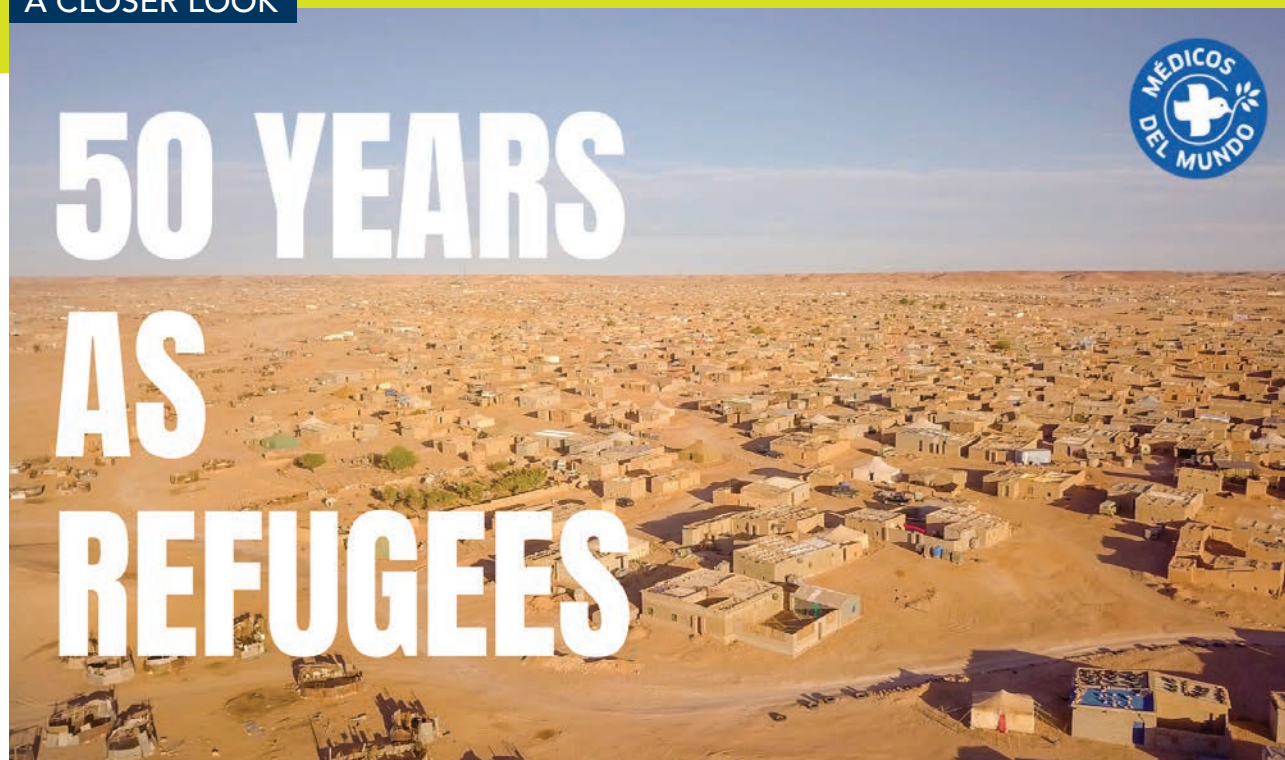


HEALTH IN EXILE:

UPHOLDING THE RIGHT TO DIGNITY FOR THE SAHRAWI PEOPLE

A CLOSER LOOK



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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Sahrawi exile, half a century of prolonged refuge in a situation of absolute dependence on humanitarian aid.

For over 50 years, more than 173,000 Sahrawi refugees have endured extreme conditions in the Tindouf camps in Algeria. In this protracted displacement, *health*—physical, mental and community-based—has become not a luxury but a matter of survival. For three decades, Médicos del Mundo Spain has stood as a key witness and advocate for the Sahrawi right to health. Today, with vital services nearing collapse, the time for words has passed—what's needed now is unwavering **economic commitment**, particularly from the European Union.

On 13 and 14 May, the Consortium of NGOs in Sahrawi Refugee Camps, made up of 18 humanitarian organisations operating on the ground, implemented a political advocacy agenda with high-level EU institutions such as the EAS, ECHO and the European Parliament. The aim of this agenda was to convey an urgent appeal to EU authorities to alert them to the systematic deterioration of the humanitarian situation and to urge the competent bodies to take the necessary measures before the damage becomes irreparable.

A SYSTEM ON THE EDGE OF COLLAPSE

Historically fragile yet operational, the Sahrawi health system has relied on international support and the resilience of local health workers. Since 2022, however, a 40% drop in humanitarian funding has pushed the system to the brink. This decline is not abstract—it's a daily reality. In 2025, 30% of pharmaceutical needs remain unmet. Medicines for chronic illnesses—such as diabetes, hypertension and epilepsy—are increasingly scarce. Frequent stock-outs are now the rule, not the exception.

Underfunding also gravely affects mental health. Generations born in exile are showing signs of accumulated psychological distress. Yet specialised care, trained staff and psychiatric medication remain largely unavailable. Adolescents, elderly people and women—particularly vulnerable to the pressures of exile—go untreated.

As Suad Mohamed, a midwife with Ministère de la santé publique, testifies: "We suffer from a lack of supplies and healthcare staff. There's a shortage of personnel due to the lack of adequate incentives."

“Declarations of solidarity are not enough. Without substantial and sustained funding, humanitarian aid becomes symbolic. The Sahrawi people deserve more than symbolic gestures—they deserve dignity, protection, and a future.”



Annual Meeting of Health Promoters of the National Union of Sahrawi Women. © Médicos del Mundo

With regard to healthcare personnel, the European commitment must include specific training support in order to strengthen local capacities and ensure the sustainability of the Sahrawi healthcare system.

RIGHTS DENIED BY INACTION

This is not just a health emergency; it is a direct violation of fundamental rights. When pregnant women suffer untreated anaemia, when reproductive healthcare is neglected, and when rising malnutrition among children under five goes unaddressed, we are witnessing a systemic failure—not of capacity, but of political resolve.

Since November 2023, the World Food Programme’s 30% reduction in food rations has pushed tens of thousands into nutritional emergency. Anaemia, stunted growth, and weakened immunity are rising—particularly among children and lactating women—while food insecurity erodes what remains of community health resilience.



Regional hospital pharmacy. © Médicos del Mundo

FROM RHETORIC TO RESPONSIBILITY: EUROPE MUST DELIVER

In recent months, Médicos del Mundo and VOICE jointly raised these concerns before EU stakeholders¹. The message was clear: humanitarian values must be underpinned by *real financial commitment*. The EU’s credibility in principled humanitarian action is at stake.

Declarations of solidarity are not enough. Without substantial and sustained funding, humanitarian aid becomes symbolic. The Sahrawi people deserve more than symbolic gestures—they deserve dignity, protection, and a future. Western Sahara remains a Non-Self-Governing Territory under Article 73 of the UN Charter², underscoring the international community’s obligation to defend the rights of its people.

Unless donors—particularly institutional ones—step up with flexible, long-term funding, the Sahrawi health system will continue to deteriorate. The cost of inaction will be measured in human suffering.

Médicos del Mundo Spain

Data source: Response plan for the Sahrawi refugee population 2024-2025. Authorship: Médicos del Mundo Spain | www.medicosdelmundo.org

1. See VOICE’s joint advocacy with Médicos del Mundo: VOICE on LinkedIn

2. Article 73, UN Charter: On obligations towards Non-Self-Governing Territories