

The Peace Building in Lebanon

News Supplement



Implemented by:
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#BuildLebanonForward

This supplement is produced by the UNDP «Peace Building in Lebanon» project and funded by Germany through the German Development Bank (KfW). The Arabic version is distributed with An-Nahar newspaper while the English version is distributed with The Daily Star and the French version with L'Orient-Le Jour. The supplement contains articles by writers, journalists, media professionals, researchers and artists residing in Lebanon. They cover issues related to civil peace in addition to the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon and the relations between Lebanese and Syrians, employing objective approaches that are free of hatred and misconceptions.

Issue n° 26, December 2020 - #BuildLebanonForward



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- 03 The Coronavirus, the Economic Crisis and Inequality: Towards Establishing Principles of Social Solidarity?
- 04 Forgotten Victims of Lebanon's Crises
- 05 The Resurgence of the Labor Movement?
- 06 Rethinking the Labor Market and Its Needs From Adapting to "Work-from-Home" Modalities to Promoting "Future-Proof" Jobs
- 07 Rethinking Our Media Consumption in Post-Pandemic Periods
- 08 Fact-Checking 'Labs' Attempt to Eradicate Fake News' 'Virus' in Lebanon
- 09 When Culture Ensures a People's Cohesion
- 10 Treating the Underlying Conditions Ailing the Health Care Sector
- 11 Urban Vacant Parcels as Opportunities to Reclaim Public Spaces in Times of Crises and Austerity
- 12 A Changing World, a Metamorphosing Lebanon - The Much-Needed Return to a Sustainable Lifestyle
- 13 Feeding Lebanon - Initiatives Supporting Community Growing and Farmers
- 14 Rethinking Education Post COVID-19: Are Schools Equipped for this Change of Format?
- 15 A Vertical Reading of the Education Sector Crisis

Rethinking the old normal:

Towards a sustainable human development in Lebanon

Celine Moyroud

UNDP Resident Representative

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge the world has faced since World War Two. The pandemic is much more than a health crisis, it also an unprecedented socio-economic crisis, with the potential to create devastating social, economic and political effects that will leave deep and longstanding scars. In this regard, a recent study from UNDP found that the severe long-term effects of the COVID19 pandemic could push an additional 207 million people into extreme poverty, on top of the current pandemic trajectory, bringing the total to over 1 billion by 2030. While the explosion of Beirut on 4 August 2020 was a turning point for Lebanon, the country is still fighting an uphill battle against the spread of Covid-19 and the deteriorating socio-economic crisis amid growing inequalities and heightened uncertainty. These are daunting challenges, certainly, but they also create a unique opportunity to “Build Lebanon Forward.”

Across the world, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed the limits of social systems and safety nets when it comes to providing and caring for populations, particularly the most vulnerable. The 2019 UNDP Human Development Report 2019 explored many of the resulting inequalities from these systems and advocated solutions that take into account interlinkages between different factors in societies, economies and political structures to guarantee sustainable human development. The COVID19 crisis has called for reevaluating priorities for individuals, communities and humanity at large. Even if the pandemic is contained, going back to the “old normal” is no longer viable.

This supplement therefore analyzes the implications of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and the compounded crises caused by the economic situation and the August 4 Beirut explosions on the “old normal”. It also outlines sectors in need of critical rethinking and sheds light on current solutions and possible ways forward, from rethinking social relations to promoting more sustainable local models of production, consumption and post-consumption, reevaluating workplace needs and improving the flow of accurate information at this critical juncture. We trust that the insights and recommendations captured in this supplement will contribute to charting the way forward to build Lebanon forward.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (Rep.). (2020). UNDP. doi:<https://sdgintegration.undp.org/accelerating-development-progress-during-covid-19>

Hope to #BuildLebanonForward

Mr. Sascha Stadler *Director, German Development Bank KfW, Lebanon*

You only lose once you stop trying. And the people of Lebanon are still trying to #BuildLebanonForward. They are keeping hope alive as they pick up the pieces of their homeland after the traumatic Beirut explosion of 4 August, even while buckling under the weight of the worst economic crisis they have witnessed in years and the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic.

One thing these national and global crises have taught people everywhere is that they do not discriminate. Therefore, solutions must necessarily be all-inclusive. From that realization, we have seen undeniable proof and inspiring stories of civil society mobilizing to #BuildLebanonForward with better equality, peace and services. What began as isolated voices and initiatives is starting to coalesce into institutionalized movements and encouraging greater citizen involvement in public life and discourse.

#BuildLebanonForward starts with building safe and positive media spaces for dialog about inequalities. The Peace Building in Lebanon News Supplement you hold in your hands is one such space. The supplement is published with funding from Germany through the German Development Bank KfW and through the common vision of peace building shared by journalists, activists, researchers and artists in Lebanon. Safe media spaces require fighting another rapidly spreading pandemic of disinformation that is also threatening peace building. Through UNDP, KfW has funded a training of editors and reporters from the National News Agency (NNA) on combating fake news. Using their newly acquired tools and knowledge, the NNA journalists have started operating a website dedicated to detecting and debunking fake news, with a focus on health-related news.

We stand firm in the belief that where there are people fighting for change in strong unity, there is always hope, and we are resolved to continue supporting efforts to #BuildLebanonForward.

The World After ... The Distant World

Ghassan Hajjar *Editor in Chief, An-Nahar Newspaper*

We are undoubtedly beginning to get used to life at a distance. Distance education. Online trading, sale, and purchase. Presenting condolences over the phone. Exchanging meetings via different applications. A new world imposed on us by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is true that we are gradually getting used to it, which is like anything else we can get used to and accept after a while, but in fact we are beginning to lose the intimacy, and the closeness that specifically characterizes our eastern societies. Interaction in schools, universities and workplaces is still deemed necessary, the participation of the child as a student playing at school and in the street is a mandatory path for building his personality and testing his communication with others, and talking to the bank employee makes us smile and build new social relationships.

What we are currently living is certainly the future, where the world will be transformed electronically, and the faster the internet is, the more governments will rush into the digital world that reduces human existence and blocks human interaction. But we are unable to withstand the changes. Faced with this inability, we must deal with the new reality, and benefit from technological development, because it actually facilitates our lives, brings distances closer, saves us transportation and energy consumption, reduces pollution from cars and planes, reduces time, all of which are positive factors that we cannot deny, but at the same time, we are looking for our humanity in this virtual world, which leads us to seclusion, and lack of emotion and interaction, laziness, growing obesity and its incurred disease, disintegration of social relations, and a lack of love and solidarity, all things essential to the human balance that must not be lost.

In Lebanon, we are going through an elemental experience, and after the end of the pandemic, we will return to our old habits, albeit at a lower rate, thanks primarily to the slow internet and the lack of electronic services in most service sectors. This lag can be considered a blessing for the time being as we brace ourselves for a new and different phase.

The Indispensable Change

Gaby Nasr *Managing Editor - L'Orient-Le Jour supplements*

Epidemiologists, economists and sociologists throughout the world agree on one point: the post-Covid-19 period will be totally different from the period before ... provided that humanity first defeats the pandemic. The "old normal systems" have shown their limits and we will certainly have to invent new ones to survive. And not only in terms of production, consumption and more generally the economic system.

The coronavirus has also disrupted many old habits, including those related to social interactions. We are witnessing a generalized collapse of sociability: children, women and men, young and old hardly see each other anymore, and when possible, stay at a safe distance fenced-in behind their masks or face shields. No more affection, no more emotion, personal health comes first. Relations between people, apart from the closed family circle, are carried out only through the small window of the telephone or the computer screen.

To get an idea of this global upheaval, one only has to look at the case of Hong Kong, hit by SARS in 2002, a cousin of Covid-19, but much more deadly. Since then, all habits have been disrupted, and until the last pandemic of the new coronavirus, the Chinese in this special administrative region scrupulously apply all preventive measures and systematic hand washing. Lifestyle habits that have been upheld for... 18 years!

The same is true in Lebanon, of course. Except that in Lebanon, in addition to the pandemic, it will be necessary to emerge from the economic and financial collapse. And it is certainly not the current political class, at the origin of the meltdown, which will be able to do so. The essential change in the Land of the Cedar will have to begin first and foremost with a profound modification of political practices, based since the independence on clientelism and cronyism. MPs, ministers and presidents without a political agenda, without a vision of governance, dragging each other in eternal discussions about trivial details, ignoring basic public services voluntarily kept in a state of neglect. In short, it is an indispensable return to the fundamentals that Lebanon needs. And the fundamentals are first and foremost education, where practically everything has to be rebuilt...

The Coronavirus, the Economic Crisis and Inequality: Towards Establishing Principles of Social Solidarity?

