

Lebanese children deserve a future

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Children in Lebanon are at risk as a result of the increasing crises. According to the United Nations, more than three-quarters of Lebanon's families do not have enough food or money to buy food. A staggering 72 percent of local families across Lebanon will “face challenges to make ends meet given the severe economic downturn coupled with skyrocketing inflation,” according to Crisis Observatory, an interdisciplinary research program launched by the American University of Beirut (AUB) to track the repercussions of the economic crisis in Lebanon.

As access to food is dwindling, nutrition practices are worsening, child labor is being used more frequently as a negative coping technique. Children are increasingly being recognized as the primary breadwinners in their homes nowadays.

UNICEF warns that children in Lebanon are suffering the burden of one of the world's greatest economic collapses in recent times. According to UNICEF's report released on July 1, 2021, titled “Lebanon: Children's Future on the Line,” the crisis in Lebanon is impacting every facet of families' and children's lives, with limited finances and little access to social assistance causing an increasing number of families to send their children to work in sometimes unsafe and dangerous settings, marrying off their young daughters, or selling their possessions, UNICEF's representative in Lebanon stated.

According to a UNICEF quick assessment done by phone among 1,244 families in April 2021, more than 30 percent of children went to bed hungry or skipped meals in the previous months. The number of homes that do not have enough food or money to buy food is up to 77 percent today. In the homes of Syrian refugees, it amounts to 99 percent.

Approximately 60 percent of families utilize credit or borrowed money to buy food. 30% of children do not receive enough basic health care, and 76 percent of households report being impacted by the significant increase in drug prices. At least 10 percent of youngsters have been forced to labor; children as young as 6 are exposed to threat of violence and mistreatment. 40 percent of children come from households in which no one works, and 77 percent of youngsters come from families that do not get any social support. 15 percent of households halted their children's schooling. More than 80 percent of caregivers said that their children frequently found it difficult to concentrate in the classroom, suggesting that their children may be hungry or emotionally distressed. This report was preceded by two other reports published in March 2021 by Save the Children titled "Lebanon Education in Crisis: Raising the Alarm" and the World Bank Group report titled "Foundations for Building Forward Better: An Education Reform Path for Lebanon." Both reports indicated that Lebanon's social and economic crisis is morphing into an education disaster, with vulnerable children facing a real crisis.

According to Save the Children's report, even before the pandemic, growing inequality in Lebanon since the country's economic crisis began has resulted in a gap in access to quality learning, especially among the country's underprivileged children. Poverty is becoming a significant obstacle to children's access to education, since many families cannot afford learning materials or may rely on children to generate an income. Even before the economic collapse, children in Lebanon had already relatively low reading and numeracy rates compared to other Middle Eastern countries. The report emphasizes as well the problem of insufficient data on school enrollment, retention, and current access to learning in Lebanon, which makes it difficult to effectively implement education initiatives.

On the other hand, the WBG report shows that education in Lebanon is under threat and that an urgent call for reform is necessary to address falling educational performance and pave the way for future growth. Low levels of learning and skills mismatch in the job market, according to the research, have jeopardized the future of generations of Lebanese children, implying an urgent need for greater and more focused investments in the area.

The report provides an overview of significant problems confronting the education system, as well as evidence-based solutions and suggestions for enhancing equality, learning outcomes, and governance in education in the short, medium, and long term.

This is not the first time an entire generation of Lebanese children has been robbed of an education and a future. Between 1975 and 1990, Lebanon's everyday life was molded by armed conflict and extensive political violence, which had an impact on schooling and education. I recall several instances when we were forced to return home amid shelling or to spend months at home waiting for the armed disputes to be resolved before returning to school.

Again, education in Lebanon is at a crossroads, as it has been throughout numerous times in the country's history. Deliberated and concentrated effort is vital to alleviating suffering, as children are the ultimate investment in the future of a nation.

Thirty years ago, when he framed his vision for Lebanon, the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was well aware that human capital is the country's most valuable asset. Hariri's first objective was to invest in youth's education. Looking at youth's talents and potentials as Lebanon's riches, trusting the transformational potential of education for individuals and societies.

Education is the primary means of achieving social equality, social mobility, and economic prosperity. “Children in Lebanon are paying a high price because of the multiple crisis. We must protect they deserve a future,” Deputy Special Coordinator Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon, Najat Rochdi, tweeted

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