

We can still save the Litani River

Philippe Lazzarini

“I don’t want the cancer to kill me” protestors chanted earlier this month in the Bekaa village of Hawsh al-Rafqah. The pollution of the Litani River has reached disastrous levels in recent months, causing widespread concerns about its impact on the health of local populations. The Litani River used to be one of Lebanon’s most precious natural resources, but it has turned into an environmental disaster. In the ’60s, people could safely swim in the river and use it to irrigate vegetables. Today, studies describe the water as “basically raw sewage.” Clearly, we can no longer ignore this crisis.

Most recently, the pollution of the river has been blamed on the presence of informal settlements of Syrian refugees in areas along the Litani River. While this is a potential factor, the pollution of the river is not new. It is a decades-old problem, the result of poor practices including ineffective wastewater treatment systems, faulty governance, the weak enforcement of existing laws as well as the behavior of the industries. Untreated industrial effluents are poured into the river by the many factories along its banks, and the river is used for the dumping of waste and sewage.

In November, the Industry Ministry shut down 79 unlicensed factories that were violating the law by polluting the Litani River. This shows there is legal recourse for breaching environmental laws, and that we can deter other actors from polluting Lebanon.

To bring the river back to life, the Litani River Authority, together with the Environment, Industry and Energy ministries, are now being supported by a \$55 million loan from the World Bank and other donors to improve the municipal sewage network, solid waste management, industrial depollution and the monitoring of water quality along the river.

The U.N. is also implementing projects to help resolve this catastrophic situation.

This includes improving wastewater facilities in informal settlements and stopping wastewater from being directly discharged into the Litani River.

Recent assessments show that nearly 95 percent of informal settlements comply with the guidelines for the management of wastewater, and we are working to ensure full compliance. We are discharging waste collected from informal settlements in authorized treatment plants, such as Jub Jennin in the Bekaa.

The U.N. is also supporting the rehabilitation of existing wastewater facilities, such as the one in Aitanit, to improve the collection and treatment of wastewater in villages in the Litani watershed.

Finally, to address behaviors, our programs aim at raising awareness among all communities and at collecting trash along the banks of the river.

Saving the Litani River is a major issue that requires the engagement of everyone in Lebanon, from individuals to factories and from municipalities to ministries. In support of this, the U.N. stands ready to work with all organizations interested in tackling these urgent environmental issues that affect Lebanese and refugee communities alike.

We are not yet out of the woods. Many inappropriate practices continue. Governance must be improved, behaviors must change, anti-pollution laws must be enforced and most importantly polluters must be penalized. One step in the right direction would be legislation to strengthen the power of enforcement of the environmental police and environmental prosecutors-general. The Litani River is in the middle of an ecological disaster, but we can still save it if we act together now. In the Lebanon we want, rivers should be sources of life, not disease.

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