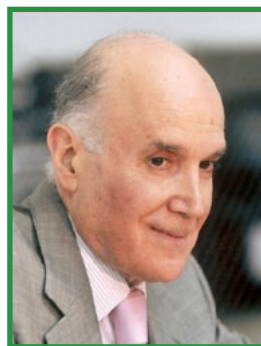


The Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Crisis in Lebanon: If Another Action, Citizen Driven & Committed, Is Possible?



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Context

With Syria entering its fourth year of violence, Lebanon too is falling into a spiral of violence. The political paralysis in which the country finds itself is not helping to slow down such a dangerous progression. The Syrian crisis is having diverse effects on Lebanon on a number of levels, the first being humanitarian. According to the government, Lebanon, with its population of only 4 million is housing more than 1.5 million refugees, of which 1.2 are registered with the UNHCR. Furthermore, it is estimated that there are 1.5 million vulnerable Lebanese living in poverty, a problem which is only further exacerbated by the crisis overflowing from neighboring Syria. From this scenario, stems a series of concerning impacts, on economic, social, political and security levels. These changes are even more troubling due to Lebanon's weak infrastructure, its deeply divided civil society, a void of political power and a largely corrupted political system.

Lebanon currently has the highest concentration of refugees per capita in the world: more than 40% of its population is refugee, if we consider the 300,000 Palestinian refugees who are living in the country. Despite the urgency of such a situation, the absence of solidarity

from the North is severely felt. This lack of responsibility from the international community is condemnable. Double standards when working with the world's most vulnerable can no longer be tolerated. Furthermore, within such a context, of such an unprecedented crisis and with a lack of political solution in sight, it is vital to question the integrity of the humanitarian response in Lebanon.

Assessments of humanitarian efforts show deplorable conditions in the field and management malfunctions are highly apparent. As international organizations continue to impose over a national response, this catastrophic situation needs to be quickly and thoroughly analyzed if we are to arrive at a committed and effective humanitarian action, based on the equal partnerships of organizations from North and South, that aim at ensuring dignity for all individuals.

A Flagrant Dysfunction in the Management of the Humanitarian Crisis: The Case of Lebanon

• The evolution of the humanitarian sector in Lebanon: from humanitarian solidarity to "charity business".

Lebanon has been the "theatre of operations" for humanitarian and development actors throughout its history- particularly during the civil war and the Israeli occupation and invasion. We have been witness to the evolution of humanitarian aid and its various forms. During the Israeli invasion and the civil war, we saw 'humanitarian solidarity', with international volunteers arriving daily to experience our tragic reality. These volunteers were motivated by solidarity and commitment and generally didn't have a financial interest in the situation.

After the civil war, in the early 90s, with the fall of the Soviet Union, we entered into a new humanitarian phase, with changes in the profile of individuals coming to work in the sector here in Lebanon. There was an arrival of

well versed 'lesson givers' that surprised the humanitarian community here in Lebanon. Our own expertise was reduced to nothing and they spoke to us of logical frameworks, performance indicators and other evaluation tools, which useful as they are, increasingly obscured the reality on the ground. Many of these non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had become an extension of foreign powers, teaching us to do our own work, with a certain arrogance in their supposed knowledge of the needs on the field, and the ways in which to best respond.

In the light of the current context, the majority of existing partnerships between national and international NGOs are not based on respect and an equal share of powers. International agencies commonly see collaboration with national bodies as a constraint, and regularly make the choice to rule out local actors or to simply not develop respectful partnerships. Such unbalanced partnerships can become vectors for incomprehension, lack of trust, and as a consequence could bring damage to the long standing relationships built up between local NGOs and their beneficiary communities. As I will go on to explain, many consider such international intervention in the humanitarian and development sectors as a new form of neo-colonialism.

• A new colonialism

In the current context, such biased management in the Syrian crisis response within Lebanon is not viable. By refusing to carefully consider the specific context in which they are working, international organizations marginalize highly important local actors. National actors are often excluded from the response to the humanitarian crisis, whilst international actors are taking the lead.

To further complicate matters, the large financial dependence on principally developed countries' institutions, has also led to a lack of humanitarian solidarity. By exploring models of development according to their own standards and norms within the complex zones in which they are working, international NGOs are forming part of a (neo) colonialist humanitarian sector.

In a world subdued to the dictum of money, human values are swept away with a flood of greed that undermines human dignity. The double standards seen in the management of humanitarian issues is appalling. Terrifying situations continue to occur without provoking the least reaction from 'big powers'- 10 million Syrian refugees; 200 000 murdered Syrians; a Palestine still occupied, despite the violations of international law this supposes, prisoners

tortured by supposedly Human Rights promoting states. It becomes apparent, that many powers use such humanitarian contexts as pretexts to intervene when their interests are in danger, rather than being truly concerned at the violations of human rights that are occurring.