Lama Karamneh

Writer and researcher at Legal Agenda

Just before its 100th anniversary, Lebanon sounded the alarm of social risk, as it was estimated that the percentage of those below the poverty line increased from 28 to 55%, and those below the extreme poverty line increased from 8 to 23% compared to 2019.¹ The unprecedented economic and banking crisis has affected an insecure social reality, with the deterioration of the Lebanese Pound exchange rate and the banks' seizure of depositors funds, accompanied by the advent of the Coronavirus pandemic on February 2020, and the announcement of the general

inequality and poverty can only be rectified by exceptional measures that derive from the concept of an "effective State". In fact, the general mobilization system (extended until the end of 2020) allows the State a range of measures that can be adopted to protect fundamental rights, from the right to food, housing and health, especially by providing basic materials, and controlling prices down to securing its hold on vital facilities (banks, hospitals, hotels), and their human resources to ensure the necessary measures of recovery from the multi-headed crisis.

Beyond general mobilization measures, the severity of the crisis and levels of inequality require a switch from real-time solutions and traditional approaches for tackling

future legislations. The adoption of this principle should be applied on two levels: First, in protecting incomes, and second, in reducing the living bill and burdens on the most vulnerable groups.

Accordingly, the principle of social solidarity must be introduced in the context of work relations, where the employee does not bear the burden of economic conditions alone. Article 50/F of the Labor Law has stated the conditions of dismissal from work for economic reasons, whereas it stipulated that the employer must notify the Ministry of Labor one month prior to the execution of the dismissal, under the penalty of considering the dismissal arbitrary. In such case, the Ministry of Labor must consult with the employer on how to complete the dismissal, and set up a program that takes into account the seniority of the institution's employees, their specialization, family and social status. In doing so, the law established a central role for the Ministry of Labor in dismissal issues, especially collective ones, and granted it the opportunity to monitor how employment contracts are terminated in a manner that would enable it to activate the principle of solidarity between the employer and the employee.

In the same spirit, it is necessary to develop and expand existing safety nets, particularly the National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP), so that a larger segment of the population can benefit from it. It is also necessary to consider developing its listed services in a manner that would reduce the cost of living for the beneficiaries, by setting, for example, a plan to secure access to affordable housing, activating control over real estate speculation, investing in the infrastructure and the public transport network in particular, and monitoring the prices of basic commodities, particularly food and health, by combating the abolition of exclusive agencies and breaking monopoly on them (medicines, equipment, etc.). It also remains important to secure sustainable funding for this program in a way that ensures its continuity. In fact, such a sustainability cannot be secured without establishing a fair and targeted tax policy, with no room for expanding its scope here, but only to give some ideas, such as introducing a progressive tax on total income sources (including rents), introducing a tax on empty apartments that would encourage offering them at affordable prices, and activating the foundations of a "solidarity tax", that is, a tax imposed on wealthier population segments used in the fight against poverty.

There is no single solution to reduce inequality. However, it is well established that all plans remain theoretical unless there are political, labor and trade union organizations and social forces capable of carrying and demanding them, through a human rights discourse that revives the logic of the State, beyond immediate assistance narratives. In this context, it is worth noting the importance of the initiatives launched by many groups in networking among the people of the affected areas in Beirut and seeking to institutionalize the victims as a community pressure force. The last point, therefore, brings us back to the main approach towards a solution, namely, the need to build alliances and organizations based on a socio-political project, participatory organizations in which all age groups, regions and professions are represented.

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lockdown. Then came the Beirut Port massacre culminating a series of crises, and claiming massive losses of lives, property and infrastructure. While the rise in poverty rates has been exacerbated by the combination of all these factors, it is certain that the inequality in Lebanon is not a circumstantial result of recent events, but rather a manifestation of a socio-economic system based on the weakness and fragility of the social protection provided by the State, and the delegation of its central role to the private sector and the civil sector, from communities and parties. Successive crises have exposed the flaws and inequalities in a worn-out system, whether through years of health policies and public-sector neglect, or in terms of the "privatization" of social and health care, under a systemic weakening of the welfare state² at the expense of sectarian leadership through charitable and religious institutions. While the authorities were supposed to respond to exceptional crises through emerging and innovative plans, they did not benefit from the declaration of general mobilization to balance asymmetric and inequitable relations, but rather tended to secure immediate needs without any serious plans. This was particularly evident in light of the announcement of the state of emergency and the authorities' preoccupation with restricting freedoms and militarizing the crisis management, instead of dealing with the dire social situation and securing basic rights following the port massacre. However, the exceptional situation we are witnessing today, and the rapidly inflating reality of

poverty, to a comprehensive societal reflection on the inequalities in the system. Lebanon is considered one of the countries with the highest levels of wealth distribution imbalance, with ESCWA figures for 2019 showing that only 10% of the Lebanese own 70.6% of the wealth. The "Gini" index, which measures wealth distribution disparity, stands at 81.9%, one of the highest in the world. Therefore, effective social policies cannot be envisaged unless they are based on bridging this gap and distributing wealth – and post-collapse losses – fairly. Today's talk of building a more just society cannot be achieved without considering the structural causes of inequality, most notably the control of monopolies over vital sectors (health, energy or oil derivatives, food), the absence of the State control and its role in protecting and securing fundamental rights, and the unfair tax policy based on more than 80% of indirect taxes burdening all citizens without distinction in their income levels. So addressing poverty inevitably goes through addressing its causes, most notably the structures that allow for the major concentration of wealth in Lebanon. Thus, the introduction of social policies to build a more just future must proceed from the principle of social solidarity as a central and fundamental principle of the new order. Perhaps even more important is the momentum we have seen in recent months in individual and community initiatives, based on solidarity among people, particularly with regard to volunteering and providing housing and food for those affected, which methods and spirit must be reflected structurally in the State, through future social and economic policies and

Forgotten Victims of Lebanon's Crises

Joumana Farhat

Journalist at "ALARABY ALJADEED" and Founder of Forgotten Refugees Initiative

Because calamities do not come individually, Lebanon has been witnessing 3 successive crises for less than a year now. The deterioration began with the economic ordeal caused

affected port blast area, have found themselves forced to deal with the crises of economic collapse, the Coronavirus, and the port explosion at the same time. On the one hand,

support them, by providing them with temporary shelter, without being able alone to deal with this crisis' repercussions.

If images of the suffering of the day and foreign workers apply to refugees, namely Syrians, then they finally face an additional problem. They have become increasingly criticized for the assistance they receive from United Nations agencies. Several cases have been reported in which Lebanese complain about their difficult circumstances, and compare them to the situation of refugees, and the food, medical and even education assistance the latter receive, before reaching their own inaccurate conclusion that "the refugees conditions are better".

Signs of community tension emerged, particularly after the Beirut port explosion, as cases were documented about refugees being denied or forbidden access to aid distributed in affected areas under the heading of "Intended for Lebanese Only". Cases were also recorded of refugees being subjected to racist practices and harassment while in front of the headquarters of associations or relief tents. All of this happened despite the damage they suffered from the explosion. Statistics showed that dozens of refugees were killed and injured, and that many lost their places of residence, and even lost their jobs, especially those working as day workers in the port, or in institutions damaged by the explosion.

If global experiences link recessions and economic crises to the rise of hate speech against foreigners in general, then what is happening in Lebanon towards refugees cannot be separated from the political discourse led by active parties, and leads to increased hostility towards refugees.

Despite the efforts of some Non-Governmental Organizations to address this phenomenon, they will not be sufficient to block it as it requires action at more than one level. Officially, there is an urgent need for the authorities to adopt a clear policy criminalizing hate speech and any racist practices. It also requires politicians to stop fueling hatred and hostility towards refugees. The media is also supposed to play a role in countering this rhetoric and refuting the false allegations that are being promoted.

In addition, UN organizations and civil society institutions assistance programs should better take into account the needs of the local communities where refugees are present, and ensure that all parties benefit from any assistance programs, in order to reduce the risk of exacerbating community tensions.



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by the collapse of the Lebanese pound against the dollar, followed by the Coronavirus pandemic and the precautionary measures it imposed, including a general lockdown that was repeated more than once, before the explosion of Beirut port came on August 4, destroying large parts of the capital. The three crises besieged, albeit to varying degrees, all the inhabitants of the Lebanese territories.

Day workers, foreign workers, and refugees have been the most affected by the crisis because they are simply the most vulnerable, living day by day without any financial or health guarantees. The repercussions of these crises did not take long to reflect on their daily lifestyle.

