
CULTURAL POLICIES
& DEVELOPMENT

A black and white photograph of a woman from behind, wearing a white garment with intricate lace or cutout patterns. She is looking out over a field or landscape. The background is slightly blurred, showing some structures and vegetation.

THE LEBANESE CULTURAL SECTOR IN CRISIS

LEVERAGING CULTURE FOR SOLIDARITY AND RECOVERY

On the afternoon of 4 August 2020, an explosion erupted in the port of the city of Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. At last count, more than 150 people have died, 6,000 have been injured and an estimated 300,000 people have been left homeless[1]. The damage from the blast has affected over half of the city. The Governor of Beirut, Marwan Abboud, estimated the cost of the damage at up to USD 5 billion and the Lebanese government declared a two-week state of emergency. A large part of Lebanon's grain reserves have been obliterated as Beirut's port houses the country's only grain silos and receives 80% of its imports[2].

The consequences of this explosion are severe and it occurs amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already exacerbated Lebanon's economic crisis and civil unrest in which the country has been engulfed since it emerged from its 15-year civil war in 1990. Preliminary estimates suggest that GDP dropped about 5% in 2019. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, estimates for 2020 predicted a drop of GDP of about 10%, with inflation at around 25%; the worse economic collapse ever since independence[3]. It is estimated that nearly half of the country's population lives below the poverty line, 35% are unemployed[4], and 75% of Lebanon needs aid as a result of the pandemic[5].

As Lebanon's economy had already been severely weakened, the civil unrest coupled with the explosion and the COVID-19 outbreak will have a deep and long-term impact on the country's socio-economic resilience. Without exception, all sectors of the country have been hit or have even come to a halt, including all components of the cultural sector. Many of the city's art spaces, heritage sites, museums and galleries, are located in the neighbourhoods of Mar Mikhael and Gemmayzeh and in the industrial area of Karantina close to the epicentre of the blast[6].

Cultural stakeholders have thus far played an important role throughout the economic crisis and the pandemic. Such mobilization of cultural actors - including from the private sector and civil society - will be critical to support the rebuilding of a sense of hope, solidarity and unity in these difficult times, and ensure the resilience of the population through cultural activities that are deeply rooted in the Lebanese culture and people.

In the longer run, it is imperative to support cultural activities in order to ensure a sustainable renaissance of the previously burgeoning cultural sector.

[1] [Beirut explosion: Lebanon's government 'to resign' as death toll rises](#), *BBC*, 10 August 2020.

[2] [Beirut Was Already Suffering. Then Came a Deadly Explosion](#), *Time*, 5 August 2020.

[3] Joelle M. Abi-Rached and Ishac Diwan, [The Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19 on Lebanon: A Crisis Within Crises](#), *Euromesco Spot-On*, N°19 - June 2020.

[4] [Crisis upon crisis: blast rocks a Lebanon already on its knees](#), *Guardian*, 5 August 2020.

[5] [75% of Lebanon needs aid after coronavirus, and hungry protesters are back on the streets](#), *CNN*, 29 April 2020.

[6] [Beirut's once-thriving cultural community was already at breaking point. Then the blast hit](#), *CNN*, 13 August 2020.

THE LEBANESE CULTURAL SECTOR: WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The 15-year civil war trembled profoundly the cultural sector of Lebanon, which led to many artists leaving the country, and a large number of cultural establishments closing their doors. This war also led to a loss of arts and cultural education, especially following the reduction of school hours. The return to peace following the civil war gave way to a renaissance in many cultural and artistic fields, especially literature (notably poetry), music and film, which placed particular emphasis on the social and political situation of the country and the deep-felt consequences of the civil war on the Lebanese society[7].

Prior to the blast that took place in August 2020, aftermath of earthquakes and ravage of civil wars have severely damaged the cultural fabric of Beirut including many of its cultural sites.

During the war in Lebanon in July 2006, three UNESCO World Heritage sites were damaged – Byblos, Baalbek and Tyre, as well as several villages in the south of Lebanon[8]. The Syrian war, and the competing needs of the displaced Syrian population that sought refuge in Lebanon's cities, has placed further strain on municipalities to increase the provision of basic services while preserving the country's cultural heritage[9].

