Poverty and human rights in Lebanon

1. **Present Context**

The past few years have represented one of the worst economical periods for Lebanon in its present history. Today, Lebanon hosts about 1.5 million refugees for about 4 million inhabitants. For almost two years now, the Lebanese economy has been experiencing its most serious crisis in decades: a public debt that reaches 170% of the GDP, a historical deflation of the Lebanese pound, banking restrictions on withdrawals and transfers abroad; and nearly more than half of the population now lives below the poverty line.

 In addition to financial and then economic crisis, a social and political crisis has been hitting Lebanon for a while. Lebanese people are calling for a total reform of the political system and a renewal of the political class. Since March 2020, the country is also severely impacted by the COVID-19 health crisis, which exacerbated the fragility of already-vulnerable people, and further slowed the economy.

The chain of circumstances that hit Lebanon reached its peak on Tuesday, 4th of August 2020 when a fire in one of the Beirut port warehouses caused two explosions, the second massive. The Blast hit Beirut, killing more than 200 people, leaving more than 6,000 injured and displacing more than 300,000 people. The government lack of actions has, since then, left Lebanon bloodless and powerless and some 78 percent of Lebanese were estimated to be in poverty as of March 2021[[1]](#footnote-1), struggling thus to accommodate themselves with basic needs like nutritional food, shelter, schooling fees, basic health needs etc.

1. **The Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA)**

The Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) has numerous programs, one of which is "Access and Rights" that cover the needs of people with disabilities (PWDs.)

In 2019, the budget made available to accredited suppliers was 6 billion Lebanese pounds (under the "Access and Rights" program) for services and 2 billion Lebanese pounds for operations (under the same program). More so, the Ministry of Social Affairs has had a long standing lack of budget transparency, therefore it was never clear to which specific services the funds were allocated for, making it difficult for PWDs to understand which services are offered for them.

The "Access and Rights" program delivered services to 22,312 beneficiaries in 2018 and 9,692 in 2019 according to the request prescribed by one of the ministry's offices.

1. **arcenciel**

arcenciel is a Lebanese based non-profit organization established in 1985 during the Lebanese civil war. It was recognized as a public interest NGO in 1995 by Presidential Decree N7541. With five core programs:1- Agriculture and Environment; 2- Mobility and Health; 3- Responsible Tourism and Cultural Heritage; 4- Social Support and Employment Program and 5-Youth Empowerment. It operates 13 centers across Lebanon. arcenciel aims to vigorously advance national policies, while keeping a non-confessional and apolitical stance.

arcenciel emphasizes the social and economic integration of marginalized people and communities back into society. It believes that every person, no matter the gravity of their handicap, is capable of overcoming their disability and contributing to the communities where they live.

arcenciel works to promote sustainable development through the following dimensions:

1. Social: care of persons in need
2. Environmental: the preservation of natural resources
3. Economic: cost-efficiency and financial autonomy in operations

We follow a tripod strategy based on:

1. Community Work: through the assessment of community needs and promoting their available resources
2. Service Providing Institutions offering specialized services and working with and for the beneficiaries.
3. Policy making with related stakeholders

Initially, the initiative was aimed at people disabled by war. These people have lost their mobility during the war and from one day to the next have become dependent. arcenciel started with a group of people who got together and started to advise each other on the aspects of daily life. Little by little, the group was not only giving advice but was able to repair wheelchairs. People started coming to ask for technical assistance and later on, requesting to buy new material, encouraging arcenciel to launch its production workshops. Most of arcenciel's staff who work in the workshop are themselves disabled, which is in line with arcenciel's policy of "The person in difficulty is at the service of the person in difficulty". They produce all kinds of technical devices such as walkers, crutches, wheelchairs, medical shoes, etc.

arcenciel now offers nursing care, medication provision, medical consultations, specialized consultations in orthopaedics, paediatrics, dental care and gynaecology. In addition, we offer services such as physiotherapy, speech therapy, psychological consultations, etc.

### **Advocating for the rights of People with Disability**

For over 35 years, arcenciel has been providing assistance to vulnerable and marginalized populations whose health, well-being and dignity are threatened. The lack of access to quality of care as well as the absence of social protection for a large majority of the population in Lebanon are challenges that we must address. Our organization militates and acts on a daily basis and in increasingly difficult conditions, to provide assistance to vulnerable people, to build bridges of vulnerable people, to build solidarity and cooperation between all, to reduce inequalities and poverty, and to invest in dialogue between communities. Our actions often help to reduce fractures, ease tensions, promote social cohesion, restore hope, and contribute to peace at a time when hate and fear are invading the country.

In 1994, the mobility program created the "Access and Rights" division within the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA), which led to the adoption of Law 220 that financially and socially protects Lebanese disabled people.

The program also contributes to raising awareness in the private and public sectors about accessibility and creating a suitable work environment for people with disabilities through the sessions it offers to different companies throughout Lebanon with close collaboration with the Employment program in arcenciel. The program also carries out rehabilitation work in workplaces that are committed to hiring people with disabilities among their staff. This rehabilitation work includes the construction of ramps, adaptation of bathrooms, elevators, installation of support bars, etc. And this goes hand in hand with our employment office's efforts to provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Lebanon.

### **Outreaching Beneficiaries - Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR)**

arcenciel’s social team adopts a specific outreach strategy which involves the Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) approach. It establishes good relationships within communities to identify their needs and work on meeting their requirements. The team adopts a case management approach with specialized therapists/doctors/case workers. If we don’t have the capacity to take care of the beneficiary, we will refer them through the RIMS system shared by numerous actors.

Our social team lists out specific documented vulnerability criteria that we base our assessments on, and continuous outreach for beneficiaries surrounding the areas of the center are carried out and requests are taken in. After beneficiaries are identified, we serve them to the best of our capacities. In order to follow up with beneficiaries, our social workers conduct home and field visits to ensure that the treatment process is taking place up to the standard method and is ongoing.

1. **arcenciel’s center visit proposition**

arcenciel has several centers across the Lebanese territory. Visiting the Jisr el Wati Sin el Fil centers in greater Beirut for 90 minutes, will achieve three goals:

* Learn about the mechanisms of service provision by arcenciel, an NGO of public utility, operating as a social enterprise and accredited by the MOSA.
* Learn about the collaboration, referral system and optimization of resources between the public and private sectors to better serve the vulnerable, through the eyes of the ministry invited to operate inside arcenciel’s center.
* Meet and discuss with several beneficiaries, learn about their challenges and their aspirations.
1. **Role of the International Community**

The international financial institutions are invited to take radical decisions in current times of multiple crises in Lebanon. There’s no more room to maneuver from public bodies in terms of reform promises. Improvement can only be achieved through the empowerment of local actors and linkages with the public sector through:

* Supporting arcenciel and similar operations that proved a success in its operation following a social enterprise model.
* Inviting funding agencies to follow the proposed model of collaboration enlarging the public private partnership to include the NGO sector in Lebanon.
* Inviting other Lebanese public authorities to copy and implement the collaborative system in their operations, in order to regain public trust and facilitate the transition into good governance and transparency.
1. **Conclusion**

Poverty in Lebanon is an alarming topic today. We have chosen to present a success story that many stakeholders take credit for achieving, public, private and from the NGO sector. We hope that we could replicate this approach in similar settings and thus serve better the beneficiaries while optimizing resources to the maximum.

1. L'Orient Today. (2021, August 6). UN officials say an estimated 78 percent of Lebanese are now in poverty as they call for $378.5 million in emergency assistance. L'Orient Today. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)