With regard to the Lebanese day workers, thousands of them have found themselves out of work, either because of being abandoned by their enterprises or due to the decline in the sectors in which they work, such as the port and construction. These workers did not know how to manage their daily living. Their best choices were bitter in light of the government's absence from assuming its role in providing social and economic assistance. And in recent months, there has been a growing phenomenon of reverse migration from major cities, specifically Beirut, towards villages and rural areas, where the cost of housing is lower or avoidable. Irregular migration, albeit in limited numbers, has also returned through the "death boats" towards European countries. Despite the authorities' swift action to curb this phenomenon, its rates may be liable to rise at any moment.

Foreign workers, particularly those living in Beirut's worst-

at least dozens of them (there are no exact statistics on their number) lost their shelter and were forced to move to live temporarily with their acquaintances in difficult circumstances, knowing that the chances of compensating for their losses are low compared to Lebanese. Their monthly incomes also declined. And what they earn is not enough to secure the cost of living. As a result, they had to stop transferring money to their families, especially with the dollar price on the black market exceeding their incomes in a whole month. Those who were lucky had the chance to return to their country. As for the rest, particularly those who have problems with their legal papers, they were forced to wait for solutions. These solutions are difficult to provide, except through clear procedures involving the Lebanese State and the embassies of their respective countries, with the Lebanese authorities acting as facilitators (such as allowing their legal status to be settled through exemption from fines). And those who are subject to the "kafala" system, they became widely deprived of their salaries in dollars as required under their employment contracts, or in the equivalent in Lebanese pounds according to the black market exchange rate, due to the inability or reluctance of their employers to secure those salaries, and a flagrant deficiency in the Banque Du Liban platform system, which supposedly allows funds to be transferred to them at a dollar rate equivalent to 3,900 LBP. And in many cases, women domestic workers were abandoned by employers and left at the gates of their country's embassies (Ethiopia, Nigeria as an example), before Non-Governmental Organizations intervened to

The Resurgence of the Labor Movement?

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As Lebanon comes face-to-face with a multi-faceted collapse brought about by the deliberate mismanagement and corruption of the ruling political establishment, as well as by a pandemic that temporarily halted much economic activity and which has spread at an alarming pace in recent months, voices calling for ‘alternatives’, already prevalent since 17 October 2019, have become louder. These alternatives range from calls for the formation of a salvation government led by competent and

country’s political establishment and business elites. However, the same cannot be said of the post-war labor movement. While the first half of the 1990s did witness significant state-labor contentions and contestations, by 1997,¹ the General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon (GCWL) was truly emaciated: the political establishment not only withheld state allocations to the GCWL, but also managed to infiltrate it from within by authorizing the establishment of ‘shell’ unions with little real adherents,

workers in non-governmental organizations⁵ as well as university professors⁶ unaffiliated with the political establishment set up collectives to defend their rights; workers in the fields of art and culture⁷ came together to form a collective; a body grouping several alternative unions, including the aforementioned ones, was established, the Lebanese Association of Professionals,⁸ with the goal of reigniting an active labor movement in the country capable of fighting for its rights and challenging entrenched powers.

There is no denying that these new unions are crucial for achieving any kind of positive and systemic socioeconomic and political changes in Lebanon. Such unions are already proving to be far more capable of defending the rights of those they represent than the officially-recognized unions – when an esteemed journalist was jumped on by thugs on the payroll of the political and financial establishment in early February 2020, a protest⁹ called on by the alternative media workers’ union to denounce this heinous act brought hundreds of demonstrators to the streets and ensured that the assault became a topic discussed on the national media.

While these developments are promising, the situation is not all rosy. Amidst the collapsing economic and financial situation, the rapid inflation, the increasing poverty and unemployment rates, coupled with the August 4 blast in Beirut that has significantly worsened the collapse, workers throughout the country are squeezed. Regardless of whether they are working in the formal or informal economy, or whether they are part of a union, alternative or otherwise, workers are coping with extreme stress and anxiety. Many are focused less on organizing, and more on ensuring their daily bread. In addition, establishing unions requires committing significant time and efforts, making sacrifices, as well as the will to work collectively and set egos and personal differences aside. Amidst a multi-faceted collapse and a pandemic which necessitates taking serious precautions and limiting social gatherings, doing so is by no means an easy task. Nonetheless, if these new alternative unions are the fruits of the uprising and manage to grow in both size and influence, then they would be the very start of the reemergence of the labor movement in Lebanon – a non-sectarian, independent and powerful movement that effectively challenges entrenched political and economic interests.



honest individuals, to drastic changes in the decades-long neoliberal financial and economic policies that have been the norm in Lebanon since the end of the Civil War. While such well-intentioned calls have somewhat subsided amidst the political uncertainties following the devastating blast in Beirut on August 4 and the subsequent resignation of the government, it is worth bearing in mind that any calls for drastic changes cannot be realized without the active participation of the labor force in an organized manner. Since the late 1990s, Lebanon’s labor movement has been emaciated and rendered toothless, as it has been entirely coopted by the political establishment. Since the outbreak of the uprising, several efforts at establishing alternative trade unions have taken place. While such efforts are promising and are to be commended and encouraged, a unified and powerful cross-sectarian movement effectively managing to challenge entrenched political and economic powers remains far off in the horizon.

A Non-Existant Labor Movement

The pre-war period was characterized by an active and cross-sectarian labor movement managing to garner significant gains by exerting heavy pressure on the

who then came to dominate the GCWL. Rather than challenging entrenched networks of political and economic power in order to defend the rights of the downtrodden, the coopted labor movement² in Lebanon then sat idly by in the first two decades of the 21st century as the political establishment passed neoliberal economic and financial policies that disproportionately affected the poor and working classes.

Reemerging Labor Movement

It is no surprise that the announcement of the imposition of an extremely unpopular and regressive taxation on an ostensibly free mobile communication application – the infamous WhatsApp Tax – was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Decades of increasing taxes amidst crumbling public infrastructure, lackluster public services and a steady degradation of living standards, culminated in the eruption of a nation-wide uprising. Amidst this uprising, the labor movement was notoriously, yet unsurprisingly, absent.

Amidst this desultory state of the labor movement, coupled with an uprising rapidly gaining steam, emerged several new alternative unions.³ To name but a few: An alternative syndicate⁴ for media workers was formed;

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Rethinking the Labor Market and its Needs From Adapting to “Work-From-Home” Modalities to Promoting “Future-Proof” Jobs

Maria Frangieh

Managing Director at Socialprise agency



It's safe to say - COVID-19, the 4th of August explosion, and the ongoing Lebanese financial crisis, have created a vast shift in the workplace.

While some businesses have been struggling, other businesses are currently thriving. The successful companies who used smart decisions to safeguard their employees, new flexible strategies and shifted quickly to online, were able to overcome the crisis. Google, Facebook, Twitter, Fujitsu, Mastercard and others were among the first to adopt these strategies. Smart management techniques embraced changes quickly and efficiently by using technologies such as videoconferencing, task management software and other digital collaboration tools.

Consumer behavior has also altered. Online communication, online entertainment, and online shopping have witnessed remarkable overnight growth.

The simultaneous changes of business models and consumer behaviors have created a sort of harmony in those who were quick to adapt and a demand for “work from home” jobs.

Benefits

While working remotely can have its challenges, many benefits have surged. Businesses who adapt to the change and implement flexible processes will find these to be a major asset. These businesses are embracing the “new normal”.

At the same time, they will notice the positive change in productivity that can reach up to 20% according to Bloom, a professor at Stanford University in California. The key here is to have flexible processes, set clear deadlines and avoid micromanaging the team. However, not all employees are more productive at home.

In this case, they should find an appropriate environment to ensure productivity, as this is going to be the new norm.

With the virtual model put in place, labor will remain in their hometowns and contribute to the economic development of rural areas. Socialprise, a Lebanese digital marketing and communication agency, has been operating from distance for 15 years now, with a team of Lebanese working in rural areas. Sela P., the Marketing Director at “Socialprise”, says “Working remotely is the greatest working arrangement I have experienced. It also pushes me to be relentlessly self-directed”. The ongoing COVID-19, the financial crisis and the 4th of August blast left many jobless. Building a freelancer's online profile by highlighting the unique skills and offering the services online will help many generate revenues.

Here are some tips:

- Consult JobsForLebanon.com, LinkedIn, Hire Lebanese and many others for online job listings.
- Become active on social media by exposing your skills, find creative ways to link digital to your skills.
- Produce unique products at home and sell them online.

The labor market has shifted with a whole new perspective reverting to online websites and social media platforms to promote the products and services. Take for example “watani store”, a Lebanese marketplace that offers its services for free to all Lebanese products and services and connects them to the diaspora. It recruits Lebanese talent to work from their homes. This initiative has embraced the change in the marketplace at all levels. Noha, founder of Oils of Nature, grew her business with watani.store. She says, “The increase in the international demand for my products encouraged me to expand my team who are working from home.”

Challenges

Every change has its own unique set of challenges.

