

## Environment and climate change advocacy for Lebanon

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In the present context of Lebanon's severe crisis at all levels, climate change advocacy is not to be dismissed offhand as a bottom priority. Climate action should be rather regarded as an instrument of recovery.

True, the country is bankrupt, the economy in tatters, the middle class has evaporated, unemployment is at 40% and counting, and more than half of the population has sunk under the poverty line. Equally true, COVID-19 has been unabatedly exacerbating the health, education, employment and economic problems overall. Moreover, the Beirut Port blast of Aug. 4 caused gargantuan destruction and immeasurably aggravated the human and socio-economic plight of the population, with relief money, by and large foreign, only capable of alleviating a portion of the total suffering. At such a scale, the task of redressing the country's economy is already daunting and complex. Add to it the huge ratio (1 to 3) of displaced Syrians to the Lebanese population, with the pressure their presence exerts on Lebanon's frail infrastructure, resources and the job market, and the country's calamitous situation grows further out of proportion. Amid all of this, there should be no forgetting the fact that Lebanon's air, water and sea pollution problems have compounded too, and will continue to, thanks to no serious solutions having been put in place in the precrisis era. In addition, there's no escaping the fact that the port explosion (one-fifth of Hiroshima's nuclear blast power) had released dirt, silt and toxic substances into the environment that will reverberate with the population's health, somewhat comparatively with how 9/11 had been impacting exposed New York citizens since 2001. Add to that the hazardous effects on the environment from moving mega-tons of debris from the port explosion's Ground Zero and radius to makeshift, improvised dumps God knows where across the country.

Within this juncture, advocating climate change involves engaging with quite an array of domestic and foreign stakeholders whose buy-in is neither straightforward nor a foregone conclusion, as they may not be disposed to see their donation, relief or investment funds go elsewhere, whether in full or in part. But they can be worked on in terms of persuasion.

Here's one way: the job creation argument, where raising the tone on the environment and climate change, and taking concrete action steps in that regard, can well integrate with other efforts being, or planned to be, deployed to help Lebanon come out of its profound economic and public health crisis, while reckoning that the recovery process is of a long-term, uphill task nature.

On a priority scale, the painstaking road to recovery involves transforming the country's ailing infrastructure into one that is modern and sustainable. Included also is turning to clean energy that would help in facing the climate emergency, the persistent key signs of which in Lebanon have been the reduction in arable land, in addition to unusual seasons characterized by fierce, shocking storms on the one hand, and by increased water evaporation and forest fires on the other hand.

Among the jobs which the current acute crisis affected were those related to clean energy projects that had been gaining ground in the country. The trend needs to be encouraged to move forward by means of incentives and PPP schemes that would make long-term ROI feasible and appealing. Let alone the transformation needed in the traditional power sector to enable it become carbon pollution-free as soon as possible. Jobs saved, created and rehabilitated within this overall scheme would contribute to remedying pressing socio-economic problems.

Another area is housing construction projects in general, including buildings, old and modern, which are up for fixing and upgrade from the destruction that the Beirut Port explosion brought about. An eye on retrofit and installation of more efficient building materials and windows will reduce residential and office power bills and help the sustainable

energy cause, while helping the job creation cause as well, in terms of added work volume, and added specialization by means of manpower training.

A similar paradigm shift in the transportation arena is capable of generating similar dual benefits, and on a big scale. Lebanon's perennial problem has been the lack of a proper public transport system, both intra- and inter-city, resulting in the confluence of private cars onto roads and streets to-and-back from workplaces during the working week, with precious productivity time lost in traffic jams, and massive burnt gasoil emissions polluting the air day in, day out, year after year. Let alone the added emissions from dilapidated taxi cars (the famous "Service") and decrepit diesel oil operated minivans. It's about time to equip Lebanese cities and regions with modern-quality, zero-emissions public transportation solutions, including facilities restricted by proper law enforcement to bicyclists and pedestrians. Viable PPP investments, coupled with union jobs protection, would go a long way to meet the needs and set this crucial sector on its own right track once and for all.

Turning to manufacturing and agriculture, these key economic sectors present quite a "reservoir" of reasons for tackling job creation from a climate change angle.

The present juncture characterized by limited imports and consumer reliance on national products offers a timely opportunity for laying the foundations for a thriving sustainable national industry.

Precrisis, Lebanon's SME sector had been growing, spurred by innovation from startups touching a wide array of businesses, with many success stories having gone international. A reinvigorated startup ecosystem would be able to help create new industries that would substitute products locally made using clean energy technologies, and manufactured by Lebanese workers, for products that used to be imported. As for "input," feedstock, materials and parts processed or manufactured in turn by SMEs, local farms, etc. from across the country, also using negative emissions technologies, would play a major role in helping the economy move to a sustainable development model over time. Coming to agriculture, Lebanon has seen strides in agricultural innovations and the sector's spillover into the agri-business area of manufacturing. The custodians of this innovation are exerting herculean efforts to keep it not just alive and kicking, but advancing as well in achievements and cumulative equity. Creating jobs in climate-smart agriculture, and reinforcing the sector's resilience, are key tasks that would go a long way to solidify this sector as another strong pillar of the country's sustainable development aspirations. As a general note, by voting in favor of the UN's resolution on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, Lebanon committed to take all necessary steps to achieve them. In sum, climate change advocacy and associated action have an important role to play, and indeed fit well with the universe of responses, plans and activities meant to alleviate Lebanon's situation at this most crucial juncture of its existence. A "new and improved Lebanon" will have to rely on a new foundation for sustainable growth able to withstand the adverse effects of climate change, and capable of ensuring a marked improvement in infrastructure, green spaces, job creation with gender integration on the agenda, and in public health, with access to clean air and clean water for all of its citizens. All with an eye on achieving significant cost reductions by means of efficient clean energy and conservation technologies, and on redressing the injustice suffered from pollution by city dwellers, as well as by rural communities whose environment hasn't traditionally been respected.

There'll naturally be skeptics. They may have a point somewhere, as huge internal and external constraints impede normal action. But the gravity of the situation beckons intervention irrespective of scale. A convergence of state and nonstate actors on the problem, and from all possible angles, would be capable of pushing the curve onward and upward; no matter how slowly, but definitely surely.

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