Many cultural activities in Lebanon are part of the informal economy which renders the collection of data and subsequent analysis difficult. As in many countries of the Arab States region, one of

the obstacles is that the involvement of the private sector and the civil society in cultural and creative industries has not yet been fully documented and analysed. In Lebanon, cultural life is largely driven by efforts from civil society and the private sector, and remains significantly dependent on the will of funders (banks, sponsors, embassies, institutions). This situation tends to exacerbate the lack of cooperation and communication witnessed across all creative fields and reflected by most cultural actors. However, it is also noteworthy that, within the region, Lebanon provides perhaps the most enabling environment for civil society organizations – significant contributors to the country's vibrant cultural sector – yet the lack the coordination between the government and those non-governmental entities pose further difficulties in data collection and analysis[10].

A fragmentation of responsibilities in the public administration the cultural sector poses challenges

to a structural and integrated national cultural policy. Several other state institutions are responsible for the organization and development of the cultural sector in Lebanon. While the Ministry of Culture has the mission of supporting creativity, improving accessibility to the arts and heritage and creating job opportunities, several culture-related tasks are delegated to other ministries: the Ministry of Tourism for the promotion of archaeological sites;

[7] Picard, Elizabeth & Ramsbotham, Alexander (2012). *Reconciliation, reform and resilience Positive peace for Lebanon, Accord: an international review of peace initiatives*, Issue 24.

[8] ICOMOS National Report 2006-2007, *Lebanon Cultural Heritage Threatened by the War in Lebanon in 2006*.

[9] Independent Evaluation Group (IEG, 2019). *Project Performance Assessment Report – Lebanon Cultural Heritage and Urban Development Project* (IBRD-71660, IBRD-81370). August 13, 2019.

[10] Maltzahn, Nadia von (2017). "What Cultural Policies?" *Explicit and Implicit Cultural Policies in Lebanon, Middle East – Topics & Arguments*, Vol. 7, p.75-84.

THE LEBANESE CULTURAL SECTOR: WHAT IS AT STAKE?

the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities oversees cultural activities at the municipality level; while the Ministry of Social Affairs is in charge of crafts. However, the limited resources of the government in the field of culture are largely deployed by the Ministry of Tourism, which concentrates most of its funding on international festivals organized in Lebanon. The municipalities are, on the other hand, considered the most capable authorities in terms of defining cultural policies in light of the law of June 30, 1977, which sets out the powers of municipality boards[11].

The cultural and tourism sectors in Lebanon are closely intertwined. This is manifested in particular through the mechanisms of funding for culture. In the Voluntary National Review submitted by Lebanon in 2018 on the implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the country considers its cultural and natural heritage as major components for strengthening the tourism sector, promoting local development and contributing to national peace-building. When tourism faces problems, the cultural sector is often the first to be impacted as many cultural events rely on tourism. The country's diverse cultural character and ancient history make it an important destination, which is slowly rebuilding itself after periods of prolonged turmoil. It is estimated that tourism contributes nearly 7% to Lebanon's GDP or about USD 4 billion[12].

The inseparable linkage between the culture and tourism sectors mean that the currently unfavourable environment for mobility, in particular for international arrivals, due to the social and health crises could have a profound impact on the cultural sector. Lebanon has a long-standing history of cultural tourism. The measures taken at the end of February 2020 concerning the entry of tourists from certain destinations due to COVID-19 had an immediate impact on the tourism sector in particular of the city of Beirut.

Regional funding targeting cultural facilities makes up a relatively small proportion compared to financial support in other sectors. It can also be noted that while Lebanon's production of cultural goods and service are well received in the Arab region, funding from the Gulf countries – who are among the main contributors of funding to several sectors of the country's economy – remain insignificant in the cultural sector. In recent years, however, a substantial amount from the region has been granted to the renovation of the National Library of Lebanon, funded by Qatar, and the construction of the Archaeological Museum in Beirut, funded by Kuwait. Both institutions were affected by the blast[13].

“

The long-term closure of cultural sites, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, may jeopardize the recovery of the cultural and tourism industry.

H. Exc. Mr Sarkis El-Khoury,
Director General of Antiquities



[11] Agenda Culturel (2016). *Culture in Lebanon by 2020: State of Play*.

[12] [Le coronavirus, coup de grâce pour le secteur du tourisme](#), *Le commerce du levant*, le 9 mars 2020.

[13] Helen Holmes, [Beirut's Damaged Museums Will Get 'First Aid' From International Arts Organizations](#), *Observer*, 17 August 2020.

