

Help Lebanon help Syria:

Awaiting a Political Solution to the Catastrophic and Explosive Situation.

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Context:

With Syria entering its fifth year of violence, Lebanon too is falling into a downwards spiral. The political paralysis in which the country finds itself is not helping to slow down such a dangerous progression. The Syrian crisis is having diverse effects on Lebanon on a number of levels, the first being humanitarian. According to the government, Lebanon, with its population of only 4 million, is housing more than 1.5 million refugees, of which 1.2 are registered with the UNHCR. This is the equivalent of 20 million people suddenly arriving to France. Put in such a situation, how would they react? The call **for international solidarity** would be immediate.

Furthermore, it is estimated that there are 1.5 million vulnerable Lebanese now living in poverty. The World Bank estimates that there has been \$7.5 billion of economic losses in Lebanon due to the Syrian Crisis. How can Lebanon look after these individuals, when their economy has been driven to the ground? Again, imagine, such a scenario in France, or England, or Germany. Such economic losses would be catastrophic, not only for them but for the global economy.

From this scenario, of rapidly expanding needs and rapidly diminishing resources, stems a series of concerning impacts, on economic, social, political and security levels within Lebanon. One of the most concerning victims suffering from these impacts are school-aged children who, given their loss of home, peace and stability are becoming the lost generation of the Syrian crisis. The large number of refugee school-aged children in Lebanon has overwhelmed the public system, and in order to avoid further hindering the future of these youth, innovative strategies need to be taken to ensure their continued education. Currently over 30% of Syrian refugees within Lebanon are aged between 5 and 17 years old.ⁱ Of these, only 25% of are enrolled in public education in Lebanon. ⁱⁱ According to UNICEF, only 100 000 of 400 000 school aged Syrian children are enrolled in educational programs in Lebanon.

Lebanon currently has **the highest concentration of refugees per capita in the world:** more than 40% of its population is refugee. Many of these refugees have been here since the beginning of

the crisis in 2011, and with no solution for Syria in sight, will most probably be in Lebanon for many years to come. Considering the Syrian crisis as an emergency is no longer viable, and **all interventions within the crisis framework must be carried out with development and sustainability in mind**. This is particularly important in the education sector, given the necessary continuity needed for a successful education for these youth. Without the appropriate studies, and opportunities for the future, these youth could easily fall into radicalization, and movements of extremist violence which would be a tragedy for all those affected both directly and indirectly by this.

Despite the urgency of such a situation, the **absence of solidarity from the North is severely felt**. This lack of responsibility from the international community is condemnable. Furthermore, within such a context, of such an unprecedented crisis and with a lack of political solution in sight, it is vital to question the integrity of the humanitarian response in Lebanon, and to ensure a focus on saving host and refugee populations from long-term consequences provoked by the prolonged war.

As **international organisations continue to impose over a national response**, this catastrophic situation needs to be quickly and thoroughly analyzed if we are to arrive at a committed and effective humanitarian action, based on the **equal partnerships of organisations from North and South**, that aim at ensuring dignity for all individuals. Unfortunately, it is often possible to see great gaps between funding requirements and the needs on the ground. Take for example the funding cuts in education in 2014, which left a huge number of youth in yet deeper situations of vulnerability, without access to a basic education. This is often the consequence of policy making and donor requirements that are detached from the real needs on the ground, and **through a lack of interaction and dialogue with local NGOs**, familiar with the situation in the field. It is those local NGOs that have access and links with the dispersed vulnerable populations, spread across more than 1400 towns and villages and through 1700 informal tented settlements. INGOs and UN agencies are incapable of accessing such quantity of areas and establishing trusting relationships in which real needs assessments can be carried out.

The evolution of the humanitarian sector in Lebanon: from humanitarian solidarity to “charity business”

Lebanon has been the “theatre of operations” for humanitarian and development actors throughout its history- particularly during the civil war and the Israeli occupation and invasion. We have been witness to the evolution of humanitarian aid and its various forms. During the Israeli invasion and the civil war, we saw ‘humanitarian solidarity’, with international volunteers arriving daily to experience our tragic reality. These volunteers were motivated by solidarity and commitment and generally didn’t have a financial interest in the situation.

