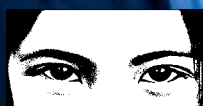


Lebanon

From the streets to the classroom

Excerpts from the Terre des hommes magazine published in March 2023



Terre des hommes
Helping children worldwide.



Franck Joly
Tdh Country
Representative
in Lebanon

Thinking about the future of Lebanon

Swept by an economic storm of unprecedented violence, Lebanon is like a sinking ship. Hospitals are in disrepair, cholera is back, the number of children working in the streets, school dropouts, violence against women, poverty and food insecurity are on the rise... Needs of all kinds have increased.

The situation of a father of two children who works in the public sector helps us understand the extent of this multi-dimensional crisis. As a civil servant, he earns between 3 and 4 million Lebanese pounds a month, a once comfortable salary that earned his family middle-class status. But with the collapse of the Lebanese currency, this income is now only equivalent to about 50 dollars, which is not much in a country plagued by galloping inflation and which has given up subsidising basic necessities such as medicines, flour or fuel. This employee simply cannot afford to fill his tank with petrol to go to work, drive his children to school or even pay their school fees.

If the middle class is being hit so hard, can you imagine what is happening to the most vulnerable people, the poor Lebanese families, the Palestinian refugee families and those forced into exile by the war in Syria? Many have fallen into a state of extreme precariousness, facing test of survival every day.

«Every child that Terre des hommes supports to go back to school is a victory.»

In this context, local and international NGOs, such as Terre des hommes with about 100 employees in the country, are at the forefront of providing vital humanitarian assistance. This help is bearing fruit. Every child that Terre des hommes supports to go back to school is a victory. Every young woman who pushes the door of one of our safe spaces to tell her story and seek legal or medical assistance confirms the validity of our projects.

But in the long run, a reform of the social protection system seems indispensable to put Lebanon back on the path to a sustainable recovery. Given the breakdown of public services, the crisis cannot be resolved without the support of local organisations, such as our partners Abaad or the Mouvement Social, which have proven themselves in the field and are therefore legitimate to think about the country's future. In addition to our response to humanitarian needs, Tdh takes responsibility to strengthen the capacities and expertise of these organisations, which will be the driving forces of the future Lebanese civil society.

Franck Joly

From the streets to the classroom

More than 700,000 children do not go to school in Lebanon, a country crushed by the economic crisis. Many of them have to work on the streets, risking their physical and psychological health in order to support their families. Recognised as a key player in the country, Terre des hommes collaborates with its local partners to give these children the possibility to go back to school.

The sky is grey, but the temperature is still mild. In Beirut, at the end of November, autumn is playing out. In an alley, a boy in a black sweatshirt, his bare feet in flip-flops, is walking away from the dumpsters with a cart topped by a pile of grey rubbish bags. He pushes his load in the direction of a sorting area where other children, teenagers and adults are busy under the indifferent eyes of car drivers. We are in Al Nabaa, a poor neighbourhood in the north of the Lebanese capital. The scene could just as easily take place in the neighbouring municipality of Bourj Hammoud, or even on the hill of Achrafieh, where buildings of insolent luxury tower over the oldest houses in Beirut. Everywhere in the city, children rummage, sort and collect rubbish that they take to open-air dumps in exchange for a few tens of thousands of Lebanese pounds. Hardly enough to buy their family's daily bread.

«People were mean»

It was in one of these rubbish dumps that Hany Atmeh, a social worker of Terre des hommes (Tdh), spotted



Most of the children work in the Al Nabaa neighbourhood. This is where the largest plastic and aluminium sales site is located.

Lara*, an 11-year-old girl. «I had the idea of going directly to the dump site. The children I meet there are the ones who need help the most,» explains Hany. For months, Lara and her little sister Rana*, 9 years old, walked the beach and dusty streets from morning to night looking for aluminium cans, stopping only to grab a quick bite to eat. «It was disgusting and the people were mean,» says Lara in a shy voice. «I fell a lot,» adds the teenager in black slim-fit jeans and white trainers.

