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Fact Sheet: Children's Relief Bethlehem and Caritas Baby Hospital

Based on figures from 2025

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1 Organization

1.1 Children's Relief Bethlehem

Children's Relief Bethlehem (CRB) is a non-profit organization based in Lucerne. Respect for the dignity of every human being characterizes the self-image of Children's Relief Bethlehem, and it is against this background that its primary commitment to the poor and weak is to be understood.

Children's Relief Bethlehem supports the Caritas Baby Hospital in Bethlehem/Palestine, the only hospital in the West Bank that is specialized in pediatric medicine.

Within the scope of its financial resources, the association also supports projects for mothers and children in Bethlehem and the region (Occupied Palestinian Territories: West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem; Israel) and provides emergency aid there.

The following principles shape the activities at Children's Relief Bethlehem:

- The child is at the centre of the attention. Attention is paid to their holistic well-being.
- Support is provided regardless of origin, gender, or religion. The association is particularly committed to helping the most vulnerable: For sick children, young people, and their families and for all those who are on the margins of society and whose long-term development is at risk.
- Work at Children's Relief Bethlehem helps bring about a lasting improvement in the social situation and health of children, adolescents, and their families.
- Cooperation with the local authorities takes place on an equal footing and aims to strengthen their personal responsibility. It is ensured that children receive adequate medical care and that the right to health does not remain an empty promise.
- The association is standing up for justice and the well-being of all and is placing the dignity of every human being at the centre. This is contributing to a peaceful coexistence in the region.

Children's Relief Bethlehem is certified by the Zewo Foundation, which awards its quality seal to non-profit organizations (NPOs) that fulfil all 21 Zewo standards. Because Zewo regularly assesses and monitors its certified NPOs, benefactors can rest assured that their donations are in good hands.

1.2 Caritas Baby Hospital

Caritas Baby Hospital is the only hospital in the West Bank specialized exclusively in pediatric medicine. It delivers high quality medical care to babies, children, and adolescents up to 18 years of age, irrespective of their social background or religion.

In 2025, a total of 40,430 children received medical treatment, including 3,649 inpatient and 32,703 outpatient treatments. This represents an increase of 13% compared to the 35,638 treatments in the previous year. The further decline can be attributed, on the one hand, to the tense security situation, as many families have refrained from traveling to Bethlehem due to the increased roadblocks imposed by the Israeli army. On the other hand, the rising unemployment in the West Bank has led many families to forgo hospital visits for financial reasons.

Consequently, the hospital's level of utilization remains below the peak levels recorded prior to the outbreak of the war in Gaza.

Operational management of the hospital is entirely in local (Palestinian) hands, while overall responsibility for Caritas Baby Hospital rests with the Association Children's Relief Bethlehem. Management at Caritas Baby Hospital and the responsible officers at Children's Relief Bethlehem discuss all important strategic issues as equal partners. Caritas Baby Hospital reports to Children's Relief Bethlehem on the amount and substance of all income and spending (revenue and expenditures).

1.3 Donations

The hospital relies on donations to meet its obligations and save the lives of children. Most donations stem from individuals, foundations, cities/communes, and cantons, as well as church communities and parishes. In Switzerland, the work of Children's Relief Bethlehem is also supported by the Swiss Bishops' Conference, on whose recommendation the midnight Mass Christmas collection for Children's Relief Bethlehem has been conducted in Catholic parishes since 1964.

1.4 Relationship to Caritas

In operational and financial matters, Children's Relief Bethlehem works independently and receives no financial support from the Caritas associations in Germany or Switzerland. Caritas Baby Hospital also receives no financial support from the Caritas associations. However, there are close historical ties between Children's Relief Bethlehem and Caritas Switzerland as well as the German Caritas Association due to the activities of Father Schnydrig (see section 2). Both Caritas associations were founding members of the Association Children's Relief Bethlehem and are also represented on the Association Board.

2 History

The origins of Caritas Baby Hospital and Children's Relief Bethlehem date back to the events of 1948. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian families were displaced and living in abject poverty in refugee camps following the establishment of the State of Israel and the subsequent "War of Independence" (term in the Israeli narrative), or "Nakba" (term in the Palestinian narrative and Arabic for disaster).

