

Municipalities swap stories of social stability programs

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BEIRUT: Representatives from municipalities across Lebanon gathered for a workshop Tuesday to exchange their experiences in undertaking a UNDP program that seeks to address the unique social problems in their communities. The “Mechanisms for Social Stability,” a United Nations Development Program project established in 2014 in partnership with the Social Affairs Ministry, seeks to address socio-cultural challenges facing both Lebanese and Syrians in 38 participating municipalities, as part of the U.N. agency’s work with countries hosting Syrian refugees. During the workshop, municipal representatives presented their mechanisms, tackling issues ranging from the environment to tourism, that have been launched or proposed between 2017 and 2019, to diplomats, non-governmental organizations and international donors.

“We have gathered 38 communities who have worked with us over the last two years to try to see how they can best address tensions they face in their own communities,” UNDP Country Director Celine Moyroud told The Daily Star.

“We’ve tried to establish mechanisms which bring different [groups] together ... and serve as early-warning [systems] when tension and pressure are put on communities,” Moyroud said.

Labib Saleh is a member of a committee formed with the help of the UNDP in the coastal town of Heri, Batroun, to create greater municipal transparency.

“We diagnosed the problem in our town as a lack of communication between the municipality and the people. ... This committee will help break the ice between [the two].”

Saleh said the first meeting would take place in April, when the committee would question the municipality board about its budget. “Our town’s income is very high but there are only about 500 people in the town. Where are the projects? We have to ask and they have to answer.”

The average age of Heri’s municipal board members is above 75, said Saleh, who expressed hope that the committee would bring younger voices to municipal affairs.

But apparently not everyone in Heri is cooperating with the new committee. “We are trying to work with [Heri Mayor] Nasser Omar but he is a bit resistant. He was invited to [today’s] event as well but he did not come. We invite him to every single meeting we do but he hasn’t come to one,” Saleh added.

In Jbeil, the mechanism for social stability has taken a different form: Young volunteers were trained to act as local municipal guides.

“We had to learn our own history so we could show it to visitors,” social worker and project participant Therese Jamili told The Daily Star. “So we gave young people training sessions to know their municipality better and bring more people to the area.”

The broader purpose of the program is for the municipalities to continue with the mechanism after the funding ends, Moyroud said.

“At the end it is about a community prioritizing this kind of engagement as something that has a value in itself. ... For us, the issue is that the community needs to find resources in that community to try to address the issues.”

Social Affairs Minister Richard Kouyoumjian said he considered the mechanism process “part of a decentralization project. Local communities are taking care of themselves and taking responsibility for planning and executing.”

He also addressed “certain views and accusations that all these projects are [designed] to resettle Syrians in Lebanon.”

“I will be very honest with you. We face a crisis,” he said.

But he nevertheless emphasized that Lebanon needed support from the international community.

“[Lebanon] went to Brussels to say we want more support because Lebanon cannot do it alone,” he said, referring to a conference last week in the European city where international donors pledged around \$7 billion in aid for Syrian refugees and their host communities in the region.