



ONE YEAR LATER....

The Elephant in the Room

It was 5 o'clock on August 5th, 2020, when Carmen literally grabbed me by the hand and took me for a walk in the devastated city. While we were walking on crushed glass and looking at shattered windows and furniture hanging from balconies, she looked at me and said, "we have to do something, we cannot sit back and watch the foreign aids dictate our narrative" This conversation triggered the creation of our collective movement: Khaddit Beirut.

We both came back that night to my apartment in Achrafieh and started calling colleagues, friends, and families asking them to join us in what we called a dignified response to the crisis. In less than a week, we were around 100 experts ready to start the work. Originating from a personal need to feel heard and useful in dark times, Khaddit Beirut was born on August 5, 2020, the second day after the Beirut Blast, the biggest non-nuclear explosion of the century. Like the chemistry principle of "Like attracts Like" people, thoughts, ideologies, research methodologies, and actions all converged into establishing the framework and action plan of Khaddit Beirut. The two diversions in the disciplines and the country of residence were the assets upon which we created a holistic interprofessional model. For the first time in the history of AUB, 150+ activist scholars decided to lead the way in co-designing solutions and best practices by creating *with and for the community* institutional models that work. Deep down, we all felt that we are embarking on a long journey that we knew how it started but never imagined how it is evolving.

The road has not been easy for sure. Early on, we thought that by extending our expertise in business, health, education, environment, data analysis and informatics, NGOs and other humanitarian organizations working on the ground would rush to team up with us, but they did not. We thought that our extended help



to devastated public hospitals would be welcome and it was not. We thought that many schools would jump onto the opportunity to work with us to circumvent the tripled catastrophe of the blast, the economic collapse and the coronavirus pandemic and some did not, we thought the donations to help create sustainable processes would be abundant and it was not... Two months into the work, we knew that accountable, sustainable, and inclusive processes are going to be hard to implement especially that these processes would require from us to break cycles of corruption, clientelism, and dependency among many others.

From day one we realized that not one real problem can be solved by one discipline. Our life is much more complicated than this. And that is why single angled solutions could be detrimental. In 1950, Allan Savory, an ecologist shot 40,000 elephants living in national parks in Africa to stop desertification before he figured out that herds of wild animals are essential to keep natural balance. "That was a terrible decision for me to have to make... that was the saddest and greatest blunder of my life, and I will carry that to my grave" he said in his TED talk.¹ By moving over the lands herds of animals keep the soil alive by eating the grass and pushing down with their paws the vegetation into the soil so it decays and regrows. Lessons learnt echo how much overcoming grim and difficult situations require holistic approaches that are



¹ <https://www.fastcompany.com/90606492/what-if-we-replaced-elected-politicians-with-randomly-selected-citizens>



based on collective efforts of individuals and institutions.

Together we started rebuilding our trust in ourselves, each other, and in the country. We accumulated the pieces one by one and collectively were able to uncover and praise the hard work of the unsung heroes in six public schools, embrace the grit and determination of our students and volunteers and engage them in hopeful and constructive resistance, train, empower and emphasize the work of many silent nurses all throughout the country, protect and highlight the values and capabilities of the Lebanese cuisine by listening to restaurateurs and responding to their needs, challenge our youth to work together and develop computer games through the Gaming Academy, mobilize a large network of environmental scholars to work in a synchronized way to attend to the environmental health consequences of the blast and all other compounded factors thereafter, stand by our community to care for COVID patients, attend to the need for vaccination, manage chronic diseases, and manage medications shortage, document and communicate the progress of our work internally and beyond. And even before sharing much of our achievements, our way of coming together to care and act has resonated with many centers, organizations, and universities all across the globe.

How long do movements like Khaddit Beirut live and how do they evolve over time? remains a question to be answered. It is enough to watch the bird flocks moving in the sky to learn that collective movements are among the greatest wonders of the world.



Our commitment to working together to face one of the most challenging times in the history of Lebanon and the history of any nation in the past two centuries, echoes the efforts of many scholars around the world who are denouncing the



conventional measures of research like the impact factors and the h-index because as Paul Boselie put it in a recent issue of “nature” dedicated for open science, these indicators contribute to a ‘productification’ of science that values sheer output over good research. “It has become a very sick model that goes beyond what is really relevant for science and putting science forward,” he says.² Open science, in the contrary, presents a new opportunity to promote progress towards public engagement and data sharing.

Moving beyond the zealous and the grit of the 300+ members of Khaddit Beirut to date, the challenges we are surmounting, and the sustainability of our efforts remain **the big elephant in the room**. Having each carried out two full time jobs, one paid by our institution and one driven by our collective presence and hope to survive, we reflect back on the eternal collective movement of the bird flock and ask ourselves: *if it is not the personal gain and glory, what makes social collective movements live beyond their immediate needs of existence?* One thing I am sure of today is that “our raison d’etre” still exists and so, we will not give up, and we will not turn our backs on a community, who in its darkest moments, is still ready to learn, improve, act, research, and share.

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² <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01759-5>