mountain camp for more than 500 children.

In terms of governance, a new Board of Directors was elected at the Ordinary General Assembly of 3 December 2023. The twelve elected Board Members confirmed the mandate of the outgoing Executive Board for a third consecutive term of two years. At its constitutive meeting of 30 December 2023, the Board re-elected Miriam Lexmann MEP as Chairwoman, Friedrich Bokern as Secretary General and Mohamad Ghiye as Treasurer. The Board also renewed the mandate of Friedrich Bokern as volunteer Country Director Lebanon and of Ahmad Albayoush as volunteer Country Director Syria.

II. Activities in 2023

Also in 2023, our activities evolved around the main Peace Centre Bkarzla, in the Akkar Governorate of Lebanon. However, the emergency aid to the victims of the February earthquake was mainly delivered in the surroundings of Salqin, in the Idlib Governorate of Syria.

We could welcome 21 international volunteers at the Peace Centre Bkarzla during the year 2023, among them our founder and Secretary General, Friedrich Bokern, who continued to oversee our operations in his function as Country Director Lebanon, supported by two Programme Managers, two Outreach Assistants, 21 local teachers and three bus drivers.

After the conclusion of the grant by the German government, implemented in partnership with GIZ in 2022, the funding for our operations in 2023 came primarily from small private donations, most of them in reaction to the February earthquake. However, we also received partnership funds from La Communion de la Viale in Belgium, from the association Aktion Hoffnungsschimmer e.V. in Germany, from Columbia University and from the company Athora Services Belgium NV.

(a) Peacebuilding Activities

Even though the year 2023 was dominated by the emergency response following the earthquake, we continued to expand our peacebuilding activities throughout the year, mainly in the Akkar Governorate of Lebanon, but also in Syria, thanks to our efficient and timely response to the earthquake in rebel-controlled areas.

The annual **Peace Iftar** took place on 18 April 2023 in the village of Rihaniyeh, Akkar. For the first time since our establishment, the religious leaders guiding our work came together in an Alawite village: Sheikh Hassan Hamed Abbas, the representative of Akkar in the Alawite Council of Lebanon, was joined by Sheikh Walid Ismail of the Sunni Dar al-Iftar, by the Greek-Orthodox archbishop of Akkar, Mgr Basilius Mansour, and by the Maronite auxiliary for Akkar, Mgr Elias Girgis. The iftar was also attended by Alawite families, all R&R teachers and volunteers, and guests from Beirut. This year, thanks to the project “Ramadan Kitchen”, implemented by a volunteer from Chile, we could also offer iftar meals in refugee camps in all our areas of operations; cooked together with youth leaders and their families, these meals were distributed by our core staff members and outreach volunteers to about 50 families per day.

The **Easter Peace March** took place, like in previous years, in the Qadisha Valley, the Holy Valley of the Maronites, on 15 April 2023, just three days before the Peace Iftar. Like in the previous year, Easter fell into Ramadan, and it was a particular sign of Spiritual Solidarity that Muslim youth leaders joined their Christian friends on this march while observing the fast. As in the previous year, the march was organised in the second half of the day; instead of the traditional lunch, participants shared an iftar meal after sunset at the Maronite Monastery of Mar Antonios Kozayha, where monks discussed with both Muslim and Christian youth leaders and joined them at the meal.

The highlight of this year's peacebuilding events was the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the disappearance of our co-founder and mentor, **Father Paolo Dall'Oglio SJ**, a Jesuit priest who had re-established the Monastery of Mar Musa in Syria and who was known for his love of Islam and his opposition to the Assad regime. He was kidnapped on 29 July 2013 by ISIS while trying to negotiate the release of hostages at the terror organisation's headquarters in Raqqa, Syria. Like every year since his disappearance — with the exception of the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 — we commemorated him at the Church Saint-Joseph in Beirut, which belongs to the Jesuit order and where Father Paolo had stayed during his studies. This year, however, the commemoration was bigger than before: the Jesuits granted us free access to the Monnot Theatre, where we held an unplugged concert by the well-known Lebanese band Tarabeat and read from Father Paolo's books, both in Arabic and English. More than 50 youth leaders and some 50 other visitors attended the event and the prayer vigil in front of the church.

