

OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH CIVIL SOCIETY IN LEBANON'S POST-BLAST SOCIO-ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

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The Context in Lebanon Today

In the wake of the catastrophic detonation of the port of Beirut on 4 August 2020 entire communities have plunged into poverty. The blast killed more than 200 people, injured more than 6,000, displaced 300,000, and threatened the livelihoods of many more. More than a year after the explosion, communities are still struggling to recover amidst an economy already strained by recession, coupled with sudden, drastic inflation. To top it off, the country has been crippled by widespread cases of COVID-19, leading to periodic lock-downs.

Despite the widespread attention of the international media, aid packages and relief personnel from foreign governments and large Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have failed to reach some of the most affected areas due to a lack of reliable data regarding the community members' needs. In the absence of even the most basic support from the government to these actors, such as the provision of accurate city maps to facilitate aid distribution, the logistics of delivering aid to the most affected areas has been extremely difficult.

Thinking Differently about Response and Recovery

A lot of established NGOs were not ready to provide adequate support following the blast. This is where newer, youth-led initiatives started popping up and taking the matter into their own hands. The Lebanese government kept silent, as youth-led collectives and young initiatives took to the streets, cleaning up people's homes, moving rubble, consolidating a sense of solidarity between those affected and those who were able to help. As youth civil society representatives are members of the community itself, they are the ones closest to the needs and are well-placed to work and find sustainable solutions together.





After two years post-blast, and being present on the ground, our neighbors and volunteers have grown to become more like a family, working together towards finding solutions to the hardships we are faced with.



Our medical team cater to of our neighbors' needs, from consultations, to finding the right medication, and the proper treatment, thus accompanying them every step of the way.

Nation Station is one youth-led community initiative that emerged in the wake of the blast. It mobilised local youth and activists through social media campaigns, networking events, and partnerships with local universities. It filled the existing data gap by mapping the affected areas and dispatching small teams of volunteers to assess the affected households, street by street, building by building, case by case. The data resulting from these assessments was stored in a central database, enabling the provision of targeted aid.

Nation Station continues recovery efforts today by involving and empowering unemployed community members. For example, local elderly women are employed as cooks in a community kitchen. Unemployed builders, carpenters, painters, plumbers and electricians support reconstruction projects. In this way, vulnerable community members put their pre-existing skills to good use and even learn new skills, becoming active agents of change in the betterment of their community. By remunerating their efforts, in cash or in kind, Nation Station is creating a virtuous cycle of solidarity, mutual help, and empowerment. It was not envisioned that there would be a long-term need for Nation Station's work when it was founded. However, more than a year since the blast, the organisation is more active now than when it was first established.

The recovery projects are designed to be sustainable, as they are based on the guiding principle 'empowerment over charity' and the principles of a circular economy and community involvement. This sustainability is based on community involvement in the projects, which aims to create a culture of civic participation and ownership. However, involving the local community in development projects is only possible due to Nation Station's continuous presence on the ground, building rapport, and mitigating the communities' general distrust of NGOs.

Challenges and Opportunities for Restoring Youth Civil Society Power in Lebanon

Unfortunately, despite the tireless engagement of youth civil society, the power dynamics within the country have not changed. However, youth civil society has achieved some successes despite this. Youth movements no longer attempt to operate within the established system, but have instead created a parallel system (in which the Lebanese government, political parties, and official authorities play no role) that has achieved some degree of functionality. However, in order for lasting success to be seen, the informal youth-led system and the formal government system will need to be consolidated.



A big part of our clinic's activities consists of doctors volunteering from neighboring hospitals. From general doctors to more specialized fields such as logopedics, orthopedists, and psychotherapists, they give free weekly consultations to those seeking medical attention.



Our community kitchen is open to volunteers who want to help cook meals for our neighbors, but also hosts women looking to make income. These women are employed in our kitchen where they are also able to sell their homemade products.

Generally, and objectively, youth civil society in Lebanon is underfunded, under-staffed, and lacks the administrative (mainly accounting and legal) capacity needed to scale operations. In addition to these crippling issues, youth civil society is burdened by the same dysfunctional system and infrastructure as the rest of the country. However, the constituents of youth civil society have not yielded to the existing system of corruption. They reject political affiliations with current parties and take an all-round more inclusive approach. This is demonstrated by youth civil society representing a broad mix of nationalities and faiths. Contrary to the current corrupt system, youth civil society has created a meritocratic setting, which promotes accountability and transparency.

Another challenge for youth civil society in Lebanon has been the ongoing pandemic. The threat of the contagion constitutes a direct impediment to participation for a large part of the Lebanese youth, who cannot risk contact with the largely unvaccinated population of the blast-affected area. COVID-19 has not only strained youth civil society's human resources, but its financial resources as well. For example, Nation Station's work routinely involves direct contact with sick and/or elderly community members, forcing the organisation to maintain meticulous hygiene and safety standards. This includes the daily provision of free PPE and disinfectants for all its members and volunteers. Also, Nation Station's community kitchen requires the attainment of official food safety certificates through COVID-safety audits and training. Meanwhile, Covid-related treatments have put further strain on the resources of Nation Station's clinic, which is directly responsible for the health of 350 chronically-ill patients.

Recommendations to Strengthen Lebanon's Youth Civil Society

More must be done to foster the leadership and engagement of both youth-led civil society organisations and initiatives as well as individual activists. In more concrete terms, based on the experience of Nation Station, the following measures are suggested:

Donors should introduce guided grants: Following the blast, the UN announced \$300 million (£219 million) in foreign aid, around half of which was said to be disbursed amongst locally active NGOs. However, many requirements associated with the receipt of such grants often put young, youth-led initiatives at a stark disadvantage. In most cases, the hard requirements (such as registration in the Ministry of Finance) were impossible for the young initiatives to meet.

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These act as hurdles in the face of young initiatives applying for grants, stunting their growth process and slowing down their work. The solution to this, however, is not the lowering of requirements. Instead, couple grants with guidance, coaching, and administrative support. Third-party legal and accounting support, for example, would not only lift the administrative burden off of young CSOs, but also ensure absolute transparency in the use of donated funds. Meanwhile, professional guidance would incubate and complement the skills and motivations of newly founded youth-led CSOs.

Government should incubate talent at home: Lebanon is home to many talented, well-educated, and capable young people seeking to improve their communities. However, the lack of opportunity in the country leads to frequent emigration. This brain-drain represents the biggest risk for Lebanon’s future. These individuals should be identified in bigger numbers through scholarship programmes directly for the students, incentivising the development of their home country. The scholarships should aim to match the opportunities found abroad. Scholarships should be guided and coupled with workshops and courses that complement higher education, resulting in a community of well-rounded civic society activists.

Development actors should constructively engage young people in change: Development actors should focus on bringing together established agents in order to provide youth with a more realistic image of the obstacles the country faces. This needs to be well orchestrated, as the aim is to recognise existing issues, not to adopt dogmatic pessimism. Development actors should attempt to provide an infrastructure that is conducive for change such as media exposure, office spaces, or networking events, which can promote growth and cooperation.

This spotlight chapter is part of the [State of Youth Civil Society](#) global, youth-led publication.

