



**Khaddit Beirut**  
**Breaking the Cycle of Toxicity**  
**Issue 3**

It has been 85 days since the explosion which claimed lives, shattered lives, and changed lives forever. As we navigate this new reality we renew our commitment for resisting the structures of oppression and corruption that have eroded the institutional fabric of our country. We refute resilience as a framework because it reinforces the responsibility on individuals to rise above challenges, rather than keep the focus on systemic accountability conducive to seeking collective solutions for the common good. We are faced with a multiplicity of overlapping failures that emanate from 30 years of acute neglect within a laissez faire governance framework dominated by the absence of safety nets that safeguard the rights of people for basic services. This has resulted in depleting the state from resources resulting in the absence of trust, capacity, and data to respond to the disastrous aftermath of the explosion. Now that resources are gone, public servants in key leadership positions never acted responsibly to secure these resources. This issue is about “Breaking the Cycle of Toxicity.” We continue to find solace in working together, by choosing hope through action and by going beyond what have become a proliferation of relief initiatives toward dreaming and building together the country that protect all its people especially those who have become the most vulnerable.

At the same time we face toxicity in the form of blocking solutions, limiting collective action, and stifling creativity in three ways. We identify below these three levels and the ways in which we are learning to break the cycles of toxicity.

### **Toxic Bureaucracy**

Bureaucracy in its “ideal” form was intended by Max Weber as a system void of personality cults, based on merit, and internal equity. In public administrative studies, bureaucracy is a good thing; because it was meant to replace a system of nepotism, spoils and corruption. But bureaucracy in our context has grown to be a pejorative term because it is poorly practiced and has failed to shield the institutions from the toxic politicization of decisions and actions. Following the rules is selective and governed by individual agendas rather than public good that does not leave marginalized people to fend for themselves. We are calling for a system that lays the foundation for institutional practices that are grounded in fairness, effectiveness and social justice. What we are faced with are politicized bureaucratic structures that reward mediocrity with no potential nor momentum for self-corrective mechanism and with stagnation that can never lead to self-renewal. Because of the timing, nature, and magnitude of the explosion, we need to lay the foundation for a bureaucracy that is effective but also adaptive. Disaster response requires flexibility and the involvement of multiple stakeholders on multiple levels. locally, nationally, and internationally. Disaster response in the absence of a coordinated effort by the state requires cross-sectoral collaboration that avoid overlap and ensures efficiency.

At Khaddit Beirut, we are working to rebuild while preserving the positive aspects of bureaucratic structures namely standards, systems, and accountability We are creatively thinking of “solutions” to address the needs from the disaster and we are doing in a manner



that models how government should have been organized to face it: adaptive, flexible, with accountability. So we have created a governance system that is organic, responsive, and encourages collaboration rather than centralization and hierarchy. Rather than boxing people in silos, we decided to think together out loud collectively all the time, and about everything. We choose to be trans-disciplinary and disruptive rather than bureaucratic, championing people and solutions over administrations that are infested with corruption and politicized decision making that drives individual agendas rather than the public good.

## **Toxic Pollution**

Access to clean air and water is a human right. We have been living in a cycle of toxic pollutants since the day we were born and from when our children were born. The epitome of toxicity was in the explosion of the port on August 4<sup>th</sup> followed by 72 hours fire from the port on September 10<sup>th</sup>. The hazardous material produced after the explosion were toxic, thousands of people, young and old, gasped for fresh air for days. Across the country wildfires cannot be stopped because Lebanon is ill equipped to respond to any national disaster. Politicians who got richer over the years redirected the state resources to their private institutions run as self-serving dynasties that strengthen and rationalize the sectarian allegiances. Politicians also depleted the state, buried the country in garbage, and let the banks control our deposits and lifelong savings. Last year, this time the President of the Republic promised an investigation into the wildfires that claimed the life of one firefighter. One year later, 10 more firefighters died by being sent to the port, and more wildfires, we see no result of any investigation and no maintenance of helicopters to stop the fires. We have the highest cancer rates among youth in West Asia and even higher rates near the Naameh landfill. We get cardiovascular diseases on average 12 years before other people in the world. Our sea is full of heavy fuel oil, garbage, and sewage.

The way we decided to break out of this cycle is to democratize science and put it in the hands of everyone from all age groups. The Nature Conservation Center at AUB launched the Environmental Academy precisely for the purpose of empowering the community to come up with and implement locally-driven solutions to environmental problems. Solutions to toxic pollution should not remain in the hands of the poorly managed state institutions nor of corrupt politicians who are culprits in the situation we are facing. Instead, let's open up the opportunity for people to design local solutions. Then let's work together to scale solutions. We cannot afford to wait for state-led solutions to arrive, we cannot import a roadmap, and we have decided to work on solutions today to break the cycle of toxic pollution. Our initiative to "Reclaim the Air" will take over tiny open spaces in the city starting with a spot in Karantina, clean it up, make it green, and invite star athletes to play with children and our health team to have conversations with adult on preventive healthcare and healthcare management. Monday November 9, the community health group of Khaddit Beirut in collaboration with the AUB School of Nursing are having a health fair to the Karantina community to raise awareness about various health issues including healthy environments, hygiene and COVID-19 precautionary measures.

## **Toxic Politics**

For decades, we have been stuck in a cycle of toxic politics that plays out in three ways. The political discourse is toxic, it incites sectarian tensions, it polarized people, and spreads venomous rumors and lies. This discourse is enshrined in our education system and reinforced through the nature of media and elections. Politicians spread hatred and divide people rather than empowering collectives for the common good. Second, the political structures are toxic as they support a network of clientelism that maintains a web of loyalties in return of favors to people and communities. Existing politicized governance structures are



so toxic they benefit from disaster and misery to enable politicians to emerge as leaders and saviors. The more impoverished we get the more toxic political structures will be imposed on us to access basic rights, like our savings from the banks. Thirdly, political institutions are toxic as they exhibit resilience by adapting to crises and co-opting narratives. Institutions absorb aid and technical assistance program using funding to maintain the status quo without serving people.

We have broken the cycle of toxic politics by reclaiming the central role of politics in people's lives. We redefine politicians not as *zu'ama* but as public servants, as members of the community who take on the responsibility to serve the communities and can create solutions and scale them into policies. We want to transform politics by making it evidence-based, community-led, and locally-driven while also being globally relevant. In Khaddit Beirut, we escape the toxicity of political discourses, structures, and institutions by creating our own narrative, solutions, and collectives. We are doing this actively in four impact initiatives that affect people's daily lives and well-being: community health, environmental health, education, and local businesses. We redefine politics as an intersection of these four impact initiatives with our efforts to revive the streets and reclaim the air. This is clean community-driven politics that has allowed us to break the cycle, we invite everyone to join and help us think bigger, better, and faster so that perhaps we can prevent impending disasters as winter approaches and prices sky-rocket.

### **Escaping Toxicity: Maintaining Ethics and Accountability**

While we identify the politicized bureaucracy as a hindrance to responsive and collaborative solutions, we also recognize that no movement can grow without institutionalization. At Khaddit Beirut, we ask ourselves just as we ask of the state: how can we maintain ethical conduct and accountability without falling into the traps of toxicity? How can we be inclusive and yet organized and concerted in our efforts? How can we serve the people while also sustaining and organizing ourselves? The shake up and the wounds that the explosion has caused in our country and our consciousness made us realize the magnitude of the devastation eating up the fabric of our country for decades. It made it clear for us that it is time to re-envision our systems and required us to build the roadmap and answer these questions as we go, while being able to create enough room for trans-disciplinary conversation and honest confrontation at every juncture.