Having access to the correct set of equipment to be productive at home is a major one. Many traditional businesses use desktops at the office. Now, the employees use their personal laptops to work from home. Since international payments are also limited or require fresh dollars, many businesses use the free versions of software to manage their teams.

The features are definitely limited, however, they facilitate the workflow.

The communication has hit a wall. With the routine of face-to-face meetings as the roots of communication, the business teams are now forced to adapt to online planning and conversations.

With no physical supervision, task management can be challenging. Here is where the management should implement an online task management system. Common software used are Trello, Asana, Slack, Basecamp, Active Collab, WorkBook, Jira, Monday.com among others.

The base of working from home requires a good internet connection. It is no secret that the quality of internet connection in Lebanon is weak and varies between regions.

Especially with kids at home, managing the time is hard. Things are even harder with kids having to continue their education online. Business owners feel it is justified to communicate with their employees at any time, even late at night. Employees are pressured to finish all tasks because they had no office hours and suddenly everything became urgent. Since the situation is not a temporary one, it is highly recommended to set working hours even at home, for both business owners and employees. After all, having a flexible time to work can boost productivity.

Changing a culture needs a lot of time, especially for the older generation who is not used to using technology to communicate with their team. Businesses need to trust their employees and start assessing their productivity based on the tasks performed, the deadlines that are met and many other criteria using the online tools at hand.

Businesses should take this opportunity to reevaluate their business needs, their costs, and their management strategies by being flexible especially with the team. Employees and home businesses need to learn new skills that they can offer from distance and that will allow them to create a work-life balance. Virtual companies are the future, and it is highly recommended that employees and home businesses learn all the needed skills to work from home efficiently to “future-proof” their career.

Rethinking Our Media Consumption in Post-Pandemic Periods

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The recent switch to online everything during the COVID-19 pandemic may have caught some people off guard, but the fact is that a significant number of innovators have been long preparing for the move.

After online searches, social media, and virtual meetings, more convenient products are expected to make their way into our lives. And with new innovations come new ways technology corporations can make themselves even more indispensable to us.

Regardless to which domain you belong, you most probably had to shift to an online form of doing your work the last few months. The necessity to continue our daily routines during confinement invited into our homes the global tech giants who were quick to step in, perhaps rightfully so. They own the technology and the means. It was only a matter of time before their new digital tools replaced some of our habits.

What function, then, did the COVID-19 pandemic play to amplify the role tech companies have already been assuming? It simply accelerated the move toward automation. For some, the idea of artificial intelligence or augmented/virtual reality might generate thoughts of robots taking over the world, but to tech experts, our future lies in digitization.

Innovations, however useful, are not applicable to all contexts. In Lebanon, digitization poses problems that are primarily related to the technology and infrastructure sector. Further exacerbating the outdated infrastructure are internet and power cuts that are a direct product of the failing economy. During the pandemic, this problem was mostly felt in the education domain. Timed power outages, coupled with slow internet and limited mobile data, significantly worsened the online learning environment for both teachers and students.

Besides learning, digitization is hostile toward the Lebanese public in various other ways. The collapse of the economy in 2020 has put restrictions on web payments and international purchases, making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to conduct any type of e-commerce. In the midst of the mounting pile of issues the country is facing, technology is put on the back burner. When the immediate goal is survival, regulating tech products or finding solutions for our e-problems turns these necessities into luxuries.

From a media perspective, the strong presence of these companies is additionally evident in the

automated news agenda they provide to direct our attention to specific news stories. Technologies that offer us the luxury of doing business and enjoying friendships from afar are not machine driven. They are people driven. The algorithms that generate news for us are the product of a series of codes that a human was involved in designing. An algorithm-run news agenda that might seem innocent on the surface increases, in fact, the risk of us sinking into a filter bubble. The danger in such news prompts exceeds the danger of us intentionally selecting the news ourselves, because the former learns our habits and subtly feeds



them back to us without giving us the opportunity to realize our inherent biases and hopefully change our news selection practices. Such echo chambers breed polarization, which is debilitating for civic deliberation, as Sunstein wrote in 2001.

But using codes to generate news is not restricted to tech companies and web aggregators alone. Many news organizations have already been using bots to create news articles. So far, research reveals little about how the public responds to automated news. A recent experiment by Tandoc Jr. and colleagues published in Digital Journalism showed, in general, the public does not differentiate between algorithm and human written stories in their credibility. Participants, however, did perceive an objective article written by a bot to be more credible than a human byline. How we'll accept them in the future remains to be seen.

With the little control we have left, how do we face the inevitable and build a better life around it? Engaging with these media companies with our critical thinking hats on will significantly impact the quality our lives and those around us. This is where media literacy plays a central role. Exercising basic filtering techniques and assessing the information we receive for facts is crucial for surviving in a digital world that will become increasingly more pervasive. Acting responsibly while consuming and producing media will also ensure we, as citizens, are taking part in spreading peace in our communities.

These practices, however, are not innate. Psychology has always told us that humans are cognitive misers who seek to conserve mental resources instead of allocating them to engage centrally with a message, as suggested by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). While this function is necessary in some conditions, applying it to our media selection habits prevents us from exerting the required effort to authenticate mediated messages. Taking a shortcut, then, is destructive in the online environment where verification of information has become increasingly more daunting. Awareness of the source of a message, the agenda behind it, its sender, and its connotations means we can considerably strengthen the shields that guard the health of our minds.

The Lebanese public faces grave challenges during these difficult times. In the absence of solutions from the higher-ups, the only way we can respond to the influx of digitization is through personal initiatives centered on knowledge of the dangers of echo chambers that could stand in the way of the very answers we seek to find. For the optimists among us, disruptions present an opportunity for local innovators to address local problems. Outreach that targets building stronger communities based on technological and digital literacy can empower individuals to look beyond the present and start devising plans to address the complete digitization that is waiting for us in the future.

The pandemic will end, but global tech companies will continue to mediate our daily lives. How we engage with them will determine whether we are capable of making the most of these digital tools without giving in to consuming and spreading unverified news. In those few areas we can still control, a sceptic mind might be our only escape route.

When Culture Ensures a People's Cohesion

Colette Khalaf

Journalist at L'Orient-Le Jour



Will the human, physical and moral elements of the seriously affected artistic circles be able to bounce back after a year 2019-2020 marked by successive tragedies: revolution, COVID-19 and finally an explosion that destroyed half the city of Beirut?

As a vital element of a dynamic society, culture binds a population together. In addition to its intrinsic value, it brings valuable social and economic benefits and is the engine that drives a society forward. The explosion on 4 August at the port of Beirut destroyed half of the capital and its artistic and cultural sites. A capital that had already been bled dry after a revolution and a virus took their toll on it.

Destroyed and redestroyed...

Lebanon has endured multiple invasions over time and despite this has remained standing. What's more, it has taken advantage of this mix of cultures to make it its own. Before 1975, a pivotal date in the history of the country, Lebanon experienced a cultural and artistic

boom at all levels. The war of 1975 came and it marked the quasi, if not the total, stop of these activities.

Starting in the 1990s and in the decades that followed, culture regained its rights. Although stability was still precarious, Beirut was entering the 21st century through the front door, once again becoming an international cultural platform. Around the year 2000, galleries (Art Lab, Sfeir-Semler, Tanit, Art on 56th and Marfa' in 2015, or Aïda Cherfan) as well as contemporary artistic venues became the meeting point of a youth freed from the taboos of their elders. Designers and great couturiers followed as well as theatres such as the Gemmayzé theatre, the Black Box by Jacques Maroun ensuring a continuity with the Monnot theatre or Madina theatre in Hamra. The port and its surroundings became the Hamra of the 70s, the hub.

From 17 October 2019, the Aïda Cherfan gallery closed its doors, settling for another space that had long been established in Antelias. The others complained about the economic crisis,

but were not ready to give up. On the other hand, regarding the 7th art, the Metropolis association, which hosted arthouse cinema films with its international festivals, also had to cease its activities and close its doors in Sofil. For the duo Mia Habis and Omar Rajeh who had created "Bipod," an international dance platform and built in 2019 "Citerne Beirut," in Mar Mikhael, composed of different multipurpose rooms, they had to leave the country, disappointed.

On August 4, 2020, the explosion did in a few moments what the civil war has done in 20 years: destroy the entire cultural scene, physically and morally, or dismantle it. In addition to the loss of human life (architects, gallery owners and others), the exhibition spaces suffered serious losses (venues and canvases). Noha Moharrem, Joumana Asseily, Nayla Kettaneh Küning, Andrée Sfeir-Semler or Antoine Haddad were affected (as was the whole of the devastated population) and then resumed reconstruction or the conception of different projects (outdoor or online exhibitions, thus not

abandoning their artists or the country).

