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ALIGNING AGENDAS IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

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This discussion is the first of AUB-NCC's 2023 series of roundtables, titled

“Navigating Climate Change and environmental activism in the MENA region: Challenges and Opportunities”

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at the Basile Antoine Meguerdiche Conference Hall - IFI

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Arab Reform Initiative

Panel:

Dr. Nasser Yassin

Lebanon's Minister of the Environment

Dr. Salma Talhouk

Founder of AUB-NCC and Professor at the Department of Landscape Design and Ecosystem Management

Taina Christiansen

Head of UN Habitat Lebanon Country Programme

Rabih Chaar

CEO and Co-founder of Nadeera Technologies

Antoine Kallab

Associate Director of AUB-NCC (moderator).

BACKGROUND:

While many debate the role of the State in Lebanon, one thing is certain: people are suffering. Environmental degradation is exacerbating livelihoods on a daily basis, especially for the country's most vulnerable. As trust in governmental and non-governmental actors dwindles, citizens, corporations and organizations alike must re-align their priorities and jointly tackle the grave threats they are facing, namely climate change. Recent examples however, such as interventions following the Beirut port explosion, clearly highlight the difficulty of collaborating within a system lacking accountability, coordination and vision.

Nevertheless, several success stories are emerging from the field, challenging along the way many of our expectations from both governmental and non-governmental agencies. In some cases, organizations have leveraged the need for livelihood protection, heritage preservation and environmental recovery to rally communities around a shared vision.

Through patience, participatory engagement, innovation and sheer determination, these actors are navigating the challenges of Lebanon's compound crisis, reinvigorating developmental agendas, and offering a glimpse of hope in these times of uncertainty and despair.

This panel shed light on some of these stories, the unique approaches that led to their success, and how they can be replicated in the fight against climate change. Panelists included academics, UN agency representatives, social entrepreneurs and public officials who shared different perspectives on grassroots action and community mobilization. The roundtable was organized as part of AUB-NCC's 20 years celebration, to reflect two decades of pioneering participatory approach, action research, multidisciplinary and community engagement in the quest to turn vulnerable communities into agents of sustainable and positive change.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION:

Dr. Nasser Yassin, minister of the environment, initiated the conversation with alarming figures that illustrate the detrimental effects of global warming on different sectors. He also presented some of the efforts led by the ministry to mainstream the concept of climate change mitigation and green recovery, develop Lebanon's low-emission 2050 vision, engage youth and launch the green investment facility. Moreover, Dr Yassin urged the different stakeholders to align their agendas using evidence-based approaches to climate action, without excluding State institutions.

The ensuing discussion shed light on the work of three actors who rely on community engagement to conceive and implement projects tackling environmental challenges. Professor Salma Talhouk began by explaining her theoretical approach to nature preservation, specifying that we should be working towards local living that is grounded in nature. She also underlined that even though climate change and nature loss are interconnected, they must be treated as two distinct crises we must address. During her intervention, Dr. Talhouk mentioned how academia can play a key role in tackling these challenges, through bottom-up and humble communication strategies that don't alienate local communities. Moreover, she shared recommendations and stories from the field, that illustrated the patience and thoroughness in how she co-designs projects with local inhabitants at AUB-NCC, such as "Baldati Bi'ati" and the "Environment Academy", which over the years successfully preserved and developed natural and cultural landmarks around Lebanese villages.



We should be working towards local living that is grounded in nature

Dr. Salma Talhouk
AUB-NCC Founder

Expanding on community-led initiatives, Ms. Taina Christiansen started by overlaying climate change induced threats on urban populations, specifically destruction risks across Lebanese cities. Most importantly, she pointed out the inequalities exacerbated by these hazards, especially when they impact informal communities. Ms. Christiansen presented the interlinkages between environmental challenges in rural settings and the increased pressure on urban infrastructure and services, noting that domestic migration, water scarcity and other natural risks are deteriorating livelihood in cities, and significantly increasing emissions. Following this initial overview, Ms. Christiansen presented some of UN Habitat's initiatives in Lebanon, mainly focusing on **renewable energy and water management.**

PROJECTED CC IMPACTS IN LEBANON A BLUEPRINT FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

Based on the MoE's National Communication on Climate Change



X2 days with temperature above 40 degrees by 2050



59.09% decrease in the number of days of snow remaining on the mountains.



9% or more of precipitation will drop over the next 30 years.



X5 the recurrence and intensity of heatwaves and droughts will increase.

Throughout her presentation, she explained how the agency operated through targeted interventions aimed at sustaining the work of community services, such as municipalities, emergency response units, and other vital functions. Ms. Christiansen insisted on the importance of nurturing a narrative amongst locals that creates sensitivity to climate action through dialogue, rather than top-down interventions, to attain inclusive and sustainable results. Through the various projects presented, she explained how these partnerships can influence design on all levels, from master planning to small neighborhood interventions in various urban sectors, such as energy, water, and mobility. Using this approach, they can go beyond the daily impact on livelihood, but also influence perceptions amongst the residents.

