

## **Statement about the Lebanese Government's Response to COVID-19 Pandemic**

The spread of the corona pandemic in Lebanon since February 2020, has exacerbated the multifaceted economic, social, and political crisis and has added a health and humanitarian dimension at a time when the healthcare system is not ready to face it, nor the state institutions and policies qualified to deal with its repercussions. The public hospitals suffer from chronic neglect and lack the equipment and staff. The banks are imposing restrictions on financial transactions and are illegally holding deposits of the Lebanese citizens. Moreover, Palestinian and Syrian refugees suffer from extremely difficult conditions that are threatening to spread the virus widely within fragile communities that are densely crowded. As for the social protection mechanisms, they are considered as confusing and partial aid systems. In short, there are no existing structures or convenient mechanisms that can be used as a starting point to address the repercussions of the current social crisis.

The spread of the pandemic came after months of the outbreak of October 17<sup>th</sup> revolution which constituted a clear expression of the Lebanese people rejecting policies pursued in the country, and the decisions that led a group of politicians and businessmen to have full control over the state and its economy. While in the meantime, more than half of the Lebanese people suffer from poverty, about 50 % of the Lebanese population lacks social security, and 55% of the workforce is classified as unprotected. These percentages reach about 75% in the poorest and most marginalized cities, neighborhoods, and villages in Lebanon.

The response of the Lebanese government came late and included a set of measures to respond to the crisis, including general mobilization that rendered self-employed and informal workers jobless and thus losing their income. Instead of setting policies that contribute to an immediate redistribution of wealth in the form of reforming taxes and deductions on the wealthy to provide immediate assistance to the broad categories who lost their income, the government created a voluntary fund as a tool to provide funding. Lastly, the government announced a measure that allocates a monthly 400,000 Lebanese Pounds to each family, however, the mechanism of determining the beneficiaries remains unclear until the time of writing this statement. One of the ideas put forward is that the families concerned fill out forms with the mayors and municipalities on the basis of which the amount will be delivered by the Lebanese Army. Before the implementation began, we had witnessed cases of objection on the behalf of the citizens whose mayor registered his relatives in order to obtain rations. These practices highlight one of the major gaps that lasted for several years in the Emergency National Poverty Targeting Program Project (NPTP). Several attempts have been made to solve this issue, but it is expected to increase now due to the inability to control and monitor the multiplicities and the parties involved in the process of registering and distributing aids.

In this context and to address the current crisis, a group of civil society organizations and research centers in Lebanon (the signatories) would like to present their basic suggestions and recommendations which stem from the need to take a comprehensive approach to the crisis with its health, economic and social dimensions, with human rights and dignity at the center of the approach taken, and learn from this crisis in order to develop plans that strengthen public health care systems, free education and public access to social security.

Accordingly, we offer the following recommendations:

- Provide coronavirus testing, medicine, treatment and quarantine for everyone, free of charge, and without discrimination based on gender, marital status or gender identity, ethnic origin, color, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental disability, or creed, and ensuring equitable medical devices and supplies all over Lebanon.
- Ensure that all marginalized groups, especially persons with disabilities, have access to healthcare, and ensure that the necessary technical and administrative measures are taken to facilitate their access to services, and include standards that allow the adoption of a service package adapted to the diversity and quality of disability needs, if any.
- Incorporation of all those present in Lebanon among which are unregistered individuals, refugees, displaced persons and migrant workers in the health plans set to contain the pandemic or to treat the injured, given that the Lebanese Government is responsible for everyone residing on the Lebanese soil and must play its required role in pressuring the international organizations to assume their full responsibility towards the refugees, in a way that guarantees the provision of everything necessary and required to maintain the safety of those people.
- Protection of prisoners and detainees by following all preventive measures to protect prisons from the spread of the pandemic, reducing the number of prisoners by accelerating the release procedures and working on long-term plans to improve prison conditions and reduce congestion.
- Prevention of layoffs and any reduction of wages for workers and employees who are still employed and preventing any form of dismissal based on discrimination. The government shall pay the salaries and dues for its contractors and workers in the ministries, of all groups, same applies to the municipalities.

