

Research Briefing Notes

Livelihood Networks and Political Experience in Beirut, Lebanon

Summary

This project is about the relationship between livelihoods pressures, political experience, and the possibilities for socially and politically inclusive recovery in the Lebanese context of economic crisis.

The project addresses the research question on “meaning and design” presented by the AHRC-GCRF project “Strengthening Social Protection, Security and Welfare in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region”: how can social policies be more inclusive of citizen and resident perspectives and aspirations? The project approaches this question with a focus on people’s experiences of the economic crisis in Lebanon and explores if and how experiences of the crisis can become the basis for responsive and inclusive social policies that improve quality of life. The research addresses the following objectives:

- To develop an account of how livelihood strategies and adaptations are experienced in the context of economic hardships since 2019.
- To understand the landscape of political discourses and priorities (especially with respect to livelihoods and services), as well as the relationship between politicians/governance actors and members of the public.
- To understand if and how community-based approaches to solutions for livelihoods and services can contribute towards inclusive recovery for Lebanon.
- To produce a set of policy recommendations for inclusive growth and recovery (especially with respect to international assistance funding and its uses).

Research Background

Lebanon is in the midst of a devastating economic crisis. Since 2019 the Lebanese Lira has lost more than 90% of its value, leading to erosion of livelihoods and deterioration of basic provisions such as fuel, electricity, medicines and food. This has translated into severe livelihood pressures that have required adaptation strategies to help people acquire basic necessities and resources. This economic crisis has been compounded by a presidential vacuum, growing political and sectarian tensions, and declining trust in government and other governance actors. In this context, economic recovery policies that improve livelihoods and access to services must respond to people’s concrete experiences of coping with new pressures, as well as to their complex relationships to political actors, discourses and priorities. In response to the importance of connecting policy to lived experience, our project carried out a number of qualitative studies across multiple scales, primarily conducted through interviews and ethnographic observations:

- Neighbourhood-level study in the Ras Beirut area of Beirut on the strategies that people have developed to obtain basic necessities in the crisis.

- A study of the discourses on livelihoods and services circulating at the national level in political speeches and social media platforms, as well as in neighbourhood-level political engagements in the lead up to the parliamentary election of 2022.
- An evaluation of the impact of community-based projects in Ras Beirut, and the ability of bottom-up projects to improve quality of life.
- A study of policy priorities in the negotiations between the Lebanese government and the IMF for the release of an IMF assistance package, leading to a set of policy recommendation for pathways to inclusive growth.

Key Findings

Our research has produced a number of findings on the intersection of livelihoods, politics, policy, and research methods. Our qualitative research on livelihoods has demonstrated that there are three types of livelihood strategies that people have taken up in the crisis: (1) lifestyle changes, including drastic reductions in consumption of goods and services such as food, electricity, travel, cosmetics, and medication; (2) increased reliance on networks, including local, national and international networks of support; and (3) increased reliance on institutions, including political and religious institutions. A key finding of this livelihoods research was that people saw the pressures to adapt as undermining their agency and dignity, which in turn generated widespread disillusionment with political and governance actors.

Our research on political discourses developed this argument by highlighting the complexity of people's political positions, and revealing that political disillusionment often coincides with commitment to traditional sectarian parties. This was connected to political discourses which focused on anxieties about internal and external threats, and the importance of maintaining political power in the face of such threats. Discourses about livelihoods and services were pushed to the background by mainstream political parties but frequently highlighted by independent political parties, the latter of which had greater popularity than in previous years, but were still a small minority in the new parliament after the 2022 election.

Lebanon has a strong culture of community-based activism, research, and service delivery. As part of this research we carried out a series of evaluation interviews with the users of two interventions that were created by citizen social scientists as part of previous PROCOL Lebanon research projects. The two projects were an online educational intervention offering teaching provision to children, and an urban agriculture intervention. According to the evaluation interviews, the fact that the interventions were developed and implemented in a collaborative fashion within the community meant that they generated social value in the form of trust and the duty of care, which in turn helped users engage with, and benefit from, the services provided. The creation of social value through community engagement increased the benefits derived from economic investments in services.

Key Implications

Our research argues for two key policy principles for guiding the design and implementation of recovery strategies by actors and organisations operating at all scales in Lebanon. The first principle is that growth-driven recovery must be inclusive and able to address the livelihood priorities of members of the public. Technocratic macro-economic policy for aggregate GDP growth might be appropriate for some purposes, such as restoring Lebanon's international credit standing or stabilising the value of the currency, but unless it is inclusive, it also poses risks of democratic deficit

in which the gap between aggregate growth and the lived reality of exclusion generates discontent and undermines trust. The second principle is that investment in community-based projects (including projects convened by academics, NGOs, charities, and other locally-embedded actors) is a highly effective pathway for maximising social and economic outcomes. Such investments build local capacities, strengthen social networks in the community, and enable users to derive greater value from the service that is offered. This leads to improvements in quality of life, as well as enhanced capacity for further social and economic participation.

Key Policy Target Groups

Members of Parliament, ministers, civil servants, NGOs and INGOs, think tanks in Lebanon.

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Key Publications

- [On livelihoods strategies and political discontent](#)
- [On livelihoods and services in political discourse](#)
- [On international assistance and policy for inclusive growth](#)
- [On the value of community-based projects for improved quality of life](#)

Funding Acknowledgment: This project is supported by the Middle East and North Africa Social Policy Network (MENASP) at the University of Birmingham, in the framework of its '[strengthening social welfare and security in the MENA region](#)' research programme, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council's Global Challenges Research Fund.

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