Our peacebuilding events were, however, disturbed by the terrorist attack of 7 October 2023 committed by Hamas on Israel and the military campaign against Gaza that followed. The Lebanese Hezbollah also entered the war, and the first hostilities were exchanged in the southern border region. We were not yet directly affected by the war, but we decided not to welcome external visitors for this year's Solidarity Olive Harvest in November. Our volunteers nevertheless went into the fields with some of the Syrian families we serve.

(b) Educational Activities

The educational crisis response in 2023 was still marked by the recovery from the Covid-19 lockdowns and the financial meltdown of Lebanon. Like in every year since the start of operations in 2013, we provided daily education to Syrian refugee and Lebanese host communities at the Peace Centre Bkarzla, as well as at the connected learning centres of Kousha, Rahbe and Michmich. We also relaunched classes at the old Camp School Tell Aabbas, where we had been teaching from 2013 until 2019, when a former volunteer founded his own NGO close to this informal refugee settlement. The community of Tell Aabbas had been asking us with insistence to return, as the educational activities of the new NGO were not delivered on a regular basis.

From September to November 2023, like in previous years, R&R staff and volunteers conducted a comprehensive survey in our main areas of operations, around the Peace Centre Bkarzla and the Camp School Kousha, to evaluate the satisfaction of the families of past R&R students and to assess the needs for the coming school year. 87.1% of R&R students passed their final school year exams, against 79.1% of other surveyed children. In terms of satisfaction with the classes offered in the previous school year, the parents of all surveyed R&R students expressed an average of 8.22 out of 10. The survey also found that 22.4% of all Syrian school-aged children in our core areas of operation are not attending any formal school – a rate that remains much lower than the national average, but still shows the need to continue our school enrolment campaigns and our offer of basic literacy and numeracy classes. The difficulties of the French curriculum and the cost of school transportation were named as the main reasons for dropping out of public school.

Even though the final report of the back-to-school survey was only concluded in January 2024, our yearly planning was already informed by the responses received, as well as by the wishes expressed at the quarterly parents' assemblies. Like in past years, our activities in this field followed the multiannual Educational Programme Line 2020–2025, mainly in the following fields:

- **Homework help classes**, with more than 250 children enrolled, were once again the main educational activity, offered on every official school day in two of our four learning centres: the Peace Centre Bkarzla and the Camp School Kousha. Most students enrolled in homework help were Syrian, more than half of them girls. Classes were dispatched over two to three hours per school day – in the morning for Syrian students attending the special afternoon shifts in public schools, and in the afternoon for Lebanese and Syrian students enrolled in the regular morning shift. Homework help covered all subjects taught in the corresponding school grade, but focused mainly on French and maths, which are also taught in French in all public schools of Akkar. We decided to open an English homework help class at the Camp School Kousha afternoon shift as well, because several Syrian families had abandoned public-school education once UNICEF stopped funding school transportation; many of these families instead chose a nearby private school, funded by Kuwait for Syrian refugees, that taught the English Lebanese curriculum and – unlike in previous years – now held a private school licence allowing it to issue official certificates. We decided to accompany the students who switched from the French to the English curriculum, as they had to learn maths in English from scratch, while continuing to favour enrolment in public schools. Our 2023 back-to-school campaign was particularly successful in this regard, as we reached an agreement with families sending children to the Camp School Kousha to cover half of the transportation costs to the public primary school of Halba: the loss of UNICEF-funded school buses had been identified as one of the main causes of dropout, alongside the difficulties of the French curriculum and the need for children to work.

- After the great success of the previous two school years, 2020/21 and 2021/22, we again offered **exam preparation classes** for high-school students in their final year, ahead of the Lebanese Baccalaureate exams. This activity had originally been launched during the Covid-19 lockdowns in Michmich, where high school students had neither access to the school building nor the means to pay for private tutors. Following the positive evaluation of the 2021/22 school year, we expanded the offer from the "general sciences" section (focused on maths and physics) and the "life sciences" section (focused on biology and chemistry) of the Michmich public high school to also include the "economics and sociology" section. Altogether, 92 students – mostly Lebanese, but also two Syrians – enrolled in classes offered over three consecutive months, from April to early July.

