Food for peace

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The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded this year to the World Food Program (WFP) for its role in combating hunger, contributing in enhancing peace in conflict-affected areas, as well as preventing the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict. The prize also has shed the light on the millions of people that are suffering from hunger especially after the pandemic.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee has highlighted the interrelation between hunger and armed conflict. "War and conflict can cause food insecurity and hunger, just as hunger and food insecurity can cause latent conflicts to flare up and trigger the use of violence." Food security is not limited anymore to preventing hunger; however, it is directly linked to peace and stability efforts.

The World Food Program is the United Nations' organization that delivers food assistance in emergencies, works with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience. Food security has been a global issue even before the COVID-19 pandemic, and has now become an instrument of peace more than any time before.

According to the universal definition "Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." (1996 World Food Summit)

Thus, there are four pillars of food security that we should always tackle: physical availability, economic and physical access, food utilization and stability of the other three dimensions over time. There are also two general types of food insecurity: chronic and transitory. According to Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FOA), there are a set of indicators and benchmarks to have different scales and phases in classifying food insecurity. When tackling the implications of a certain problem such as COVID-19 or armed conflict, it is not enough to measure its duration but analyze its intensity and impact on food security and nutrition.

According to the UN, "prior to the onset of this pandemic, more than 820 million people were already identified as chronically food insecure. The latest data shows that the food security of 135 million people was categorized as crisis level or worse. That number could nearly double before the end of the year due to the impacts of COVID-19."

Moving from the international to the local perspective, Lebanon is stricken with compounded crises starting from the financial crisis, lockdown and lately the Beirut Port blast. The country is already suffering from financial contraction and currency depreciation that have impacted on food security. Based on the food security brief of the Food Security Program at the American University of Beirut, it is predicting a 38 percent decline in Lebanese agricultural production (in 2020 vs. 2018) since farmers are facing declining purchasing power and less incentive to produce. The problem has been exacerbated after the port explosion on Aug. 4 as approximately 85 percent of the country's food needs was imported in recent years. The damage to Beirut Port, which handles 80 percent of the country's imports, will have a high impact on food availability.

According to the World Bank, real GDP is projected to decline by 19.2 percent in 2020. As per WFP, 1 million people in Lebanon are living below the poverty line and 49 percent of Lebanese are worried about having access to food. We can't also neglect the burden of refugees on the country as it has the world's highest per capita refugee presence, estimated at one-quarter of the overall population. Such factors are pushing a percentage of vulnerable Lebanese to the brink of starvation. However, we still don't have any scientific data on the percentage of vulnerable Lebanese, people under the poverty line, and those who are suffering from chronic or transitory food insecurity.

Taking into consideration the Lebanese complexities, food security is not a nutritional issue; however, it is the fuel of local conflicts and a major factor of social instability. With the absence of any economic and political reforms at the governmental level, the international community will support Lebanon at the level of crisis response in mapping and categorizing the vulnerable in order to set relevant interventions.

Currently, the Lebanese are equally vulnerable as refugees and international response should target the vulnerable ones as a priority to ensure political and social stability. Social security is a national priority and any political stability cannot be attained while the margin of hunger and vulnerability is widening in Lebanon.

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