...But Still Standing

Collective initiatives have multiplied, to name but a few: #LiBeirut organised in collaboration with the Permanent Delegation of Lebanon to UNESCO, on 17 September, an online debate "ResiliArt Lebanon" under the theme "Museums and art galleries for the return to cultural life in Beirut." According to the daily L'Orient-le-Jour, "the speakers underlined the central role of Beirut's museums and art galleries as a cultural bridge at the service of Lebanese society and its diaspora, as well as their role in social cohesion, education and development. They highlighted the impact and challenges of this disaster on the Lebanese cultural sector already heavily affected by the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic." The debate also focused on the damaged museums: a total of six, including the "Sursock Museum."

Another private initiative has been launched by Art Nub "Beirut Fine Art Heritage Rescue" which works free of charge to restore damaged works. Nayla Yared and Gaby Maamary consequently wish to recover a national heritage in loss. In addition to the financial crisis and the lockdown due to COVID-19, the explosion of 4 August also inflicted considerable damage on many companies in the Lebanese film and audiovisual sector, impacting also filming and post-production services. France's CNC (National Centre of Cinematography and the Moving Image) has launched an emergency fund for Lebanon. The aim of this scheme is to provide exceptional aid to films or feature film projects whose writing, shooting or post-production has been delayed or interrupted since the beginning of August.

Finally, the theatre, could not die with such energy from its human element. It is true that the theatre halls have suffered serious deterioration, but on the mental level, the dynamic is still there. If some people have ceased their artistic activities preferring to devote themselves to the "Thaoura," others have adapted to physical distancing and have resumed creation... "Hamamat" is an online stage project that is currently raising funds to support damaged theatres. May these initiatives be cloned in all artistic circles in order to put culture back on its feet.

Treating the Underlying Conditions Ailing the Health Care Sector

Sara Chang

Public Health Specialist



Heroes, Lebanon 2020

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Injuries related to Lebanon's historic demonstrations that began in October 2019. Trauma and damage resulting from the massive Beirut port explosion in August 2020. Medical care and treatment due to continuing surges of COVID-19. The health care sector in Lebanon has been on the frontlines for months treating patients across the country, exhausting already overstretched institutions and workers. Political instability and economic collapse have also led to complex and compounding crises affecting individuals and institutions alike. For the health care sector, these crises have led to increased shortages in workers, supplies, equipment, and medicine, all of which hamper the ability of institutions to provide adequate medical care. Additionally, unpaid bills from public and private hospitals continue to accumulate as the government faces difficulties in reimbursing services. Health care is not immune to these multiple crises. It is for this reason capacity-building efforts within the sector must be accompanied by proactive,

Examining the Interplay Between Individual, Community, & Societal Factors on COVID-19 in Lebanon

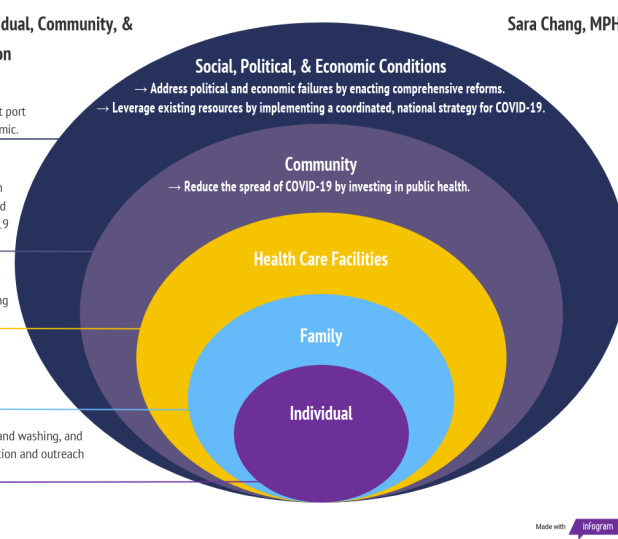
Political instability, economic collapse, and the Beirut port explosion are interconnected to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policy interventions, such as closure of non-essential businesses, movement restrictions, and limitations on gatherings, rely on enforcement by security forces and municipalities and aim to slow the spread of COVID-19 and reduce strain on health care facilities.

Health care system capacity has been increased by operationalizing hospital beds, expanding and training the workforce, and adding supplies and equipment.

Increasing poverty and hunger leave much of the population ill-equipped to weather lockdowns and restrictions.

Individual behavior change, such as mask wearing, hand washing, and social distancing, has been supported by communication and outreach campaigns.



Sara Chang, MPH

Made with infogram

comprehensive action at the societal and community levels. I will describe three key societal- and community-level recommendations for decreasing pressure

on the health care system and increasing its ability to respond to COVID-19: 1) Leverage existing resources by implementing a coordinated, national strategy for COVID-19, 2) Reduce the spread of COVID-19 by investing in public health, and 3) Address political and economic system failures by enacting comprehensive reforms.

1) Leverage existing resources by implementing a coordinated, national strategy for COVID-19. Operational and coordination challenges among entities supporting the COVID-19 response exemplify the larger fragmentation of public, private, and non-governmental stakeholders and priorities in Lebanon. A detailed, comprehensive preparedness and response plan is therefore central to optimize the resources available to address COVID-19, as well as align efforts with blast-related recovery work. Partnerships must be based on shared responsibility and shared action. Data-driven decision making, respectful communication and engagement, clear roles and responsibilities, and resilient mechanisms for collaboration within and across stakeholders must also be included in a comprehensive preparedness and response plan. Populations most vulnerable to the virus, its health consequences, and its secondary impacts like unemployment and hunger, must be considered and consulted in plan development. These populations include, but are not limited to, poor households,

investing in public health. Lebanon's public health system suffers from decades of underinvestment, meaning many of its core functions like monitoring and tracking spread of the virus and identifying and investigating cases have been unable to keep up with demand. These, in addition to widespread testing, affordable and accessible preventive care, and the collection and analysis of public health data are critical to containing COVID-19. Policy makers are understandably focused on increasing the availability of hospital beds for COVID-19 patients, but the response to COVID-19 doesn't start there - it ends there as people test positive, become ill, and require medical intervention. Public health must not be neglected as preventing cases in the first place is central to relieving pressure on the health care system.

3) Address political and economic system failures by enacting comprehensive reforms. The health care system operates in and is affected by the broader social, political, and economic conditions of the country. Therefore, until those conditions are addressed, the sector will remain vulnerable to unpaid and falling wages, difficulties in importing much needed equipment, gaps in basic services like water and electricity, and challenges in ensuring the availability of medical care and treatment. Policies to address social, political, and economic conditions will not only benefit the health care sector, but in fact all people in Lebanon. Comprehensive economic reforms, assurance of basic services, and good governance through transparency and accountability are critical to address increasing rates of unemployment, poverty, and hunger. These steps may also begin to restore trust and confidence in the government and its partners, which has been critical in other countries curbing the spread of COVID-19.

As a public health professional, it is natural for me to look at the context of an individual to understand their health and wellbeing. My preceding recommendations take on this lens with the health care sector and the impacts resulting directly and indirectly from the country's multiple complex crises. Implementing a coordinated, national strategy, investing in public health, and enacting comprehensive reforms will support the health sector through this pandemic and beyond, and ultimately improve the health outcomes of all people in Lebanon.

refugees, migrant workers, persons with disabilities, older persons, and female-headed households.

2) Reduce the spread of COVID-19 by

Urban Vacant Parcels as Opportunities to Reclaim Public Spaces in Times of Crises and Austerity

Dana Mazraani

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In March 2020, Lebanese authorities closed off parks and gardens as part of a wider set of measures in an attempt to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. They were only reopened three months later, along with daycare centers, cinemas, pubs, nightclubs, and gyms. This conflation of open public spaces with enclosed gathering places needs to be challenged.

Because of their vital roles in cities, open public spaces should have been the first sites to reopen, while ensuring physical distancing. Indeed, public spaces improve physical, and mental health, promote social interaction, support economic development, and aid in forging inclusive urban citizenship. In the aftermath of the August 4 Beirut Port explosion, vacant parcels and abandoned structures have proven to play a vital role in disaster management by acting as venues for relief provision, mobilization, and gathering. Beirut is a dense and rapidly urbanizing city, with scant and ill-managed formal public spaces: these consist of 21 parks and gardens with an area amounting to less than 1 m² per resident, a seaside Corniche, and a few publicly accessible coastal sites.

Given Lebanon's current socio-economic and political crises, grand plans and projects are impossible to implement. Yet, as planners aware of the crucial importance of green open and inclusive public spaces, we need to advocate their presence in the city and work with what is available rather than what should be available.