- Besides homework help and exam preparation, we continued to offer **basic literacy and numeracy (BLN)** classes in two locations, Bkarzla and Kousha, throughout the 2022/23 school year and into 2023/24. With the start of the new school year, we also relaunched BLN classes at the old Camp School Tell Aabbas, at the request of families of the associated camp where we had taught from 2013 until 2019. Educational neglect at this site had been severe during

R&R's absence: the new NGO established nearby by a former international volunteer did not provide daily educational services, and as a result, none of the children of this informal settlement were still attending public school. Our educational work there had to start from scratch, also because most of the families who had lived in this settlement between 2013 and 2019 had since been resettled to Italy or other European countries through the Humanitarian Corridor of the Catholic organisation Sant'Egidio. BLN classes in all three locations follow a simplified Lebanese French curriculum, so that students have the chance to enrol in public schools of the area at a later date.

- **"Work & Learn Scheme"**, targeted at older youth and young adults who cannot attend regular school because they need to work, also continued to offer vocational training classes in 2023. The offer responds to requests from the communities we serve, taking gender equality into consideration. In the school year 2022/23, the highest demand was for IT training courses, and we offered two series of eight-week classes at the Peace Centre Bkarzla and the learning centres in Kousha and Rahbe. With the start of the new school year 2023/24, we also relaunched tailoring classes at the Kousha centre, attended mainly by young women. Altogether, more than 60 students benefited from vocational training in 2023, and all received a certificate upon completion.

Parents were actively involved in the planning and implementation of all educational activities. Plenary parents' assemblies were organised roughly every three months in each of our learning centres. At the first Parents' Assembly of the school year, in October, free and secret elections of a Parents' Committee were held in each location. The Parents' Committees met on average once a month to be fully involved in the class offer, the recruitment of students, and the emergency cash assistance provided to individual cases of hardship among the students we serve and their families. In case of a conflict of interest – if, for instance, a committee member was themselves concerned by a case of hardship – that member recused themselves from the vote.

We would like to thank in particular the German association Aktion Hoffnungsschimmer e.V. and the company Athora Services Belgium NV for their generous support of our educational work in 2023, along with hundreds of individual members and donors.

(c) Psychosocial Activities

Besides the provision of regular psychosocial support, such as structured recreational activities and regular outreach visits to the families we serve, the consolidation and further development of our interreligious youth network played a major role in the psychosocial crisis response of 2023. Following the grant from the German government implemented in partnership with GIZ throughout 2022, the youth leaders trained in the previous year maintained their activities throughout 2023 and became true leaders for the future of the Association's work in the Akkar Governorate of Lebanon. Together with international volunteers living at the Peace Centre, they implemented most of the psychosocial activities for younger children.

The highlight of the year was without any doubt the annual **Summer Mountain Camp** in August. This year, we could welcome three special project volunteers who brought a grant connected to Columbia University, which helped us implement a summer camp bigger than ever before. For the second consecutive year, youth leaders from all four learning centres of Akkar could sleep over at the camp site in the high mountains of Michmich, as in 2022; this year, we expanded the camp to seven camp days altogether. More than 80 youth leaders, aged 15 to 21, took part in the full camp. About half of them, both girls and boys, were permitted to sleep over at the camp site, while the other half joined the team by daily bus shuttle. On two of the days, younger children aged 11 to 14 also joined the camp; besides artistic and musical workshops, the youth leaders had prepared these days especially for the smaller children, including a storyline and a cross-country station game.

The story of the Summer Mountain Camp evolved around a "wizard tournament" in Akkar, in which the children had to free a good wizard and overcome the dark wizard who had manipulated a "tribunal of injustice" to condemn children for good deeds they had done for their communities. Thanks to the potions and answers obtained during the cross-country game, the children could free the good wizard and stage a prison break. The tribunal itself was played out as a piece of participative theatre, with each group presenting the "accusation" against one of the children for a good deed. The seven condemnations made reference to "Ahl al-Kahf" – the Christian-Islamic legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus – feeding into our long-standing plan to compose a children's opera around this story. The summer camp ended with a long hike down the valley to a river, where all youth leaders enjoyed a refreshing swim on the last day.