«Once I tripped over a glass bottle and hurt myself.» Ahlam*, her mother, nervously kneads her hands. She explains that she had no choice but to give the two girls up to this exhausting work. This Lebanese family with five children lives in a two-room apartment with a tiny kitchen at the end of a rutted alley in Al Nabaa. High up, the electric cables weave a tangled web. Yet there is at best only one hour of electricity a day. The water supply is just as random.



«I want to make children a little happier»

Hany Atmeh, 28 years old, took a while before getting into social work. The revelation came when he joined Tdh to work with street children. «When I came into contact with them, I realised that I wanted to change things, to make them a little happier,» he says. Hany enjoys all aspects of his work: raising awareness of children's rights, warning them against abuse, but also playing football together with them, organising drawing workshops or encouraging meetings between families, Syrian or Lebanese, and seeing them form friendships.

If Hany is so committed to these families in great difficulty, not hesitating to answer the phone at night or to accompany someone to the hospital, it is because he understands what they are going through. Originally from South Lebanon, he himself started working in construction when he was 12 years old. «It was exhausting, especially in the summer,» he recalls. «But I was lucky that my mother wanted to enrol me in school. I only came to the construction site after school.» He is convinced that school was his salvation: «If I hadn't gone to school, I would still be working in construction,» he insists. His greatest source of satisfaction? Hearing parents asking Tdh for a schoolbag for their child, a sign that they have decided to send them back to school.

< Hilal*, 13 years old, was forced to work when his father fell ill. With support from Tdh, like over a thousand other children, he was able to resume his education in 2022.

Inflation consumes household purchasing power

A few dozen metres away, a shredded flag of the cedar tree flies along a mast, a sad allegory of Lebanon's wreckage. Since 2019, the country has been grappling with «*one of the three most severe economic collapses the world has seen since the 1850s*» according to the World Bank. The fall of the Lebanese pound, the national currency, has brought the country to the brink of bankruptcy and led to an explosion of inflation that is consuming the purchasing power of households and paralysing public services. The health sector is in a state of collapse. Education, too, is in a critical state: teachers and students can no longer afford to pay for transport, and some public schools have closed down because they cannot afford their operating costs.

In the case of Lara and her family, the poverty trap closed when Ahlam, the mother, had to borrow 6 million pounds to treat an infection in her foot that was slow to clear up. Weighed down by debt, the family could no longer afford the urgent expenses: bread, milk for Ahmad*, the youngest child just one year old, medicine and the 1.5 million pounds rent. «*Because of the anxiety and anger, I was crying every day,*» says Ahlam, who still takes antidepressants, while her husband, Bassem, is regularly immobilised by back pain.

A harvest of good marks

The support plan developed by Hany helped loosen the grip. Tdh provided the family with cash assistance to meet several rent payments, food and basic necessities such as mattresses and rechargeable lamps. The children



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Lara, 11 years old, was able to return to school. In her neighbourhood, many children still have to work.

received psychosocial support, which enabled them to verbalise their stress and better understand their rights. Most importantly, Hany convinced the parents to send Lara back to school. Since she stopped picking up cans, the little girl has regained her liveliness and is getting good grades. «*I will become a lawyer,*» she says, leaning her head against her mother's shoulder. Ahlam's eyes glaze over: «*I dropped out of school myself at 14 and immediately started working for a printer,*» she says. «*My dream is that my daughters will have a better life than mine. That's why they have to go to school.*»

4-year-olds at work

In 2021, Unicef estimated that more than 700,000 children in Lebanon were out of school, even though education is compulsory for children aged 6 to 15, and that 12% of households had at least one child who was forced to earn money in an informal activity, such as street vending, rubbish collection, packing in shops, working in factories or in the fields of agricultural regions such as in Bekaa. In the absence of official monitoring, there is every indication that the situation is

continuing to deteriorate. «*We see more and more very young children, sometimes as young as 4 or 5 years old, working. There are more girls too, and competition between them is tougher,*» notes Alice Hujairi, Tdh's project manager for child protection in Beirut. Another observation is that the most vulnerable groups, Palestinian or Syrian households, are no longer the only ones concerned. Like Lara and her sister Rana, a growing number of children living in Lebanon now find themselves on the street, as a result of the general impoverishment of the population.