In a city prioritizing people's wellbeing, municipalities should champion urban change and lobby for the reactivation of public life. They have the legal prerogatives to elaborate city-scale urban strategies and neighborhood-based plans that can engage residents in improving their built environment. Mobility needs to play a central role in this strategy, and link existing formal public spaces with unbuildable and vacant parcels, abandoned buildings, and cultural and civic sites, forming a network of open communal spaces that serve and connect multiple neighborhoods. Such a network can foster belonging and a sense of ownership, and hence improve inclusion. If the municipality of Beirut were to adopt such priorities, public life in the capital would thrive, and provide dwellers with some respite from their daily challenges. But, in the absence of a responsible

municipality, it is up to urban activists to keep advocating for improving their city. The four sets of recommendations below present pragmatic interventions that can be implemented relatively easily, through partnerships with the private sector and civil society groups, along the lines of partnerships already taking place in various neighborhoods, albeit in uncoordinated ways (e.g. food markets, temporary souks, pocket gardening).

First, existing public spaces need to open and be rehabilitated as needed; and the seaside park by the Zaytuna Bay should be implemented. Second, indoor public spaces, such as the national and municipal libraries (where the user is not expected

speculation, municipal Beirut is rich with a wide variety of vacant properties. In a study we are leading at the AUB Beirut Urban Lab since Summer 2019¹, our findings revealed 932 vacant publicly owned parcels in municipal Beirut, having a total area of 210,000m².

The value of urban vacant land lies in its flexibility. Unlike formal public spaces, urban vacancies are "loose spaces", encouraging spontaneous and creative activities like open-air playgrounds, community gatherings, or urban agriculture. In addition to furthering the social value of land, if used in conjunction with green infrastructural systems, urban vacancies can help advance ecological

afforestation project was being developed in a vacant lot by the Beirut River; an outdoor movie screening for children had set shop in a dead-end street in Geitaoui; a small neglected municipal garden in Caracas was cleaned up...After the blast, several open lots became sites of relief provision and community support. For instance, the Geitaoui Municipal Park acquired this role organically and spontaneously as a garden well-incorporated in the urban fabric and used by many dwellers. A vacant parcel including an abandoned and dilapidated gas station in Geitaoui was appropriated by a local community group ("Nation Station") to provide free food and other forms of aid.

Against all odds, socio-spatial practices play a vital role in Beirut. We can witness this, albeit fleetingly, in how they are resurfacing again in the areas affected by the explosion, even if people have not yet fully returned to their homes and neighbourhoods. This is noticeable through neighbours sitting on plastic chairs outside grocery stores, small businesses acting as focal points within the neighbourhoods as their owners greet familiar passersby, residents drinking coffee on their balconies while watching the reconstruction activities, and children playing football in empty parking lots. All of these instances demonstrate how people are slowly reclaiming their neighbourhoods and communal spaces.

Surely, the repurposing of urban vacant land will not redress the causal roots of systemic inequalities, yet such interventions can still be pertinent for daily public life in cities. While Lebanon experiences multiple crises and its people struggle more every day, solidarities are direly needed, and spaces where people can meet and connect would play a key role in nurturing these solidarities. Vacant parcels can be such spaces, where playgrounds, food banks, and basic infrastructure can emerge, and where new forms of communal life can be experimented with.

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Handwritten signs that were put up during the garden clean-up in Caracas, Beirut, June 2020

to be a consumer) should be made accessible. Third, streets need to be redesigned in ways that prioritize pedestrians. Taking cues from the impact of COVID-19 on Beirut, many people took to biking and walking, transforming the car-dominated city in very pleasant ways. Using tactical urbanism tools, simple and affordable measures can be introduced to give more leeway to soft mobility.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, is the repurposing of urban vacant parcels (public and private, built and unbuilt), temporarily or long-term, for communal and shared use. In these sites, planned (and unplanned) social interactions and spatial practices can flourish. Today, due to multiple reasons—namely the commodification of land and building regulations that favor real-estate

needs.

Devising inclusive modalities for the use and management of urban vacant land provides remarkable opportunities for increasing the stock and range of open spaces in dense cities. Furthermore, vacant parcels are particularly relevant in times of economic downturn and uncertainty. They usually do not require much capital investments or maintenance, can be managed communally and operated temporarily, yielding fast results. Programmatically, initiatives in urban vacancies can respond to the needs of the neighborhood, ranging from infrastructure to agriculture, and thus generate a sense of collective ownership. Prior to the Beirut Port explosion, some groups had been experimenting with initiatives of varying scales and ends: an

A Changing World, a Metamorphosing Lebanon The Much-Needed Return to a Sustainable Lifestyle

Dr. Rana El Zein

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The COVID-19 pandemic turned into a wake-up call on a global scale. In the midst of the 21st century, we were forced to reconsider our lifestyles and our choices. Our illusion of being in control over nature was crumbled by a virus that is a few nanometers in width. We were forced into lockdowns that slowed down our rhythm while granting earth some time to breathe. Gladly, we witnessed a significant decrease in pollution and noise levels. We have seen

behaviors and opt for a sustainable lifestyle.

We have to admit it: sustainability is not a privilege anymore or a "trend" limited to some environmentally conscious individuals. Now and more than ever, sustainability is our only collective survival strategy.

Nevertheless, there's hope in this ordeal. Sustainability is not expensive, nor

valuing the local resources and creating jobs,

- Promulgate traditional crafts (that we abandoned) using available natural products,
- Decentralize businesses and institutions to promote the socio-economic rise and empower provinces & remote regions,
- Empower and upgrade the industrial sector while implementing sustainable technologies and clean production,

- Implement ecological urban planning to metamorphose urban areas into "green & breathable cities", reducing the pollution and enhancing the living environment of more than 80% of the Lebanese population,
- Reconsider the founding elements of housing (surface areas, energy consumption, isolation, material, etc.) and the real estate sector to preserve our remaining landscapes,
- Conserve and valorize the natural heritage as an indivisible pillar of the sustainable recovery plan of the country,
- Increase the green surfaces through afforestation, reforestation & agroforestry practices to combat climate change and environmental degradation,
- Make environmental education a priority to raise a new generation of eco-citizens with a strong sense of belonging and an authentic environmental awareness, which is vital to the revolutionary change that we are seeking for our nation.

The history of Lebanon is marked by a long record of downfalls and ascensions dating back to 12 000 years ago when the earliest civilizations of the world settled in the Levant. Hence, its fame of repeatedly rising beneath the ashes and proving to be inexhaustible and infallible.

This tumultuous history, however, has been merciless to this "little piece of heaven" and to its natural resources which are its most valuable assets. Our most cherished symbol "the Cedar" is, for instance, a living witness to the oldest legacy of "environmental" destruction in the history of civilization. In his book "The Lebanon: a history and a diary" (1860), David Urquhart described the transformation inflicted to the landscape by the successive inhabitants of Lebanon by the following: "Elsewhere man has cultivated the land, in Lebanon, he has made it"; or rather "un-made it".

Today, and more than ever it is about time to re-make Lebanon.

So yes, we will rise again, but we shall "rise sustainably"!



plants and animals stepping further into places that became forbidden to them because of an imposing and threatening human occupation; and here lies our chance to reconcile with nature.

While trying to cope with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lebanon is also facing an unprecedented economic collapse, making the challenge even harder. To rise again, Lebanon has to rise durably. The old consumptive lifestyle has proven to be non-viable economically, socially, and environmentally. Thus, we should abandon our old production and consumption

complicated. On an individual level, it involves adopting a minimalist and functional lifestyle, consuming responsibly and locally as much as possible, reconsidering our priorities and "needs", adopting new sustainable habits, and abandoning the "old" extravagant consumptive lifestyle, therefore integrating a novel pace of living, which is more in harmony with nature.

On a collective level, we must strategize our social and economic rise to aim at the following milestones:

- Produce locally to reduce imports while

- Adopt sustainable agricultural practices and policies to safeguard our environmental resources while ensuring food security,

- Reduce our consumptive bulimia (e.g. unnecessary packaging, accessory-products, etc.) to reduce waste production per capita,
- Implement recycling and reusing strategies from the smallest (households) to the largest levels (e.g. companies and institutions),

- Invest in public transportation to reduce pollution and noise, making the transport sector efficient and environmentally sound,

- Effect an energetic transition toward green and renewable energies,

Feeding Lebanon - Initiatives Supporting Community Growing and Farmers

Nabila Rahal

Reporter at Arabian Business magazine



With every passing day, indicators of Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis become starker and darker. Both the implications of the coronavirus pandemic, including the two-month lockdown which deprived hundreds of their livelihoods despite its necessity, and the devastating impact of August 4's port explosion have exacerbated an already grim situation. They have also highlighted the dismal state of Lebanon's food sufficiency, defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as "a country producing a proportion of its own food needs that approaches or exceeds 100 percent of its food consumption".