Thanks to the visit of a volunteer group of hospital clowns from Italy, through a partnership with the Associazione Veronica Sacchi Onlus, we could also offer meaningful camp days for younger children, aged 5 to 10, from all four locations. Following our pedagogical approach not to mix the youngest children of different locations during their summer camp trips, we organised trips for children from Bkarzla, Kousha, Rahbe and Michmich separately, enjoying each a show of the clown and some other games our youth leaders had prepared for them.

The youth leaders also took part in the **Spiritual Solidarity events** mentioned earlier — the Easter Peace March to the Holy Valley of the Maronites and the Ramadan Kitchen project marking the Holy Month for all Muslims. Besides these two, the youth leaders also participated in the annual snow hike and helped animate the weekly Friday Fun sessions for younger children in three of our four locations. They also took an active part in the back-to-school survey between September and November 2023. Last but not least, the youth leaders decided during the summer camp to set up a new drafting committee to prepare statutes for the movement, inspired by the publication of the Children's Rights Charter that they had drafted within the framework of the GIZ project in 2022.

Besides the projects already mentioned, such as the Ramadan Kitchen and the Summer Camp, another group of international volunteers joined the Peace Centre to prepare a documentary film marking the tenth anniversary of the Association. Several short films have already been published by Georg Gassauer from Austria, while a team of three volunteers led by Ina Hoppe, the chairwoman of R&R Germany, is preparing a full-length documentary to be released in the near future.

Weekly choir classes continued throughout 2023 at the Peace Centre Bkarzla. Five football teams – two female, three male – remained active with weekly training sessions connected to the Camp School Kousha throughout the year.

Besides these regular recreational and cultural activities, our outreach teams — composed of international volunteers and local outreach assistants — continued to visit the families we serve on a regular basis, to provide counsel and help in cases of emergency.

(d) Emergency Aid Activities

The fourth operational programme line of R&R is also our oldest: **Emergency Aid**, formerly titled the "Humanitarian Programme Line", served as our first response to the influx of refugees into Lebanon in 2013 and has continued on a smaller scale in the years since, responding to seasonal needs – such as our regular winter aid, providing heating oil and warm clothes to the families we serve – or to occasional cases of particular hardship. Staff members and the Parents' Committees of each of our four learning centres were actively involved in the decision and implementation of such aid.

The Emergency Aid programme became of primary importance with the earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria on 6 February 2023. The city of Salqin, in the Idlib Governorate of Syria, where R&R had opened a learning centre in 2021, was among the areas most severely hit: four of the 182 students who received daily education there were killed. The area of Salqin was already hosting a high number of internally displaced persons who had fled the Assad regime's onslaught on the last remaining rebel-held areas even before the earthquake struck. Despite the takeover of Idlib province by Islamist factions – some of them sanctioned by the US or the EU as terrorist organisations – we managed to maintain a free learning centre in Salqin, open to both girls and boys, that remained independent of any of these factions. The students there prepared for the Syrian Baccalaureate exams either under the authority of the transitional National Coalition government, based in Gaziantep and recognised by Belgium, Germany and most other EU member states, or under the authority of the Syrian government in areas reconquered by the Assad regime.

In our first call for help, we asked our donors and friends to support the Syria Civil Defence, better known as the White Helmets, who were carrying out search and rescue operations in the most affected areas of Idlib; only once the scale of the destruction around Salqin became clear launched our own emergency appeal. International aid was slow to arrive: although the UN Security Council's authorisation for cross-border deliveries via the Bab al-Hawa crossing had been renewed on 9 January 2023, it took UN agencies three days to bring the first aid convoy to the border, on 9 February. We guaranteed that every donation received under the special mention "Earthquake" would go 100% to the families of Salqin, with our overhead costs kept below 1% and transaction costs capped at a maximum of 2%, both covered separately through our general budget.

