Social cohesion in time of crisis

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While the world is busy containing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the different guidelines for prevention have greatly affected the social and community cohesion.

In fact, these guidelines, from social distancing to total lockdowns, are antisocial by nature. Social cohesion is about connecting people and groups and building relations and solidarity between them, all of which are based on physical presence, which in turn is what the pandemic prevention tackles. Activities promoting cohesion and mutual understanding and acceptance of the other have long been halted now. Social gatherings, events, campaigns, cultural activities and programs, sports and schools have incurred huge losses as a result.

As such, social cohesion in the time of the pandemic and the crisis it has followed becomes a hard task. However, it remains possible even in the most deprived regions, through governments and/or the civil society actors. On a governmental level, many countries have promoted social cohesion by providing equitable distribution of public goods and services – in this case health care to COVID-19 patients and vaccines equitably – and also by adopting proper planning for building resilience and solidarity in its people, as is the case in many different countries such as Finland, Jordan and even Nigeria.

On a community level, we have witnessed solidarity initiatives as a response to the pandemic and its subsequent crisis. These initiatives have increased the level of social and community cohesion through determined actions of community volunteers and civil society organizations to provide aid and support to local people in need. One of the many initiatives worldwide is the "Digital Bridge K-12," developed by the Education Super Highway organization in the United States. It provides internet access for tens of thousands of low income students in San Francisco Bay by installing Wi-Fi spots in communities and on buses that are now inactive.

Nonetheless, the crisis has led in parallel to significant economic and other challenges that have increased the level of poverty, inflation, debt, illiteracy and school dropouts in many countries, laying an unbeatable burden on people and societies to be able to contain the situation.

A 2020 discussion paper on "The role of values for social cohesion" by the German Development institute relates social cohesion to three main elements: inclusive social identity, trust and cooperation for the common goods.

Reflecting on Lebanon, the sense of belonging has long been developed in the heart of every Lebanese and it has been more visualized in their solidarity in each of the many challenges the country has encountered lately. Today, in the face of the pandemic, we see health care providers being restless in helping and curing the outrageous numbers of infected people, while others have volunteered to support the incapables.

Another great example is in the aftermath of the Beirut Port blast and the economic crisis, where we witnessed thousands of volunteers, civil society organizations and other benevolent entities rushing to aid people in distress, from reconstructing homes to continuously providing food, shelter and care. All of that wouldn't be possible if the Lebanese people didn't have a sense of belonging, an inclusive social identity. However, a social identity is not enough to have a structured social cohesion without the element of trust. Social cohesion is also the level of trust within the society's groups and also in the government. Today more than ever, the Lebanese people have lost their trust in the government, its efficacy to assume its role and even its readiness to work for the people, leading to failure after failure, drowning them with inflation and poverty while ripping off their accomplishments and dreams of a prosperous civil state. While it remains the government's role and interest to promote social cohesion across the society's clusters, whether ethnic, religious, economic, social or cultural, it is the individuals and civil society actors who are coming together to help each

other in the most difficult times of the Lebanese history. Yet, they are drained and with the damaging instability of the economy, the continuous depreciation of the local currency and the political indecision, they are hardly able to survive themselves.

Until a proper government is formed, a proper accountability system for corruption is established and a proper rule of law is applied, there will be no trust in any government which is normally the head of any social cohesion. Furthermore, people are not oriented toward the national common good. They are used to look for the tribal common good, that of their sect unfortunately. This is highly reflected in the results of the parliamentarian elections, and the misapplication of the Lebanese Constitution and the Taif Accord, keeping almost every governmental decision or indecision based on sects and parties rather than merit.

As long as the Lebanese are not ready or willing to act as citizens and work collectively to reach common national goals, national growth and sustainable peace will remain a dream, a dream that was once achieved by our ancestors but has been destroyed by some arrogant political leaders, the same lords of war.

The hope is not doomed yet. The revolution of Oct. 17 has reinforced the social cohesion of the Lebanese people at least by connecting with each other on common needs, empowering trust and collaboration among them, coming together and cooperating for the common goal, that is to stop corruption and change toward a modern civil state. What is needed now is the proper planning and structuring of social cohesion toward achieving common national goals and putting the country back on the world map.

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