The agriculture and agro-industry sectors in Lebanon are underdeveloped, contributing only 5 percent each to GDP according to FAO¹. As such, Lebanon is dependent on imports to meet the food needs of its citizens and 85 percent of the country's basic food needs is imported, according to FAO. Even in locally produced foods, there is usually an element that is imported, be it the feed for farm animals, the seeds, and pesticides used to grow vegetables and fruits, or even containers. Imported items are largely paid for in dollars, and so with the steady increase in the foreign exchange rate, the importation cost – and hence the price – of these items is rapidly becoming prohibitive for most Lebanese. The price of the average food basket in Lebanon increased by 120 percent

in August 2020 as compared to the same period last year, according to the Consumer Price Index in Lebanon. The World Food Programme (WFP) recorded that there was a 56 percent rise in prices of food between October 2019 and April 2020, and all indicators support the idea that prices are continuing to increase. WFP also notes that 49 percent of Lebanese are worried about their access to food².

Despite the bleakness of the situation, some have not given up on trying to find solutions, no matter how small, for Lebanon's food situation. "Great ideas come from crisis, at the end of the day, because you are trying to solve a real-life problem," says Ziad Hourani, co-founder of "From The Villages", an e-commerce platform that connects 28 producers so far in several villages in south Lebanon with consumers in Beirut³. Following August's Beirut Blast, From the Village shifted its operations towards helping those affected by the explosion and is now slowly going back to its original business model, says co-founder Hani Touma who is now leading operations of the platform.

Indeed, several initiatives have cropped up to reimagine Lebanon's relation with the food it consumes by going back to the basics, and encouraging more local production or supporting local farmers and agro-industrialists.

Some of these initiatives are aimed at encouraging individuals or communities

to grow a portion of their food needs. These types of initiatives found fertile grounds during the COVID-19 related lockdown measures. "The combination of being bored at home and concerned about accessing food led to an increased interest in home planting", says Salim Zwein co-founder of the 44 thousand plus members Facebook group IZRAA, a community platform where members share their planting challenges and propose solutions among each other. Zwein says that interest in individual planting has continued to grow post lockdown and membership is increasing by 1,000 every few days.

"As people found success in their small scale planting efforts, such as growing herbs on their balconies, they've evolved to bigger projects with many now planting small plots of land in their villages", says Zwein based on his observations of the group. He also adds that questions raised by the group members have moved beyond planting, as people ask about taking care of farm animals and even silkworms (hoping to use the threads to make their own clothes).

The port explosion drove more people out of Beirut and into the mountains where they again took up planting what they could. Municipalities, such as the Municipality of Shweir -Ain El Sindyaneh, also encouraged growing fruits and vegetables within their areas either through distributing seeds to residents or by offering up plots of land to

be either planted by the residents themselves or by professional growers. Early this fall season, crops planted by the municipality were distributed to the community's needy families.

In parallel to these efforts that encourage planting, there are also several initiatives that have been launched since the last days of 2019 to date, which support local food producers. Although the concept of supporting local producers is not new in Lebanon - Souk el Tayeb, one example of a successful farmers' market, has recently located to a bigger location in Mar Mikhael – consumers have been more open to embracing them because local food items are generally more affordable and available than imported ones.

Also, following the Beirut blast and the worsening of the country's economic conditions, international interest in the funding of local agricultural products has grown, says Zwein.

Despite the merit of these initiatives, their impact is likely to remain at the community and individual levels in the absence of a government-initiated national plan for agriculture and of reforms. Such a plan would include establishing and empowering farmers' cooperatives in Lebanon to reduce cost on farmers (sharing machinery, for example), and to give them bargaining power with traders, according to Zwein. It can also include tax exemption on imported goods for agro-industry or support in exports. The suggestions are many, and the path is long before Lebanon can truly claim farm-to-fork in at least a percentage of its food production. But at least there are sincere and impactful efforts in the right direction.

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Rethinking Education Post COVID-19: Are Schools Equipped for this Change of Format?

Kamal Abouchedid

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The unforeseen outbreak of COVID-19 has compelled educational institutions to migrate teaching to emergency makeshift formats. The pandemic has caused a paradigm shift, with different reactions undertaken to adapt to its requisites.

component was not prioritized, given the emergency nature of the transition, and because of lack of contingency plans guided by a vision. Therefore, "Emergency Remote Teaching" proposed by Hodge et. al. (2020)³ more accurately reflects the

Infrastructure and Access to Facilities and Tools:

Due to the decrepit infrastructure, online sessions were disrupted frequently by power outage, leading to frustration and interruptions. Poor connectivity was an equally important impediment to online teaching regardless of the school sector. Uploading images was deterred by limited bandwidth, videos shut down and voice options muted to keep bandwidth consumption to a minimum for completion of sessions.

Schools that have a subscription to Office 365 found it advantageous to use Skype for Business or Microsoft Teams for online delivery or Zoom, as opposed to schools that invest less in technology. Teachers occasionally supplemented their lectures with voice-over recordings and used the discussion forum on Blackboard or Moodle, depending on the schools' adopted Learning Management System (LMS). It is common knowledge in Lebanon that private schools, on average, employ LMS in teaching and learning than their public counterparts. The rift in deployment of facilities and tools between public and private schools raised concerns about issues of equality amidst digital divide.

widespread dissatisfaction among students and parents due to poor connectivity and classroom mismanagement by some schoolteachers in both the private and public sectors.

Whither Education in Post-COVID 19?

Training:

From the onset of the pandemic, some schools have offered training to schoolteachers to transition to emergency remote teaching in a short period. However, training was tuned to teaching on how to use tools rather than customize technology for pedagogy and assessment. Despite this, teachers, particularly "Luddites" were able to familiarize themselves with the intricacies of transitioning teaching to virtual learning environments. Given the fact that online delivery is going to stay with us for the near future, it is recommended that teacher training encompass instructional design led by theories of learning.

Open Educational Resources (OER):

The educational sector is called upon to diffuse supplemental educational resources that are freely and openly available online and reside in the public domain. Creative resources can promote self-directed learning and compensate for the "static" nature of the textbook.

Policies:

Educational laws to legalize online learning should be crafted, with an eye to setting out quality assurance standards to ensure the quality and integrity of online delivery modes.

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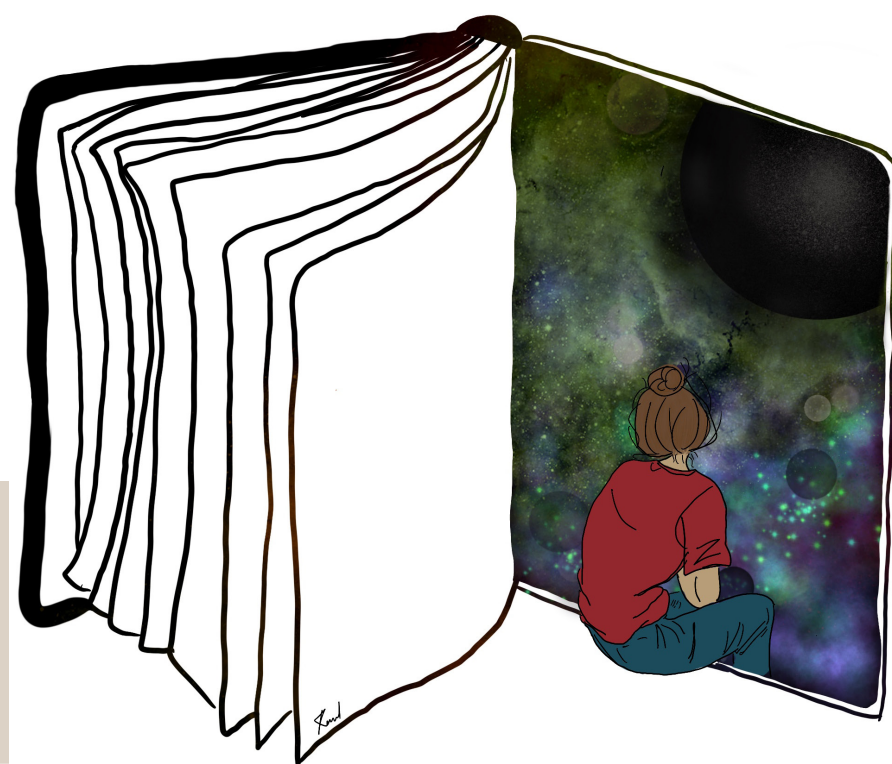
¹See Circular 15, <https://www.mehe.gov.lb/ar/LegislaionsRegulations/All/Details?LegislationRegulationId=1012>

²See Circular 16, <https://www.mehe.gov.lb/ar/LegislaionsRegulations/All/Details?LegislationRegulationId=1010>

³<https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>

⁴Branch, R. and Dousay, T. (2015). Survey of Instructional Design Models. Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT).