Thanks to very generous donations from hundreds of members and supporters, we were able to equip a traditional oven in the city of Salqin and provide daily warm meals to about 100 families a day, from 15 February until 15 April 2023. Altogether, more than €15,000 were collected and

distributed to the most vulnerable families who had lost their shelter in the earthquake. Local volunteers, both men and women, were essential to the production and distribution of these meals, and more than 5,000 individuals benefited from them. The oven refurbished through this emergency response continued to operate after the meal distributions ended, run by some of the female volunteers who continued to provide daily bread to families at a reduced price throughout the year.

Besides this extraordinary crisis response, we continued to provide monthly cash assistance to seven families in the Akkar Governorate of Lebanon, selected by the Parents' Committee of the Camp School Kousha, located in the poorest area of Akkar with the highest number of Syrian refugees. Families were identified by our teachers and outreach assistants, assessed by our Protection Officer, and submitted to the Parents' Committee for a final decision, based on objective vulnerability criteria developed in consultation with UNHCR. The monthly amount, converted into USD 20 per month, gave these families a stable supplementary income to cope with their difficulties, alongside the cash assistance provided by the UN. We also provided cash assistance to cover the school registration fees of some Syrian students who could not afford enrolment in public schools.

III. Financial Records

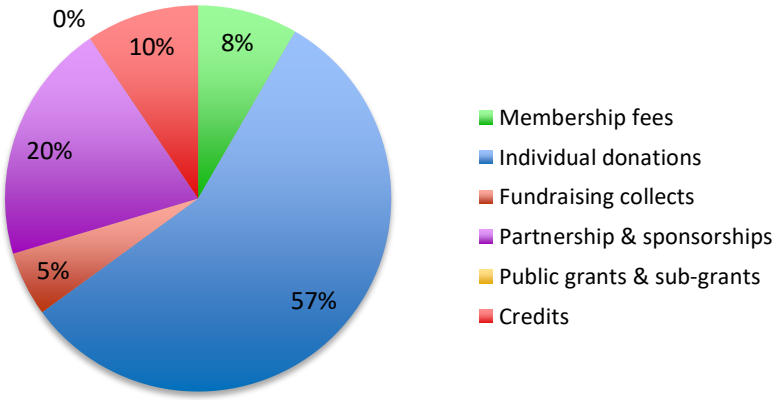
The total expenditure by R&R in 2023 was **€100'917.18**, as detailed in the financial records annexed to this report. The total revenues of R&R in 2023 were **€105'431.64**, leaving the association with a positive balance of **€5'569.56** in liquidities. In the end of 2023, the Association still had **€21'970.00** debts, exclusively towards its members who had advanced funds for specific activities.

Also in 2023, we could maintain overhead costs, defined as any expenditure outside of the two Countries of Operations (Syria and Lebanon), below 1% of all expenditure. We spent only **€522.37** (0.52%) for such overhead, mainly for the hosting of our website. However, we also had to spend €892.10 (0.88%) in legal penalties to the Belgian government for having missed the deadline of our tax declaration. We hope we will be reimbursed this amount at a later date.

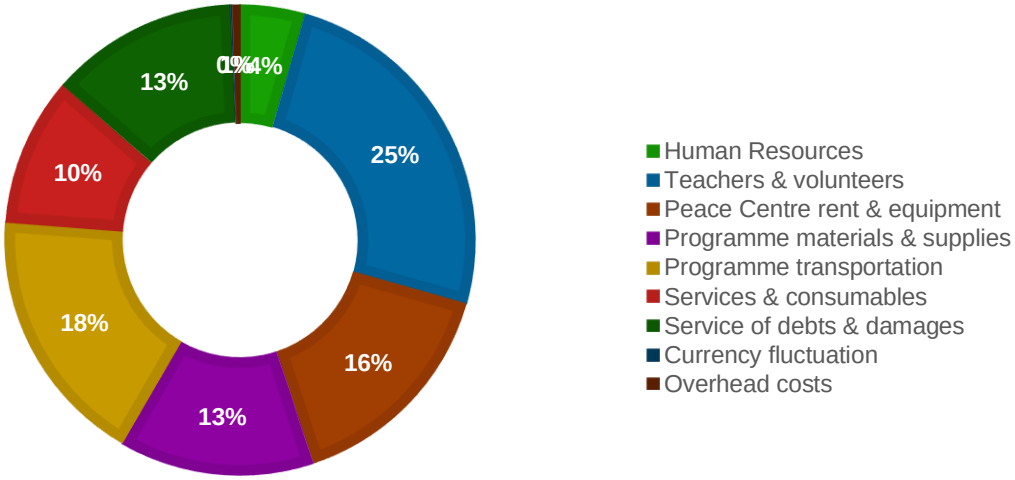
The expenditure for the emergency response after the earthquake of 6 February 2023 was divided between Food Items, recorded under the Emergency Aid Programme Line, and cost for volunteers that were recorded under the Peacebuilding Programme Line.

