



**Khaddit Beirut**

## **Breaking the Cycle – Issue 1: Proposing a New "Model"**

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The explosion that destroyed part of Beirut on August 4, 2020, opened up a wound for the entire world to see. It confirmed yet again that the sectarian power-sharing model of governance adopted in Lebanon is conducive to violence, corruption, and back-door dealings, all implicated as the root causes of the August 4 Blast. The current Lebanese model of politics has stood strong in spite of recurrent catastrophes over several historical junctures. Hopes for change are skillfully aborted by the same “feuding” political elites who instigate violence and tally the bodies, and then move on triumphantly after shaking hands and sharing smiles. This vicious cycle has plagued the lives and livelihoods of the Lebanese for decades.

No more! In a few seconds, the August 4 Blast has not only shattered bodies, buildings, doors, and windows; it shattered the souls and minds of the survivors. It shook our collective consciousness, as Lebanese civil society, sending ripple effects and mobilizing people across Lebanon and the world to support and rebuild. Rebuilding efforts are not enough and we cannot allow the political elites to take advantage of people's pain to reclaim their positions and roles. It is time to change. However, how can we break this cycle of pain and misery? Is there room to create different modus operandi?

A group of activists, scholars, athletes, and artists have come together right after the Blast to explore and propose a new model of operation. For that, we cannot do it alone and need the input and support of fellow Lebanese in Lebanon and the diaspora. We also need to connect with likeminded citizens of the world who believe in a fair and equitable global political and economic order. We have to work on two fronts within Lebanon. First, we have to lift the literal and figurative burden of our political elites and the tons of rubble they have placed on our shoulders. Second, we must resist the hegemony of the current global aid and relief architecture. We cannot pay the price for the incompetence, corruption, and lack of accountability of our political elites and the price for the top-down approach of international donors.

We have to integrate our perseverance, solidarity, and belief in a better future with an open call for political change. We cannot keep rebuilding. We want to rebuild, maintain, and grow. To

achieve this, we have to take charge of this journey and guide rather than being guided by international aid agencies and foreign donors. We ask with humility whether our tiny heartbroken city can break the cycle and present an alternative community-led model of recovery.

Our struggle then is two-fold. We have to work against corruption and incompetence within our political system and its public institutions. We also should be vigilant about the works of international donor agencies, such as the World Bank, EU, UN, DFID and others, and closely monitor their programs in Lebanon. A case in point is the recent Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA) prepared by international agencies, in collaboration with unidentified national experts. The report concluded that the transport sector is a priority besides housing and other tangible and nontangible assets. We are concerned about the RDNA conclusions and wonder about who represented the national expertise on the report, and in what ways was community voice was integrated? In our view, the lack of a community voice is alarming.

We are also concerned that a rapid assessment will become the permanent reference for decision-making and priority allocation of funds. Who speaks on behalf of the members of the affected community, Beirut, and Lebanon? We have suffered from decades of mismanagement and corruption in our state institutions but this does not justify the conscious or unconscious complacency of international donors. The cancellation of the World Bank loan for the Bisri dam project can serve as a cautionary tale. Programs driven by partisan interests and private businesses do not put people's rights first.

International agencies must be accountable to their own donors/funders as well as to the people they aim to serve. We believe that international aid must be rights-based, lest they be coopted as a mechanism to further empower the corrupt elite. Statements such as the one written on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, by the UN Special Coordinator Mr. Jan Kubis on Twitter: "Many thanks to the High Commissioner 4 @Refugees @FilippoGrandi for visiting #Lebanon, for bringing assistance to its people, when they need it the most, after they have hosted Syrian refugees for so many years. The international community is in debt to Lebanon, needs to repay it now" are disturbing.

As much as humanitarian aid is needed, it should be only conceived and driven by a human rights lens. We do not consider the protection of the rights of refugees who escaped war and violence to be a debt for repay as if human lives are part of a bill the UN must settle. In parallel, we recognize that the Lebanese state policies towards refugees have not been rights-based and we denounce using the needs of refugees for political gains and as a bargaining chip with the international community.

We must learn from failed international aid projects which enabled complacency and laziness at all levels of state institutions. Millions of US dollars have gone to the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) to work on reforms and improve women's economic and political participation. How did these funds affect the lives of women? Could it have been spent differently and more efficiently? Similarly, how many projects have been funded over the years in solid waste management and our garbage is still piling on the streets? Where are Lebanon's recycling plants

and why is Lebanon ranked amongst the most polluted countries in the world? The same story repeats in the education sector where in spite of huge investments “our children are left behind” and our youth perform very low on different subjects by international standards.

Of relevance to the August 4 Blast, why is the Disaster Risk Management Unit at the Office of the Prime Minister absent? Where did the UNDP support and investment go? We have the right to question why Lebanon continues to rank 143<sup>rd</sup> place worldwide on ease of doing business in spite of the huge resources invested in support of small to medium size enterprises (SMEs). We ask where Lebanon stands in its efforts to implement e-government, decentralization, and digitization of the administration?

Why are hospitals owned and managed by political parties, and why is the healthcare sector overpowered by clientelism and private interests? We link all of these failures in accountability to the lack of proper political representation and ‘marvel’ at the gaps in electoral reform and the glaring practice of vote-buying, intimidation, and gerrymandering in all parliamentary elections.

As founders of Khaddit Beirut and authors of this first issue of "Breaking the Cycle", we pledge to be one voice alongside many others to say that *enough is enough*. We must break the cycle of corruption and complacency. We commit to transparency and accountability. We have developed a framework for action to guide our work in the areas of community health, environmental health, education, and SMEs. In each of these four areas, we are working on micro-initiatives of relevance to the victims of the Beirut Blast while building a vision for Lebanon that is rights-based.

As lucky survivors of the August 4 Blast, we believe that collective agency drives change. We add our voice and vision to others who want to help Beirut lead the change for a better Lebanon. Let us together turn the catastrophe of the August 4 Blast into an opportunity to create a community-led, evidence-based, and locally-driven model for recovery and change. Only then, we and other Lebanese can restore faith in ourselves, in humanity, and in our collective agency.