⁵<https://www.mehe.gov.lb/ar/LegislaionsRegulations/All/Details?LegislationRegulationId=1065>



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Lebanon reacted in ways that were adapted to ensure educational continuation during closures. Circular No.15 issued by the Minister of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) on March 17, 2020, outlined three parallel tracks for reconnecting students to the curricula: (1) broadcasting lectures for grades 9 and 12 students as well as for those who do not have internet access; (2) deploying electronic platforms to ensure interactive communication among teachers and students in the directorates of the MEHE and the Lebanese University; (3) distributing materials and exams to students through school principals. Choosing the appropriate track was made at the discretion of the relevant school principal¹. Further, the MEHE invited volunteering schoolteachers from public and private schools to film lessons for broadcasting on TV targeting students slated for the national examinations.² The three-track modality was closer to infrastructure and access to content than to pedagogy for learning. The pedagogical

modality of content delivery during the pandemic than the term online learning does. Online learning is not merely about delivering content online, neither is it a tool used apart from pedagogy. It is an art that requires skills and competencies in designing chatrooms, activities for facilitating problem-solving, and critical thinking (Branch & Dousay, 2015)⁴, not to mention nurturing discussions among learners within the humanistic tradition of reflective dialog. Further, online learning focuses on meeting learning outcomes rather than simply covering content and exams for quantity control. More recently, Circular 463/2020 scheduled hybrid learning to be implemented in schools, partially and gradually commencing October 10, 2020⁵. The Circular consisted of 5 articles, none of which focused on pedagogy. Conflict of powers between the MEHE and the Center for Educational Research Development (CERD) have even thwarted piecemeal initiatives for optimizing the online experience during the pandemic.

What Happened Behind the Screensaver During the Lockdown?

The school system in Lebanon largely and overwhelmingly adheres to traditional models of education in its various manifestations, including emphasis on lectures and teacher-centered approaches that water down constructivist learning and limit higher-order thinking. This distinct pedagogical weakness in the teaching of mathematics and science, to take but one example, was corroborated by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) test results for Lebanon over the last few years. The traditional classroom environment seems to have migrated too to the online environment. While there is a scantiness of research into the learning environment in Lebanese schools, little is known about student-teacher interaction online, and most importantly how cognitively and non-cognitively challenged students were mainstreamed into emergency remote teaching. Anecdotal evidence suggests

A Vertical Reading of the Education Sector Crisis

Samir Skainy
Journalist

In light of the current collapse, it is imperative to recognize that the damage has affected all sectors of the state without exception, whether in varying proportions, and whether some of them have received unique attention and thus had greater chances of survival.

The education sector may be the most affected, and the most unable to continue. Basically, this sector was historically marginalized in Lebanon, and further marginalized following the Taif Agreement. Unfortunately, in this crisis, rather than developing strategic plans to save it, restrictions on it are being added. Even when some political parties have tended to show support in this field, it went exclusively to the private sector, at the expense of the public sector – when the issue is supposed to be reversed, or at least a merger between the two sectors is done.

The crisis indications in the education sector were evident on several levels, starting from the most basic student rights to the most extreme duties in educational policy – and in between. In our article we try to shed the light on most of these aspects, gradually from top to bottom:

Authority's View of State Sectors

It is no secret that education is not a priority of the ruling authority. This can be seen (for example) when reviewing the budget of the Lebanese University over the years; whereas the cumulative total “trimming” from 2005 to 2014 reached about 210 billion Lebanese Pounds, rather than consolidating or at least maintaining this budget, which is currently only about 370 billion LBP per year, and in Lebanese Pounds of course. Beyond the figures, the prevailing logic does not usually consider the education sector as a productive sector. The focus is often on the banking and tourism sectors (even though they rely on the rentier economy), or on agriculture and industry as the driving sectors of the productive economy. The education sector is being ignored, although it is at the heart of the “production” process, if we look at the student as a knowledge value that can evolve and develop its society at the same time.

Strategy of the Administrations

Private university administrations opted for adopting the so-called “hook policy”, even if they did not explicitly declare it. They decided not to price tuition fees in dollars (and this is required), so they issued circulars declaring the maintaining of \$1 = 1500 LBP. However, that comes on the condition that the second semester pricing is subject to change. This means that the administration will adopt the official exchange rate in the first semester installments, for students to register, and then adjust it (most likely according to the platform price, 3900 LBP) in the second semester, making up the difference, and more. Thus, the student has eaten the bait and got stuck with the hook,

having to pursue his university year at a higher cost.

Teachers and Double Exploitation

Here, we're in the category of the affected people. Teachers, are in part essentially unprepared to offer classes online, having for decades been prisoners of the same monotonous curriculum. The other part is prepared, but bear the responsibility to update the study materials, individually (without any additional allowance), to bridge the huge gap between the requirements of distance education and the study material that exists in the first place. This should have been at the core of the ministry's missions since even before the time of the coronavirus. Not to mention the implications of the integrated method of education, in terms of health risks or in terms of prolonging the sessions to make up

Internally, changes in the student structure are numerous, most notably “internal migration”, first from private to formal education: for example, it is estimated that the Lebanese University will receive 5,000 – 6,000 additional students this year due to 1) the displacement from private universities, 2) the return of immigrant students who will not be able to complete their studies abroad after the exchange rate collapse, 3) those who have graduated under pass statements. Secondly, “internal migration” also means a student's exit from education in general, mainly because of his inability to secure registration fees, thus heading towards disguised unemployment. All this necessarily entails a blow to the level of education in Lebanon. Not to mention the high cost of books, stationery, transportation and communications...

In this context, Rana – who is a “former” student at a private university says: “I preferred to continue my education at the Lebanese

making our choice (dependent on unknown data), also adds psychological pressure on us”. As for the independent student clubs, they pointed out that the deteriorating financial situation will change all students' approach to education, as they are now looking for the cheapest, regardless of the level, and they even no longer have the “luxury” to repeat their year, or start a new year if they intend to reduce study hours to work in parallel with those hours, and this in turn entails new problems.

But even so, students cannot be considered the weakest link, for a simple reason: their awareness of their rights. This puts them at the forefront of the revolutionary and activist groups in Lebanon. Most of them, thanks to the October 17th uprising, became more concerned with public affairs, and were able more than once to turn their internal issues into public opinion issues, and have started for months now organizing themselves into secular and democratic-oriented grassroots student organizations.

Horizon Is Almost Blocked

Accordingly, solutions seem non-existent. Just as the crisis in the education sector is part of the entire system crisis, the solution of the first requires solving the second. However, rearranging the sector is possible with specific and urgent steps, to reduce the consequences of the collapse.

Administratively, a few measures related to public sector policies have become urgent. Such as determining the staff at the Lebanese University and high schools, as a cause and a consequence of the suspension of political quotas recruitment. On another level, some teachers find this to be the right moment to reposition vocational education at the forefront, and remove negative stereotyping from it. Vocational orientation would reduce the overcrowding of university education, provide the labor market with the professions required of it today, and partly solve the problem of disguised unemployment.

Economically, there is no solution but to restructure the general budget of the government, in a way that gives priority to productive sectors, including education. On the other hand, stop the waste gutters, and reinvest the capabilities of graduates in business and scientific research inside the country – rather than recruiting foreign companies. As for confusion, it is present in the file of distance education, and there seems to be no escape from “sacrificing” a generation because of the patch up policies.

“A crisis that shall pass?” No, this time the crisis is structural. If it is not addressed radically today, it will subsequently carry worse collapses. The time has come, then, to rearrange our priorities, and to realize that the education sector — thanks to the knowledge and manpower it produces — is the basic guarantor for the survival of society.



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for the difference, but without considering it in the salaries. In fact, several schools and universities have deducted from the salaries of their teachers and employees, or even expelled some of them without prior notice.

Students, the Weakest Link?

As for students, they are the base of the pyramid. From registration difficulties to graduation and unemployment, they bear the brunt of the collapse. Even those who escaped and pursued their studies abroad, they became captives of bank circulars that seized their accounts and the transfers of their parents and hindered their academic career.

University, for financial reasons. I just finished my second year, and have 3 years left. I can complete them at my former university if the tuition fee pricing stays at 1,500 LBP, but this does not seem certain, and I do not like to venture and be fooled in the middle of the year when the new rates are approved, which will prevent me from continuing, and thus I would have lost a university year.” At the same time, most final year students venture without changing their university, as they reckon that “even if we’ve been duped, and the pricing changes, it will be in our final university semester. It is bearable”. Rana adds: “The impact of these decisions is not just about financial matters. This reluctance and loss towards

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