«*We see more and more very young children, sometimes as young as 4 or 5 years old, working.*»

Alice Hujairi, project manager
for child protection in Beirut

«*Terre des hommes' objective is to minimise the exposure of these children to the dangers of the street. We raise awareness in the communities through prevention sessions and we provide material support to families on a case-by-case basis to get their children back to school. When they*

are the only source of income for the household, we at least try to ensure that they work fewer hours and we teach them to protect themselves. It's a matter of dignity,» says Alice. In the case of rubbish collection, the children are threatened by the toxicity of the materials, a risk to which Tdh responds by providing protective jackets, gloves and boots.

«Education is the light»

At first glance, Wardsham, a smiling and reserved 10-year-old brunette, and her brother Sobhi*, a cheerful 7-year-old, are just like any other children. Their parents, Karam* and Eman*, fled the war in Syria when Wardsham was just a baby. Living in the neighbourhood of Ein-Mreisseh, the parents make a point of ensuring that their children

are clean, well-dressed and go to school. *«To be an active member of society, you have to be educated. Education is the light. Without it, you are blind,»* insists Karam, whose diabetes and the trauma of the Beirut port explosion have left him blind and unable to earn enough to feed his family. So, as soon as classes end in the afternoon, Wardsham and Sobhi go to sell red roses to passers-by on the Zaitunay-Bay promenade, one of Beirut's tourist attractions.

Wardsham and her younger brother Sobhi sell roses to tourists after school to bring in some money for their family.

▼



«We learned what was acceptable and what wasn't, and who we should talk to and who we shouldn't.»

Wardsham, 10 years old

Since Tdh has been following Wardsham, her parents have become aware of the need for the older sibling to accompany the girl and her younger brother to protect them from the threats of other children, traffic or bad encounters when it gets dark. *«If someone is not nice, I count on my big brother. And if they are really bad, I make scary faces,»* says Sobhi, whose big eyes make his family laugh. *«We learned what was acceptable and what wasn't, and who we should talk to and who we shouldn't,»* adds his sister, looking up from her exercise book.

Wardsham dreams of a computer to help her progress faster in her favourite subject, maths. Karam, her father, dreams of a world governed by respect: *«Tdh has helped me without judging me or worrying about my identity or my religion. I want my children to grow up in an environment where they are protected and at peace.»*



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Alaa, 12 years old, attends the drop-in centre in Tyre. She loves participating in group activities where she has learned to protect herself.



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The centre is surrounded by vegetation, a relaxing atmosphere that allows the children to escape from their daily lives for a while.

A house surrounded by a garden

Tdh has created several drop-in centres in Lebanon, centres for children working on the streets, so that they can, if only for a moment in their day, regain a sense of security. Managed in partnership with the Lebanese NGO Women's Humanitarian Organization (PWHO), the centre in Tyre, in southern

Lebanon, is set up in a house surrounded by a green garden at the crossroads of several poor districts of the city. Between 15 and 30 children cross the threshold every day to get a bite to eat, change clothes, rest, confide their story or simply have fun. «Our centre is very well known in Tyre, where it is the only one of its kind. We

welcome all the children coming to us, even if we have exceeded our capacity, because the needs are so great. We will continue as long as we have funds to finance our projects,» says Zahra Awad, a Tdh social worker in Tyre.

Tdh teams regularly organise activities to inform children working on the streets about their rights.



«We will continue as long as we have funds to finance our projects.»

Zahra Awad, Tdh social worker in Tyre

Alaa* has been attending the centre for several years, along with her three brothers and sisters. Originally from Syria, the 12-year-old girl loves the group activities organised by the

facilitators. On this particular morning, two groups compete in a game of skill on the patio: they have to aim at a cone with hoops, and learn the virtues of team spirit in the process. «*Yalla, yalla!*» the children shout, clapping their hands to encourage each other. Alaa missed her target. She makes a pout that is quickly disproved by a smile.