Hedwig Vetter, an employee of Caritas Switzerland, travelled to Palestine in 1949, where she was confronted with the misery of the Palestinian population. To provide relief, she and Palestinian physician Dr. Antoine Dabdoub decided to set up a drop-in centre to offer emergency medical care to mothers of young children. They rented space in Bethlehem's old city for the centre. This was the beginning of a successful endeavour that later led to the foundation of Caritas Baby Hospital.

In 1952, Caritas Switzerland sent Father Ernst Schnydrig, from the Canton of Valais, Switzerland, to Bethlehem to assess the situation of Palestinian refugees on site and learn more about Hedwig Vetter's work. He was shocked by the widespread poverty – at the birthplace of Jesus – and began supporting the activities of Hedwig Vetter and Antoine Dabdoub. In 1953, they were able to rent a few beds in a local hospital to treat ill children. This is regarded as the birth of the Caritas Baby Hospital and the start of an exceptionally successful collaboration between the local population and dedicated individuals from Switzerland and Germany.

After returning to Europe, Father Schnydrig began working at the German Caritas Association, where he campaigned to secure financial support in Switzerland and Germany for Caritas Baby Hospital. In 1963, he founded the non-profit association Children's Relief Bethlehem based in Lucerne.

3 Caritas Baby Hospital Today

In 1953, that the first children received treatment in the sublet beds of a pediatric ward. Since then, the pediatric medical care offered has steadily improved, been modernized, and expanded.

In April 1978, Caritas Baby Hospital opened its own hospital building. To this day, the hospital has continued to develop, in alignment with global medical standards.

Caritas Baby Hospital in the West Bank is financed and operated by Children's Relief Bethlehem in Lucerne. The treatment concept involves mothers in their children's recovery processes, and the hospital offers extensive social services. In 2025, 40,430 children and babies were hospitalized or treated at the outpatient clinic. All children receive help, regardless of their social background or religion.

The Bishop of Basel (currently Felix Gmür) and the Archbishop of Freiburg (currently Stephan Burger) are Protectors at Caritas Baby Hospital.

News and more information about the current situation in Bethlehem are available on our homepage: www.kinderhilfe-bethlehem.ch/en.

3.1 Regions Served

Today, the cities of Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, and Beit Jala form a single urban area. In 2026, the population of Bethlehem numbered more than 75,000 inhabitants (including the surrounding communities, projection: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics PCBS, 2026). Most children treated at Caritas Baby Hospital are from the southern West Bank, the region surrounding Bethlehem and Hebron. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, around 1.15 million people live in the districts of Bethlehem and Hebron, 500,000 of whom are children and adolescents under 18 years of age (source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics PCBS, 2026).

The southern West Bank has been impacted by the expansion of Israeli settlements; the Palestinian population's freedom of movement has been restricted, thus limiting their potential to develop, and the lack of viable economic prospects has resulted in widespread poverty.

3.2 Common Diseases

Infections and respiratory diseases as well as gastroenteritis are some of the most common illnesses. Diseases of the central nervous system and other neurological disorders, neonatal sepsis, and neonatal jaundice are also widespread. In addition, genetic disorders such as cystic fibrosis as well as other metabolic and neurological diseases are relatively frequent.

3.3 Management of Caritas Baby Hospital

All persons in management roles at Caritas Baby Hospital are from the region: the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the Medical Director, the Director of Finances, the Director of Operations, and the Nursing Director are from the West Bank. The CEO of Caritas Baby Hospital reports to the Managing Director of Children's Relief Bethlehem.

Caritas Baby Hospital is one of the most important employers in the region. The hospital employs approximately 270 people, of whom roughly two-thirds are women.

4 Medical Services at Caritas Baby Hospital

Caritas Baby Hospital provides medical care to sick children both on an inpatient and outpatient basis. It offers comprehensive services in pediatric medicine and specializes in three areas: neurology, pulmonology, and intensive care. These specializations are in high demand. Since the fall of 2024, the construction of the day surgery unit has been underway and is progressing. The goal is to carry out scheduled outpatient surgeries (see below).

4.1 Outpatient Treatment

The following services are offered on an outpatient basis:

Outpatient Clinic

Most patients are treated at the hospital's Outpatient Department. Parents can bring their sick children to a consultation without an appointment. In 2025, 36,781 children were treated on an outpatient basis; in keeping with the global trend, sick children receive outpatient treatment whenever possible instead of being hospitalized. The Outpatient Department is particularly child-friendly – the walls are painted in bright colours, and the furnishings have been selected with children in mind.