After the civil war, in the early 90s, with the fall of the Soviet Union, we entered into a new humanitarian phase, with changes in the profile of individuals coming to work in the sector here in Lebanon. There was an arrival of well versed ‘lesson givers’ that surprised the humanitarian community here in Lebanon. Our own expertise was reduced to nothing and they spoke to us of logical frameworks, performance indicators and other evaluation tools, which useful as they are, increasingly obscured the reality on the ground. Many of these non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had become an extension of foreign powers, teaching us to do our own work, with certain

arrogance in their supposed knowledge of the needs on the field, and the ways in which to best respond.

Nevertheless, Amel, who has so far offered 900 000 services to the Syrian refugees, has fostered very successful relationships with international organizations, working together in partnerships that offer local knowledge, strong technical expertise and the financial resources to design sustainable projects.

In the current context, biased management of programs in favour of international NGOs, at the cost of local NGOs, in the Syrian crisis response within Lebanon is not viable. If we are to be able to provide sustainable projects to develop the local society, both host and refugee communities, **there must be a stronger emphasis on collaboration and cooperation between all stakeholders** involved. This involves both international and national NGOs, as well as donors, municipalities, ministers, among others. Given the extent of the crisis, collaboration across all domains is vital, given that the Syrian crisis is affecting all areas of Lebanese from, education, to health care services, to the environment, as tons more rubbish is being produced by the increase population number. Amel, being a civil, non- sectarian organization, is able to work successfully and productively within in the Lebanese context, and ensures strong collaboration between all actors involved.

However, to further complicate matters in the local humanitarian context, **the large financial dependence on principally developed countries' institutions**, has also led to a lack of humanitarian solidarity. It threatens the success and continuation of projects, and often leaves local NGOs incapacitated. Projects aimed at building human capacity, have had to be stopped or reduced due to **donor fatigue**, and many local NGOs are not in a position to be able to counter this. Fortunately, **Amel is capable of ensuring 53% of its funds through the participation of beneficiaries, revenues from the property, and its bi-annual gala dinners**. This autonomy and independence is reflected in the internal organisation of Amel and in its choices of programs. In this way, we are able to develop strong relationships, built on trust, with various partners, in order to implement ambitious, innovative and comprehensive projects.

Take for example Amel's empowerment of host and refugee of youth and women through the set-up of a shop, MENNA, selling their local produce in the capital city, Beirut. This project has found great interest from the national and international humanitarian and entrepreneurship communities given its innovative way in providing women with access to the market and economic opportunities. Educating women in business and marketing tools, as well as quality controls, not only works towards improved social cohesion as women from host and refugee communities work together, but also ensures sustainability, as it will ultimately the beneficiaries who are financing the continuation of the project, through the sales of their goods.

In a world subdued to the dictum of money, human values are swept away with a flood of greed that undermines human dignity. Terrifying situations continue to occur without provoking the least reaction from 'big powers'- 10 million Syrian refugees; 200 000 murdered Syrians; a Palestine still occupied, despite the violations of international law this supposes, prisoners tortured by supposedly Human Rights promoting states. It becomes apparent, that many powers use such humanitarian contexts as pretexts to intervene when their interests are in danger, rather than being truly concerned at the violations of human rights that are occurring. This is tragically demonstrated by **the current**

European migration scandal, in which migrants are left to die daily in the Mediterranean, without the minimum regard for their human rights, the freedom of movement and the right to life. Financial interest in undertaking projects is yet further demonstrated in the **large sums of money that go to the overhead costs within international NGOs**, rather than being invested in beneficiaries.

However, **as the consequences of a prolonged war, become more troubling for the West**, this lack of support to countries carrying the main burden of the crisis will have to change. A demonstration of this is the terror threat that extends past borders and affects the global community. Sadly, countries such as Lebanon and Turkey are acting as **breeding grounds for new terrorist recruits, given the large number of youth not enrolled in any educational system**, and often, as a consequence, become easy targets for extremist groups.