- Go beyond the Emergency National Poverty Targeting Program Project which is narrow and based on the development context. The government shall work on keeping the current assistance it provides, and launch, within the current emergency situation, a comprehensive unconditional cash assistance program for people who lost their work and their sources of income, among them are the families of the missing and the kidnapped, and people with disabilities who are not working and have no other source of living. Also, identify the beneficiaries based on their broad categorical characteristics based on the recent available studies (CBS 2019), and strengthening the data with other complementary sources, whether from the poverty program, municipalities, associations, or administrative data. The amount of assistance or aid should be sufficient to meet the basic needs of the family throughout the general mobilization. The government shall also take into account the additional cost in case of having a disabled person within the family due to the shortage in medical, rehabilitation, and educational equipment which may increase the price.
- Freeze the payment of taxes, fees, and debts for a period of 6 months based on clear and unified instructions and find solutions specifically designed to address some of the problems that can result from the aforementioned situation which leads to injustice to some groups, especially in dealings between individuals, and preventing the confiscation of materials and tools of small projects for persons who are unable to pay their debts.
- Issue decisions that freeze forced evictions of homes and stores if the tenant fails to pay the rent during the general mobilization period due to the cut or the deduction of income. The owners of the buildings - especially the ones that have old rents- shall be included in the assistance program, as they rely on the rental allowances as the source of their income, while taking into consideration better solutions later.
- Establish a coordination mechanism between the interveners at the national, regional, decentralized and local levels, so that civil society is given a role in monitoring, advising and accessing information, and making use of the public school and development services centers, municipalities and local associations to achieve the maximum results in the shortest time.
- Associations and organizations demand the adoption of utmost transparency in the relationship between ministries and civil society organizations in crisis response programs and the need to publish detailed periodic reports that include all in-kind , financial donations obtained by the state, and the mechanism approved

for distributing aids to citizens, in addition to the publication of relevant contracts concluded by ministries, departments and public institutions. The government shall secure a hotline for complaints related to corruption and protect its detectors.

- In this scope, the signing organizations and centers emphasize that responding to the crisis and addressing its social effects must be the government's responsibility, along with its institutions, towards its citizens and all those on its soil within the rule of rights and law. Associations reject any derogation from this responsibility, whether in the form of government abandonment of its roles, or through political parties taking over its role. If every political party individuates in managing the affairs of its region by its own means and harnesses the government's institutions and resources for that purpose, this will definitely lead to the collapse of the government. At this critical time, addressing the crisis requires an effective government, an active public sector, as well as a full solidarity, be it global or national, instead of the confusion caused by forming cantons within the same country. Associations also refuse to exploit general mobilization to undermine public freedoms and expose human rights defenders and activists to prosecutions and arrests.

Organizations and research centers signing on this statement confirm that they will play their role in monitoring the performance of the government and all parties involved in the crisis and in raising the voice whenever the need arises. They also address health workers, including doctors, nurses, staff, janitors , and volunteers, with salutations and gratitude, and call on the government to provide them with immediate and far-reaching measures, including appreciating their work and providing them with decent work requirements that are appropriate to their great role in our lives.

Organizations and research centers also affirm that achieving a successful response certainly requires immediate redistribution procedures and deductions from wealthy people and business sectors that have accumulated fictional profits for years, which obviates us from obtaining additional loans or begging from countries all around the world. We will also continue to monitor the performance of banks and other economic sectors, so as not to turn the nation into new opportunities to hoard more profits.

Signing Organizations and Research Centers:

1. Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut
2. The Arab NGOs Network for Development (ANND)
3. Legal Agenda
4. The Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union (LPHU)
5. ABAAD organization
6. Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon
7. Proud Lebanon
8. Lebanese Observatory of Workers and Employees' Rights (LOWER)
9. Social Movement
10. Spotlight Center for Law and Human Rights
11. The Palestinian Human Rights Organization (PHRO)
12. Frontiers Ruwad Association (FR)13- The Lebanese Democratic Women's Gathering (RDFL)
14. Access Center for Human Rights
15. Ibn Arabi For Human Rights
16. The Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH)
17. Developmental Action Without Borders, Nabaa
18. The Arab Network for Child's Rights "Manara"
19. NGO Platform of Saida (Tajamoh)
20. Association Najdeh (Najdeh)
21. The Coordination Forum of NGOs Working among the Palestinian Community
22. Lebanon Support
23. Lebanon Family Planning Association (LFPA)
24. The National Union of Associations with the Ministry of Affairs
25. Alef - Act for Human Rights
26. Lebanese Transparency Association - No Corruption
27. The Arab Institute for Human Rights, Lebanon Branch