Specialized Outpatient Consultations

In addition to neurology and pulmonology, consultations are offered in several pediatric specializations, including cardiology, orthopedics, and metabolic diseases. Consultations are offered on a regular basis, ensuring that young patients with certain, often chronic illnesses receive long-term care from a medical specialist. Moreover, psychological counseling has been offered since December 2024. However, due to a shortage of qualified staff, the service was temporarily interrupted and is expected to be resumed in summer 2026.

Daycare Unit

The Daycare Unit is set up for children whose outpatient treatments or medical examinations require more time (up to six hours). Short-term treatments like oxygen therapy and fever monitoring are frequently conducted in the Daycare Unit.

Pediatric Observation Unit

In the Pediatric Observation Unit, which opened in early 2020, children are placed under observation for up to 24 hours; sick children remain for medical monitoring and receive simple treatments (infusions, for example). If the child's health improves, he or she can be discharged quickly; if the child's condition worsens, he or she is admitted to one of the pediatric wards. With its four beds, the Observation Unit meets an important need in the Outpatient Department, with which it is directly connected.

Day Surgery Unit

This is a new service that is currently being developed. The aim of the pediatric day surgery unit is to carry out plannable outpatient surgical procedures directly at Caritas Baby Hospital in future, thus enabling sick children to receive high-quality surgical care. In doing so, Caritas Baby Hospital aims to close a gap in demand, as the range of surgical facilities for children in the region is currently inadequate. It also aims to develop pediatric surgery in Palestine. To implement the project, the children's hospital is currently constructing an extension, which is expected to be put into operation in autumn 2026.

4.2 Hospitalizations

At Caritas Baby Hospital, there are 70 beds for inpatient care of hospitalized children:

- 9 beds in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) (4 in PICU “Pediatric Intensive Care Unit” and 5 in NICU “Neonatal Intensive Care Unit”). The demand for intensive pediatric care is very high in the West Bank, and the supply is much too limited.
- 39 beds in two medical wards (Ward A, Ward B)
- 22 beds for newborns (Neonatal Ward)

In 2025, 3,649 children were hospitalized and received treatment. The average hospitalization was 3.7 days (without intensive care).

4.3 Mothers’ Residency Department

Respect for children and their families, regardless of their social background, is a key feature at Caritas Baby Hospital, as is the hospital’s holistic approach to medical care. Parents of sick children are systematically included in treatment pathways. Mothers of hospitalized children are permitted to stay overnight in special accommodations, enabling them to remain close to their children – which promotes both the children’s sense of wellbeing and supports healing.

While staying at the hospital, the women also receive information and advice on issues such as hygiene, hereditary diseases, and nutrition, and they have access to psychological counselling. In addition, Caritas Baby Hospital encourages the mothers get to know each other and share their experiences. This helps strengthen the women’s role in their families, and their new knowledge benefits their other children as well as their general environments.

4.4 Physiotherapy

One of the specialized services offered at Caritas Baby Hospital is early childhood physiotherapy for infants up to the age of three, a treatment that is rarely provided in the West Bank. Early childhood physiotherapy can bring great benefits and have a positive effect on a child’s later development, especially in patients with neurological and muscular problems. In addition to traditional physiotherapy, Caritas Baby Hospital also offers occupational therapy, pulmonary physiotherapy, and speech therapy. All complementary medical treatments are coordinated with the medical team.

4.5 Social Services

Numerous social services have been created to support children and their families. Medical and nursing staff consult with social workers when this is believed to be in the best interest of the patient. The social workers are responsible for assessing a family’s financial situation and, if needed, paying regular house calls. They also conduct counselling sessions and advise families of children with chronic or serious diseases.

5 Regional Significance of Caritas Baby Hospital

Caritas Baby Hospital cooperates closely with the Ministry of Health of the Palestinian Authority and maintains regular ties with other hospitals in the West Bank. Founded as a purely charitable organization, today Caritas Baby Hospital is a cornerstone in the Palestinian healthcare system and it plays a key role in developing and strengthening medical care at the local level.

Through its continuous efforts to further expand its services, Caritas Baby Hospital sets standards for medical and nursing care in the region. The hospital regularly organizes professional development courses for employees. The close ties it cultivates with other hospitals in the region (further education courses, sharing experiences, knowledge exchange) also foster a spirit of solidarity and promotes regional stability.

