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A looming famine in Lebanon

After 30 years of the same political class ruling and mounting public debt — Lebanon is experiencing food insecurity. Immediate measures must be taken

The unprecedented collapse that Lebanon is currently going through is one of the most dramatic of its kind on a global scale since the 19th century.

It is the direct result of the economic policy pursued by the State in the aftermath of the civil war. Namely: excessive indebtedness, privatisations, dismantling of industries and agriculture, prioritisation of tourism which revenues are uncertain and above all, the rocketing interest rates offered by the banking sector to attract capital, illusory stabilisation of the exchange rate of the Lebanese Pound against the US dollar. Therefore, the country's economy is unproductive and is all the more vulnerable because it is hostage to a particularly turbulent regional context and to an incompetent and corrupted elite that maintains itself in power through clientelism.

After 30 years of the same political class ruling, the public debt is close to 180 per cent of GDP, infrastructure is failing and social justice is lacking. Thus, access to basic needs such as water, electricity, quality education, health care and social security depends on the ability to pay for these rights. In addition, the public transportation network and retirement pensions are almost non-existent.

The accumulation of corruption and the failure of the State in fulfilling its duties led to a crisis that burst in October 2019. The Lebanese people expressed their frustration and anger in the streets, unmasking to the world the excesses of the system. Today the local currency has lost more than 90 per cent of its value. People don't have access to their own money in the banks and suffer from hyperinflation, rampant impoverishment, insecurity, unemployment, shortages of medicine, fuel and food.

Since then, drastic changes are affecting the lifestyle all over the country. These changes are particularly noted when it comes to food behaviour

with people's diets becoming more and more restrictive. Is Lebanon facing food insecurity?

Pervasive food insecurity

In order to answer this question, it is important to understand the meaning of food security. It is defined at the World Food Summit in 1996 as existing 'when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life'. This concept is based on four pillars which are the physical availability of food, economic and physical access to food, its use, and the stability of these three dimensions over time. When these parameters are challenged, the situation of food insecurity is to be considered.

Lebanon is a net importer of foodstuffs, which inevitably challenges the physical availability of food. The country mainly imports cereals, which constitute between 35 per cent and 40 per cent of the daily consumption of its inhabitants. However, more than 96 per cent of wheat in particular comes from Ukraine or Russia, which further reduces its availability. Firstly, because of the delivery difficulties caused by the current war between these two states. Secondly, because Lebanon can no longer afford to buy these commodities. Moreover, imports are subject to a monopoly that controls the market according to its interests. The available stock of wheat is thus automatically reduced to 40 days of provisions. And, it is to be mentioned that the reserves had already been limited since the destruction of grain silos, which had a capacity of almost 120,000 tons, during the explosion of the capital's port on 4 August 2020.

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As for local producers, they are held back by the cost of materials like grains, fertilisers, and pesticides that are bought in US dollars, while they have no other choice but to sell their harvest in the local currency. All the initiatives implemented to help them remain insufficient. As a result, they are forced to abandon their activity because they can no more make a living out of it.

Economic access to food is therefore becoming increasingly problematic, with prices rising steadily. Thus, between March 2021 and March 2022 alone, prices have risen by 390.3 per cent. For example, the price of bread is currently rising from 1,500 to 20,000 Lebanese pounds. Further price increases are expected in the coming months due to the continued

depreciation of the Lebanese Pound, the cost of fuel and commodities worldwide. As a result, today 50 per cent of the population is unable to meet their basic nutritional needs.

Continuous State failure

The solution set up by the previous government to mitigate the impact of the crisis failed: subsidised goods were sold at higher prices on the black market, and consumers stored the products at home as a survival reflex. Consequently, stalls have been emptied, further exacerbating the shortages. The situation is all the more serious as access to certain vital items such as infant milk or even drinking water is affected. The effects on health are obvious: growth problems in some children and a cholera epidemic that are starting to spread.

In order to continue to feed themselves, households are giving up on the quality of what they eat, on education or health care, and are even skipping some meals. A study conducted by the American University of Beirut reached alarming conclusions: 33 per cent of adults skip meals more than once a week, 33 per cent of families can no longer eat meat, fish and chicken, and 85 per cent can no longer afford to buy basic foodstuffs.

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The inability of the State to find sustainable solutions will further deteriorate the situation, entrenching the lack of availability, access and utilisation factors over time.

Lebanon thus seems to be in a situation of food insecurity. More precisely, the country is in a food emergency phase, when referring to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) . Immediate measures should be considered.

For example, planning is essential in order to restore strategic reserves as well as building new storage points in different locations. Moreover, strengthening competitiveness in the market to regulate prices and availability should be considered. It is also necessary to encourage local production by financing, subsidising and supporting small producers and local SMEs. All of this obviously requires reforms, an advanced degree of governance and coordination between state and non-state actors. Otherwise there is a risk of maintaining the current situation — feeding the clientelist networks that are taking advantage of the crisis, and getting



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