A demonstration of such interests has been the all-too-quick military 'response' from the international community in Iraq, against 'jihadists' or 'terrorist'. Today we see the manipulation of humanitarian means to military, economic and political ends. Certain powerful countries have become the defenders of Human Rights abroad, whilst they themselves fail to respect such rights. The recent worrying revelations of the practice of torture by the CIA are one example among many. Human values are no longer the pretext of interventions, and action is now led by a new global paradigm, the federalism of money. It is vital to move back to a sincere humanitarian intervention.

• A financial aberration

We are also witnesses to another deviation of values within the humanitarian sector: the astronomic sums that international agencies reserve to administration and coordination, visibility and security. In such cases, the marginalized and vulnerable populations often don't receive more than a minimal amount of the initial aid budget. Simultaneously, the performance of coordination strategies, reunions and conferences, which is developing 'humanitarian tourism', is rapidly dissipating funds which should be used to save and/or improve lives of the most vulnerable.

It is in such a context that many international NGOs are intervening in Lebanon. There are not many who trouble themselves in making partnerships with local NGOs. They seem to instead 'occupy' the roles of these local NGOs, recruiting our local employers and transforming our local actions into projects that often don't respond to the basic needs on the ground.

However, NGOs, notably those from the South, are starting to reconsider the balance of power and influence with states and international organizations, and starting to put pressure on decision-makers, so that funding and international support respond to the real needs on the ground.

The Role of Local NGOs, a Catalyst for Change

Despite the United Nations insisting on the importance of engaging and working with local partners, the majority of

the time UN agencies adopt a paternalistic attitude. For example, in Lebanon, the UNHCR has built up its own network of NGOs, instead of participating in dialogue with those already existing. As a consequence, the capacities of local NGOs are not being reinforced, and instead, the sector is simply being further diversified. This assures that no organization will be strong enough in the future to build up a counterbalance to the politics of the United Nations.

• **The most valuable local actors**

Local NGOs and other local actors, namely municipalities, are the real sources of efficient action and the true levers for change. Strong in their field experience, they possess a significant and irrefutable expertise within the contexts in which they have been working. Through their many years of hard and committed work, these structures and local NGOs have earned a great deal of legitimacy among local communities. International NGOs are not able to pride themselves on such parameters. It is due to these grassroots experiences that the importance of local NGOs should be held in greater esteem by the international community.

• **A new light in which to consider the work of international organizations**

We recognize the importance of international NGOs' intervention, but we denounce their often heavy-handed management of humanitarian action. Being important financing machines, these international structures need to commit to not imposing harsh conditions or restricting timeframes on local NGOs in accessing and receiving their funds. They should support local actors in their technical knowledge, taking into consideration their expertise in crisis management and participating in knowledge and skill sharing.

It is worth remembering that international structures, by definition, are not tied to staying in any one country in which they operate, unlike local actors. The latter must be considered as stable actors through which change can be made. The reinforcement of the capacities of local structures is therefore of great importance in an enduring crisis. They should be directly supported in improving their organisation, their governance and their transparency, with the aim of becoming fully-fledged partners. This doesn't mean adapting to an audit to make surface changes, but rather conducting joint reflections on the ideal configuration of partnerships.

Nevertheless, these important considerations don't seem to be evident to everyone. The willingness to involve

local and international actors in an honest, equal, and just partnerships remains a utopia within the 'charity business' context. Indeed, in times of peace, national-international coordination and partnerships are weak or often non-existent. The majority of the time, work with national NGOs takes place only in moments of crisis, when donors demand a coordinated response. Such partnerships are therefore led by funds. What is more, these partnerships are generally created on the basis of projects, which are time-limited and do not have a viable potential for sustainability.

• **Amel Association International: a model and pioneer in counter-current humanitarian action**

Amel Association International is a non-governmental, non-confessional, civil organization set up in Lebanon in 1979 during the civil war and the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Through its 24 centers, 6 mobile clinics and 700 personnel who contribute to uphold the vision of Amel, the organization implements extensive activities and projects related to health and mental health, education, child protection, vocational training, rural development, gender and human rights. Amel's programs target marginalized populations in all regions of Lebanon, without discrimination of nationality, political or religious affiliation. The action of Amel aims to reinforce a culture of rights among citizens, refugees and immigrants and to promote their access to these rights and their participation in public life.

Amel has distinguished itself in a region where confessional, political, social and economic divisions are rife. In this way, Amel's work encounters numerous challenges on a daily basis. Despite all of these difficulties, the organization and its staff refuse to fall into inaction and pessimism, and we focus on the words of Nelson Mandela: "Vision without action is just a dream, action without vision just passes the time, and vision with action can change the world." During the years, the organization has been motivated by the motto "Positive Thinking and Permanent Optimism" and our work is guided by the 3 Ps: "Principles which define a Position that we put into Practice". In this way, Amel has adopted simple and consistent principles in line with its action, proving that Lebanese civil society is quite capable of constructing its own future. In this sense, Amel has been and continues to be an example for Arab and Lebanese NGOs.

In the first place, Amel is capable of ensuring 53% of its funds through the participation of beneficiaries, revenues



campaigns implemented through Amel's House of Human Rights and programs focused on migrant domestic workers. Amel has decided to work counter-current, as a pioneer across the sector. For example, in facing the current reality of double-standard, financially driven interventions from international donors, which have lost their sense of solidarity. Many simply follow the budget or a given political line, or fall into momentary or sensationalist trends without providing long term support.