Here an overview of all revenues and expenditure in 2020:

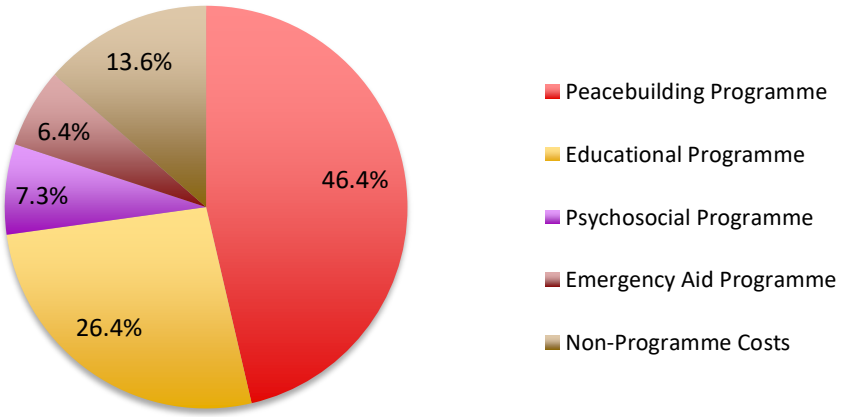
Revenues after categories



Expenditure after categories



Expenditure after Programme Line



Revenues after Categories			
Membership fees	8’836.41 €	in %:	8.38
Individual donations	59’662.13 €	in %:	56.59
Fundraising collects	5’711.31 €	in %:	5.42
Partnerships & sponsorships	21’251.80 €	in %:	20.16
Public grants & sub-grants	0.00 €	in %:	0.00
Credits	9’970.00 €	in %:	9.46
TOTAL REVENUES	**105’431.64 €**		

Expenditure after Categories			
Human resources	4’513.67 €	in %:	4.47
Teachers & volunteers	25’134.80 €	in %:	24.91
Transportation of children	2’248.86 €	in %:	2.23
Food items for those we serve	10’992.18 €	in %:	10.89
Non-Food Items for those we serve	857.72 €	in %:	0.85
Peace Centre rent & charges	14’980.56 €	in %:	14.84
Peace Centre furniture & equipment	742.59 €	in %:	0.74
Catering at the Peace Centre	5’017.20 €	in %:	4.97
School equipment	1’119.73 €	in %:	1.11
Teaching materials	564.69 €	in %:	0.56
Communication	875.26 €	in %:	0.87
Office supplies	313.94 €	in %:	0.31
Staff mobility	15’761.34 €	in %:	15.62
Services	2’156.92 €	in %:	2.14
Legal Fees	892.10 €	in %:	0.88
Bank & transaction fees	1’046.04 €	in %:	1.04
Financial liabilities	13’000.00 €	in %:	12.88
Exchange rate fluctuations	177.21 €	in %:	0.18
Overhead costs	522.37 €	in %:	0.52
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	**100’917.18 €**		

Expenditure after R&R Programme Line			
Peacebuilding Programme	46’792.83 €	in %:	46.37
Educational Programme	26’677.17 €	in %:	26.43
Psychosocial Programme	7’320.18 €	in %:	7.25
Emergency Aid Programme	6’427.43 €	in %:	6.37
Non-Programme Costs	13’699.57 €	in %:	13.58