Mr. Rabih Char, CEO of **Nadeera Technologies**, went on to describe the macro-implications of Lebanon's waste management problems, and how the company's phone app and model are mitigating the challenge. Specifically, he demonstrated how technology can decentralize solutions, and enable collaborations with small communities around the country and the MENA region. Moreover, it allows their involvement in environmental action and the sharing of the profit generated by the application. From his perspective, innovative social entrepreneurship reconciles business profitability and sustainability, without sacrificing the need to tackle urgent and difficult problems traditionally handled by governments. All three panelists underlined the importance of engaging communities at the onset of any initiative, and the need for coordination amongst the various stakeholders. Social inequalities and context sensitivities should not be clouded by global threats, but rather used as part of the solution. They also stressed the importance of partnerships with local institutions, especially municipalities, to ensure the sustainability of these projects.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

GLOBAL EFFORT, LOCAL SOLUTIONS

Rather than perceiving the specificities of a context as an additional complexity layer, they should be seen as a source of knowledge that guides the design of interventions. Community engagement plays a key role in channeling local know-how into projects seeking to achieve sustainable change. Moreover, as Lebanon further sinks into political and economic instability, focusing on targeted interventions, rather than systemic centralized change, is one of the few avenues left to reduce environmental degradation. Climate change and nature conservation should be addressed as place-based issues with consistent grassroots involvement.

SUBSTANTIAL ENGAGEMENT INSTEAD OF NOMINAL MEASURES

Cross-cutting agendas and tools, such as bottom-up interventions, gender mainstreaming or sustainability, should not be cosmetically inserted as separate components to developmental projects, but rather integrated throughout the project design phases. Real change can only be achieved if enough resources and time are dedicated to influencing perceptions and nurturing change from within a community.

TECHNOLOGY AS A PROTECTOR OF NATURAL RESOURCES

By embracing digital technologies, organizations can better mobilize environmental activists and communities, despite the common misconception that such technological progress drives a wedge between humans and nature. Increasing digital connectivity is also key to reducing social and structural inequalities that can drive communities towards unsustainable practices. Nevertheless, in-depth studies on how technology is being used, particularly by younger generations, are essential in promoting grassroots efforts that rely on innovative tools for nature preservation and climate change mitigation.



Technology can decentralize solutions, and enable collaborations with small communities around the country and the MENA region

Rabih Chaar

CEO of Nadeera Technologies

COMMON THREATS, FRACTURED RESPONSES

The Ministry of the Environment is working hard to mainstream climate change mitigation in sectoral policies and unlock green investments. However, political and financial instability limit the ministry's ability to protect the country's natural resources. The weakening of Lebanon's governmental institutions is leading to a multitude of private initiatives and actions, most if not all are uncoordinated and subscribe to diverse agendas. Now more than ever, developmental stakeholders need a common platform that regroups governmental and non-governmental actors, including academic institutions, private corporations, and civil society organizations.

THE WAY FORWARD: PARTNERSHIPS AND MULTIDISCIPLINARITY

To foster initiatives and projects that truly serve the greater good, it is essential to establish partnerships across communities, sectors, and disciplines. Collaborations will remain challenging as long as Lebanon's developmental system is devoid of dialogue, accountability, coordination, and vision. Harnessing local experiences and amplifying the voice and aspirations of society are needed to align agendas and produce long-lasting change. Furthermore, it is worth repeating that integrating genuine bottom-up approaches to assessing needs and designing interventions must be mainstreamed, as opposed to merely tokenizing communities for appearance's sake and relying solely on external assistance.



Nurturing a narrative amongst locals that creates sensitivity to climate action through dialogue

Taina Christiansen

Head of UN Habitat Lebanon Country Programme

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The roundtable produced consensus over the need to align priorities amongst Lebanon's environmental actors and stakeholders. Without such coordination, there is little hope in building common holistic green strategies and successfully mitigating the impact of climate change. Clearly, structural reforms, lobbying and communication are needed to homogenize the work of the government, academia, private corporations, and non-governmental organizations.

Considering the above key messages of the discussion panel, we believe that aligning agendas of the active forces will be essential in Lebanon, and moving forward, the following steps can play a vital role in aligning agendas in the face of climate change:



ENABLING DATA SHARING AND COMPLEMENTARITY

Data-driven decision-making remains the optimal approach to justifying priorities and promoting complementary interventions. Furthermore, open-access information can create multi-level alliances that drive stakeholders to respond to indigenous needs with solutions rooted in scientific evidence, rather than donor interest.

Organizations should strive to share information and experiences with one another, through online platforms, data-sharing partnerships, and collaboration with research centers.



ENGAGING COMMUNITIES THROUGH GENUINE INCLUSION

Community engagement should be approached as an equal partnership founded in mutual respect, and a proven ambition of prioritizing the local needs of residents. Indigenous know-how, cultural capital and intangible heritage should be mapped ahead of any intervention that seeks to improve local livelihood conditions. Such actions require time, patience, and enabling free exchanges of thoughts with the groups impacted by local threats.

Inclusion and sustainability should accompany any project design transversally, rather than be perceived as donor requirements that can be simply fulfilled through a narrative.



LEVERAGING DIVERSITY FOR BETTER PARTNERSHIPS

Community interests vary across social groups, locations, priorities, and livelihoods. The variety of actors can cater to the multitude of positionalities and perspectives. Social enterprises provide economic and innovative solutions that attract talent and the youth, alongside leveraging financial investments and technology. UN agencies and non-governmental organizations can channel donor funding while relaying the true needs on the ground. Academic and research centers are essential in understanding the scope of today's challenges and how best to tackle them. Finally, governments should bring citizens together, and be an instrument of good by coordinating the work of the different stakeholders.

Any serious effort to tackle global challenges will require a cross-sectoral collaboration, rather than a silo-based approach that yields little impact.

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