5.1 Major Local Employer

As a major employer and as a place of continuing education, Caritas Baby Hospital also offers young Palestinians prospects for a viable future in their homeland. Hospital employees have good working conditions, receive fair salaries, and benefit from regular continuing education courses. In addition, Caritas Baby Hospital brings major benefits to the local economy; medication, food and commodities are purchased locally whenever possible.

5.2 Training and Further Education Strengthen Local Healthcare System

Caritas Baby Hospital is accredited by the Palestinian Authority as a teaching hospital. Since March 2025, licensed doctors can complete their entire pediatric specialization training at the Caritas Baby Hospital. This specialist training lasts a total of four years. The program is based on the curriculum set out by the Palestinian Medical Association and the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

Caritas Baby Hospital works with Bethlehem University and offers nursing students opportunities for internships.

The hospital has its own Center for Continuing Education (CCE), which offers professional development courses for Caritas Baby Hospital staff as well as for external participants.

Lastly, specialized pediatricians from Germany, Switzerland, and Italy visit Caritas Baby Hospital regularly for extended periods of time with the aim of transferring knowledge to the local staff.

5.3 Quality Standards

In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) renewed the Patient Safety Friendly Hospital Initiative certificate awarded to Caritas Baby Hospital. Caritas Baby Hospital is the only West Bank hospital to have attained three of four healthcare levels. The hospital is also a pioneer in infection control and combating antibiotic resistance, and it regularly shares knowledge and experience with other hospitals in the region. The fourth level is assumed to be attained in summer 2026.

6 Location

Caritas Baby Hospital is located in Bethlehem, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, approximately 200 meters behind the wall that Israel constructed between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Palestinians need a permit from the Israeli security forces to pass through the checkpoint when traveling in the direction of Jerusalem. The realities of the occupation limit the mobility and economic prospects of people living in the West Bank. In the southern West Bank, the numerous, continually expanding Israeli settlements greatly restrict the Palestinian population in their freedom of movement and their potential to develop. Due to roadblocks and checkpoints, hospital patients and employees are sometimes forced to take roundabout routes to Caritas Baby Hospital.

Certain specialized medical treatments are unavailable in the West Bank (e.g. complex heart surgery). In such cases, Caritas Baby Hospital works with Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem or with Israeli hospitals. In medical collaborations, the well-being of the patient is the main concern.

7 Financing

Roughly two-thirds of the funding needed to operate Caritas Baby Hospital stems from donations, with the other third coming from locally generated income. Most donations are from Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and Austria. In addition, fundraising activities are conducted in Bethlehem, as tourist groups make donations when they are visiting Caritas Baby Hospital. Due to the current security situation, very few visitors are being received at the hospital at the moment.

Approximately one-third of all income is generated locally and stems from the following sources:

1. Treatment fees

At the hospital, patients – or rather, their parents – are required to pay a deductible fee that, however, does not cover costs. Patients whose families are unable to pay the fee receive medical care free of charge after the hospital's in-house social services team has carefully assessed the situation.

2. Performance contracts

Performance contracts have been concluded with various local partners – for example, with the Ministry of Health of the Palestinian Authority or with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). These institutions assume part of the costs for treating children they have referred to Caritas Baby Hospital.

In 2025, the operating costs at the children's hospital in Bethlehem amounted to CHF 11.67 million (for salaries, medications, infrastructure, maintenance, depreciation, etc.). Details are available in the Auditor's Report on the Association's website: www.kinderhilfe-bethlehem.ch/infomaterial/downloads.

At the end of every year, the annual, locally maintained accounts of Caritas Baby Hospital are merged and consolidated with those of the Association Children's Relief Bethlehem. The Association maintains reserves in order to secure regular operations at the hospital, ensure that local staff receive their salary, and cover costs for medications. The reserves cushion shortfalls and fluctuations in income; they are listed in the balance sheet with the assets of Children's Relief Bethlehem.

8 Links with Further Information on the Palestinian Healthcare System

www.ochaopt.org/

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

www.pcbs.gov.ps/default.aspx

Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics

www.emro.who.int/countries/opt/index.html

World Health Organization WHO (Occupied Palestinian Territories)

www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/middle-east/israel-and-occupied-territories

International Committee of the Red Cross

www.palestinercs.org/en

Palestinian Red Crescent