«I like coming here because I feel motivated to participate,» she says. She continues: *«The most important thing I've learned is how to protect myself and my friends. I also learned that I have rights. For example, when a child is sick, they have the right to be treated.»* Alaa knows what she is

talking about: she has a cardiovascular disease. She stopped working in the factory where she used to put lumps of coal in boxes every morning before going to school. The dust made her cough her lungs out. The Tdh team helped her family to get the medicines they needed. The centre also offered her mother the opportunity to participate in «positive parenting» sessions. *«They explained to me how to talk to my children. I used to shout all the time. Now I try to speak more softly and listen,»* she says with a look of tenderness for her daughter. When she grows up, Alaa will be a doctor. *«To treat children,»* the little girl says in a whisper.

Angélique Mounier-Kuhn

**The names have been changed.*



^ In the drop-in centres, children can participate in group games that develop observation and cooperation skills.



Fatima Ardat, Child Protection Manager, Lebanon

In Lebanon, young girls are increasingly victims of gender-based and sexual violence due to the crisis. Fatima Ardat is in charge of the Terre des hommes project that takes care of these young women and teenagers. She tries to change mentalities through prevention.



«Because supporting women cannot be considered without taking into account the role of men, our project also includes an important awareness-raising component.»

What is the reason behind the increase in gender-based and sexual violence in Lebanon?

It stems from the multiple crises that have hit the country for years: the Covid health crisis, the refugee crisis linked to the war in Syria, the economic crisis, the shock caused by the explosion in the port of Beirut. Whatever the community, Syrian, Palestinian or Lebanese, women are responsible for taking care of the children, cleaning, managing the household... They also often play an essential role on family livelihood. Their husbands tend to expect everything from them, whereas these women already carry a lot on their shoulders and have difficulty expressing their own needs. If they cannot work because of the crisis, this creates tensions within the family which can lead to violent situations.

How does Terre des hommes respond to that?

In partnership with the Lebanese organisation Abaad in Beirut, and the Mount Lebanon and Bekaa regions, we work to protect and empower girls under the age of 18 who are married or at risk of marriage and women up to the age of 24 who are exposed to violence. We target 80 per cent of refugee families from Syria and 20 per cent of Lebanese families.

We have opened safe spaces where abused girls can come and talk with us. We try to accompany them with psychosocial,

legal, possibly financial and, if necessary, medical support with a gynaecologist consultation. They can also follow first-aid and self-defence courses. In rural areas, we reach vulnerable people who are sometimes prevented from moving to our safe spaces, with the help of a mobile unit.

Because supporting women cannot be considered without taking into account the role of men, our project also includes an important awareness-raising component. We use different methodologies to change behaviour. These include roundtable discussions with boys, men, and all stakeholders such as religious courts, judges, communities, and ministries whose involvement is crucial for change. We seek their collaboration when a girl is at risk, such as in the case of forced marriage.

It is a challenge to outreach to these men, but we take into account their interests and capacities and build on the experience gained from previous projects.





What does your work teach you?

It gives me great satisfaction to find solutions for the women or children in danger whom we accompany. In Lebanon, Terre des hommes is one of the few organisations to answer the phone on weekends or late at night. Frequently, individuals or organisations contact us in the middle of the night to entrust us with young girls in critical situations. Our reputation is a guarantee of trust and people know that we can be counted on in an emergency.

«Our reputation is a guarantee of trust and people know that we can be counted on in an emergency.»

I am not only proud of what I have achieved professionally, but I apply it in my personal life. I bring what I learn through Terre des hommes to my daughters. I give them tools to be resilient in our society.

Interview conducted by Angélique Mounier-Kuhn

Through psychosocial activities, girls improve their self-esteem and learn to protect themselves. ▾





How you can help

By making a donation, you will contribute to our response for the families in Lebanon.

Here's how you can support us:

By online bank transfer: **CH58 0076 7000 R047 0535 0**

At a post office in Switzerland

Via www.tdh.ch/donate

With your donation, we can, for example:

CHF 30.-

organise an arts activity for a child

CHF 50.-

provide school materials to a student

CHF 100.-

provide psychosocial support to a child and their family for one month

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