Fortunately, despite the reductions in funding in the formal education sector, Amel has been able to continue non formal education programs, offering opportunities to youth to keep them out of trouble, and out of the reach of preying terrorist groups. Amel's EU funded project, enrolls youth in skill building workshops, and helps them find work in internship placements. The success rate of this project is quite amazing, and a strong number of youth have then been seen to go on to find work and use their skills in their local communities. This keeps the attention of these youth in positive, social groups, rather than letting them slip into the reach of extremists and terrorists.

The role of local NGOs, a catalyst for change:

Despite the United Nations insisting in the importance of engaging and working with local partners, the **majority of the time UN agencies adopt a paternalistic attitude**. For example, in Lebanon, the UNHCR has built up its own network of NGOs, instead of participating in dialogue with those already existing. As a consequence, the capacities of local NGOs are not being reinforced, and instead the sector is simply being further diversified. This assures that no organisation will be strong enough in the future to build up a counterbalance to the politics of the United Nations. It is important to repeat, **that strong dialogue and cooperation between all stakeholders will assist in developing a resilient and sustainable strategy to deal with the Syrian crisis**.

Local civil society and other local actors, namely municipalities and ministeries, are **the real sources of efficient action and the true levers for change**. Strong in their field experience, they possess a significant and irrefutable expertise within the contexts in which they have been working. Through their many years of hard and committed work, these structures and local NGOs have earned a great deal of legitimacy among local communities. It is due to this grassroots experience that the importance of local NGOs should be held in greater esteem by the international community. Amel employs local staff on the field-level who are well aware with the contexts and situations in which they are working. This is why Amel is still able to work in the high risk area of Ersal, as local staff, familiar with the situation, know the best way to continue implementing projects, and assisting the local communities in their development.

It is worth remembering that international structures, by definition, are not tied to staying in any one country in which they operate, unlike local actors. The latter must therefore be considered as stable actors through which change can be made. Amel acts as a strong example of this stability and long-

term capacity, given its 24 centres and 6 mobile units across the country, which will continue to provide vulnerable populations with the appropriate assistance, even when international organizations leave. This is particularly important given the dire forecast for the Syrian crisis, and the high probability that refugees will be here for many years to come. **The reinforcement of the capacities of local structures is of great importance in an enduring crisis.** Local NGOs should be directly supported in improving their organisation, their governance and their transparency, with the aim of becoming fully-fledged partners. This doesn't mean adapting to an audit to make surface changes, but rather conducting joint reflections on the ideal configuration of partnerships. Amel focuses on developing the skills of all individuals necessary to make change, from its own staff at headquarter and field level, as well as beneficiaries, to ensure that they too can be actors in positive change.

Amel Association International: a model and pioneer in counter-current humanitarian action

Amel Association International is a non-governmental, non-confessional, civil organisation set up in Lebanon in 1979 during the civil war and the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Through its 24 centres, 6 mobile clinics and 700 personnel who contribute to uphold the vision of Amel, the organisations implements extensive activities and projects related to health and mental health, education, child protection, vocational training, rural development, gender and human rights. Amel's programs target marginalized populations in all regions of Lebanon, without discrimination of nationality, political or religious affiliation. The action of Amel aims to reinforce a culture of rights among citizens, refugees and immigrants and to promote their access to these rights and their participation in public life.

Amel has distinguished itself in a region where confessional, political, social and economic divisions are rife. In this way, Amel's work encounters numerous challenges on a daily basis. Despite all of these difficulties, the organisation and its staff refuse to fall into inaction and pessimism, and we focus on the words of Nelson Mandela: "Vision without action is just a dream, action without vision just passes the time, and vision with action can change the world." During the years, the organisation has been motivated by the motto "**Positive Thinking and Permanent Optimism**" and our work is guided by the 3 Ps: "**Principles** which define a **Position** that we put into **Practice**". In this way, Amel has adopted simple and consistent principles in line with its action, proving that Lebanese civil society is quite capable of constructing its own future. In this sense, Amel has been and continues to be an example for Arab and Lebanese NGOs.

The organization places a great deal of energy and hope in the young generations. Whether they come from large towns or remote rural villages, these individuals are filled with values of tolerance, respect for human rights and as well as a spirit of entrepreneurship, all of which must be fostered.