A FAVOURABLE CONTEXT FOR THE RECOVERY OF THE CULTURAL SECTOR AND RESILIENCE IN THE LONGER TERM

Lebanon has actively participated in the consultation process for the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Council of Ministers established the National Committee on SDGs, headed by the Prime Minister and composed of representatives of relevant ministries and public institutions, as well as civil society and the private sector, to ensure that the SDGs are included in national programmes and plans. The Lebanese Parliament formed a committee in 2017 to ensure coordinated parliamentary political support for the promotion of SDGs[14]. Nevertheless, the humanitarian crisis caused by the influx of displaced Syrians has had a significant impact on development programmes.

Lebanon has a rich cultural heritage with almost 250 archaeological sites, including UNESCO World Heritage listed sites at Byblos, Baalbek, and Tyre, coupled with some natural sites (Mediterranean coastline, Cedar Forests). The artistic scene in Lebanon is particularly active and has its own independent magazine, "L'Agenda culturel", which has become a reference in terms of the country's cultural life and one that is unique in the Arab world.

Culture is also recognized as part of the country's economy;

it creates jobs, and cultural investments are increasingly profitable. The State has multiplied initiatives, including a five-year plan for cultural recovery in Lebanon estimated at USD 180 million [15], which will bring a significant benefit to the national economy. The Bank of Lebanon notably makes credit available to non-governmental organizations, particularly those in the field of information and technology. The Ministry of Culture is also in discussions with the Bank of Lebanon for an increase in investment in the cultural and creative industries, particularly for cultural start-ups to receive a share of the credit and finance.

In recent years, the Lebanese film industry and the field of digital arts, have gained traction.

Lebanese films are appealing to domestic and international audiences, and are also increasingly financially viable. A new generation of filmmakers are harnessing the power of cinema to shape a new narrative expressing national identity and culture. These include a growing number of women producers and directors. Investment in film production has been growing rapidly, going from a mere USD 350,000 in 2009 to USD 11 million in 2014[16]. Lebanon is considered one of the regional leaders in production and post-production, exporting content to most of the Arab world.



[14] *SDGs in Lebanon*, United Nations Lebanon.

[15] 180 millions de dollars pour faire rayonner la culture, L'Orient-Le-Jour, 6 juillet 2017.

[16] McKinsey (2018). *Lebanon Economic Vision*.

A FAVOURABLE CONTEXT FOR THE RECOVERY OF THE CULTURAL SECTOR AND RESILIENCE IN THE LONGER TERM

Investment in sustainable food production increasingly testify to the vitality and significance of the Lebanese gastronomic tradition that is deeply embedded in the Lebanese identity and culture. The agro-food industrial sector is one of the major contributors to the Lebanese economy, generating around 20% of Lebanon's overall GDP[17]. The country has progressively developed interest in fair and organic food processes, based on traditional know-how and on the Mediterranean diet that could point to a better future for the food and gastronomy sector alongside a healthier and environment-driven agricultural economy.

International and regional solidarity has demonstrated a long-standing willingness to support of the cultural sector in Lebanon, notably in the fields of heritage, arts and creativity. On 10 August 2020, UNESCO mobilized leading cultural organizations and experts from Lebanon and abroad through an online meeting to coordinate emergency and longer-term measures to safeguard the city's severely damaged cultural heritage and rehabilitate its cultural life. During the meeting, the Directorate General of Antiquities presented the findings of its preliminary damage assessment, which found that at least 8,000 buildings have been affected by the explosion, including some 640 historic buildings. Participants in the meeting also highlighted the impact of the explosion on major museums, such as the National Museum of Beirut, the Sursock

Museum and the Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut, as well as cultural spaces, galleries and religious sites. UNESCO, responding to the Directorate-General of Antiquities of Lebanon's call for support, will lead the international mobilization for the recovery and reconstruction of Beirut's culture and heritage, based on the Lebanon's technical needs assessment, and develop the International Action Plan for Culture in Beirut with all its partners in Lebanon and abroad.

On 11 August 2020, the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) announced and signed a global statement of solidarity and support with Lebanon for the restoration of the damaged cultural heritage in Beirut, which has now been signed by 29 public, private and international institutions involved in promoting and preserving cultural heritage from around the world, including UNESCO[18]. The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) and Culture Resource (Al Mawred Al Thaqafy) have announced a list of 23 cultural structures that will benefit from their joint programme, whilst the Solidarity Fund for Arts and Culture Structures in Lebanon aims to support arts and culture structures in Lebanon.



[17] Lebanese National Accounts, 2013.

[18] ICESCO, [Statement of solidarity with Lebanon and support to recover the damaged cultural heritage in Beirut](#), 11 August 2020.