Amel aims to act as a catalyst within Lebanese and international civil society in the humanitarian sector, and to question the norms imposed by international actors. The role of Amel within the collective of Lebanese NGOs, and its membership in ECOSOC, HAP, HCT, ICVA, DPI. and multiple international networks, is testimony to Amel's commitment to the causes it is working for.

Backed with more than thirty years of experience in Lebanon, Amel became an international organization in 2010 as it opened an office in

Geneva. The aim of such internationalization is to unite the North and South through humanitarian goals, to work for the interest of vulnerable populations, to commit to the just causes of the people, first and foremost, the Palestinian cause, and to maintain a distance from political opinion. Thanks to this international dimension, Amel has been able to develop numerous partnerships with other NGOs across the world, including Medecins du Monde and Medico International. Reinforced by the trust shown by local communities to the work of Amel, the organization has acquired high recognition among international organizations.

from the property, and its bi-annual gala dinners. This autonomy and independence is reflected in the internal organisation of Amel and in our choices of programs. In this way, we are able to develop strong relationships, built on trust, with various partners, in order to implement ambitious, innovative and comprehensive projects.

In the second place, we place a great deal of energy and hope in the young generations, particularly in women. Whether they come from large towns or remote rural villages, these women are filled with values of tolerance, respect for human rights and as well as a spirit of entrepreneurship. Finally, convinced that there cannot be democracy without development, we act in three phases. In the first place, offering humanitarian aid and primary needs response that answer to vulnerable populations. This is currently characterized by the Syrian crisis response and the 600 000 services which Amel provides within this framework. In second place, the provision of long-term projects of development, implemented in order to reinforce the capacities of vulnerable populations and to revitalize economic growth in Lebanon. In third place, advocacy for Human Rights and awareness raising

Through these relationships, Amel has proved that it is possible for local NGOs to establish equal partnerships with international organizations whilst strengthening internal structures and respecting international norms. Many of the partnerships Amel has developed with international organizations are models of committed relationships based on trust and the exchange of expertise, always focused on providing services to the most vulnerable and defending the just cause of the Palestinians. It is fundamental not to marginalize the initiatives of civil-society which aim at solving social problems. This means

that the non-governmental sector should not be considered as the 'third sector' of society but as the first. This would ensure that development plans dictated by governments, economists and financial institutions, are inclusive projects aimed at benefiting ALL members of society.

An alternative humanitarian sector, based on the vision of 'partners not lecturers' is therefore possible, but only if local NGOs are trusted and helped to free themselves from the tutelage of international NGOs.

Amel maintains the principles that all humanitarian action that is not committed to vulnerable populations is not humanitarian action. All humanitarian action that does not follow the just causes of the people and the right to independence and self-determination, as well as social justice, is not humanitarian action. All humanitarian action that focuses only on visibility and not on providing stable support to the most vulnerable is not humanitarian action.

Conclusion:

So it is within the framework of a critical perspective on humanitarian action that we make the following reflections to develop to a citizen-led, committed action.

We feel the following points are necessary to highlight:

- To centre field work on efficiency and not just visibility, and in the same vein, to ensure that all attributed project funds reach the beneficiaries, rather than just covering administrative costs;
- To demand from and work with donors to develop sustainable projects;
- To adopt rules of cooperation and collaboration among international and national NGOs, which should include the harmonization of salary brackets, the recruitment of local employers and dialogue with local communities;
- To reinforce such cooperation between national and international NGOs to create true partnerships and a fairer distribution of wealth in the world, supporting the poor and the just causes of the people, including the Palestinian people;
- To develop an underlying international solidarity and work together (both North and South), in partnerships of equal-equal, forming pressure groups to correct the at times misguided policies of governments, multinationals, for a more just and humane world;
- To influence public policies in order to push for social change. Civil society is at the forefront in transforming these dynamic pressure instruments to influence policies. We must ensure that laws meet the needs of all without



discrimination or religious, political, ideological, or geographical distinctions. This however, requires a comprehensive vision of development and a charter between NGOs and members of Northern and Southern civil society, in which roles are fairly distributed;

- To support capacity-building projects of national NGOs, particularly in terms of the flow of information and technical skills; to reconsider our humanitarian practices so that professionalism ("charity business", "BONGOs", humanitarian colonialism and an "aid industry") does not hinder active citizenship;
- To return to a welfare state that cares for the most vulnerable and which limits a private sector driven solely by profit. Within the "global village" of this increasingly linked world, appears the international citizen. We must therefore, not only as an NGO, but as global citizens, push for a regulated and improved welfare state which is not comprised solely of financial institutions and bankers.

We aspire for a more just and humane world, a just distribution of wealth, the end of commodification of previously honorably values, and the end of a humanitarian sector driven by economic and military whims. Humanitarian action must be an ethical imperative, which should find its base in international solidarity. With such aspirations and visions, employed at a universal level, we believe that we are able to contribute to the just transformation of the humanitarian sector.