Amel is convinced that there cannot be development without democracy, and for this development to continue positively in the future, we cannot let this young generation fall out of the system and lose their chances of an education. The provision of long-term projects of development, implemented in order to reinforce the capacities of vulnerable populations and to revitalize economic growth in Lebanon is vital.

Amel aims to act as a catalyst within Lebanese and international civil society in the humanitarian sector, and to question the norms imposed by international actors. The role of Amel within the collective of Lebanese NGOs, and its membership of ECOSOC, HAP, HCT, ICVA, DPI and multiple international networks, is testimony to Amel's commitment to the causes it is working for, and to its commitment of strengthened collaborations between international and national actors.

Backed with more than thirty years of experience in Lebanon, Amel became an international organisation in 2010 as it opened an office in Geneva, and in France in 2014. The aim of such internationalization is to unite the North and South through humanitarian goals, to work for the interest of vulnerable populations, to commit to the just causes of the people, first and foremost, the Palestinian cause, and to maintain a distance from political opinion.

Thanks to this international dimension, Amel has been able to develop numerous partnerships with other NGOs across the world, including Medecins du Monde and Medico International. Reinforced by the trust shown by local communities to the work of Amel, the organisation has acquired high recognition among international organisations.

It is fundamental to not marginalize the initiatives of civil- society which aim at solving social problems. This means that the non-governmental sector should not be considered as the 'third sector' of society but as the first. **This would ensure that development plans dictated by governments, economists and financial institutions, are inclusive projects aimed at benefiting ALL members of society.** For the path of development to be successful in Lebanon, interventions should promote and protect the right to independence and self-determination for all populations. Focusing on education is a key tool in providing individuals with the capacities to develop themselves and the societies in which they find themselves.

Conclusions and Amel's recommendations for stronger, more equal North-South partnerships for a more accountable humanitarian sector:

In conclusion, there are a number of recommendations that Amel makes to ensure viable, development focused projects. **Change must come not only through short time aid fixes, but through long-term influences in policy too. Civil society is at the forefront in transforming these dynamic pressure instruments to influence policies,** and they must ensure here in Lebanon that a coherent national policy on dealing with the crisis is developed. We must ensure that laws meet the needs of all without discrimination or religious, political, ideological, or geographical distinctions. This however, requires a **comprehensive vision of development** and a **charter between NGOs and members of Northern and Southern civil society, in which roles are fairly distributed.**

If development is really to take way in response to the Syrian crisis, all involved and engaged actors must ensure an **environment in which human capacity has the opportunity to thrive.** This means, in the first instance, empowering youth through ensuring that all school-aged children are involved in the appropriate educational programs, and that other vulnerable individuals in socially-economically difficult situations, have access to skill building programs.

Through long-term strategies of strengthening public services and through medium-term projects of service provision among vulnerable populations, Lebanon should be able to continue to provide support to the thousands of Syrian families left in despair. This however, does not mean that they are able to continue to provide adequately for the 1.5 million refugee population that currently finds itself in the country. **Western countries must assume more responsibility and carry more of the burden, in accepting greater numbers of resettlements, and maintaining financial commitments.** Furthermore, there are recommendations for economic support from the international community. We must remind the international community, and the international organisations channeling their donations, to dedicate funds as far as possible to the beneficiaries, and not spend large sums in costly overheads. The **charity business**, and **BONGOs** (business orientated NGOs) in this way can be avoided.

A political situation to resolve the crisis must also continue to be pushed for, in order to bring resolve to this tragic scenario, and the lost generations is has created. The international community must help Lebanon help Syria, to avoid the prolongation of this catastrophic and explosive situation, caused by the conflict in Syria, but affecting dramatically the whole region. The presence of INGOs in the region is not enough, if equal relationships between organisations of North and South are not fostered. In the case that balanced partnerships are not developed, neocolonialism is simply reinforced. As local civil society, we must stand against this, and ensure that principles of respect and collaboration are installed in interactions and cooperation between INGOs and NNGOs.

ⁱ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

ⁱⁱ http://www.unicef.org/lebanon/media_10274.html