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Lebanon's Crisis of Child Poverty

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There is a deepening crisis of child poverty in Lebanon. Recent quantitative and qualitative studies on child wellbeing and vulnerability paint a similar picture ([UNICEF Lebanon, 2022](#) and [UNICEF Lebanon, 2021](#)): children are being deprived of their childhoods; caregivers are increasingly unable to offer basic rights due to the pressures of the all-encompassing crisis; the extreme violation of children's rights, such as through child marriage and child labor, is on the rise; and the wellbeing of children and their families is being irreversibly undermined ([UNICEF Lebanon, 2021](#)). This policy brief aims to improve public awareness on the alarming state of multidimensional child poverty in the country, highlight the patterns and implications of child poverty on children and their families, and offer recommendations to work towards alleviating its immediate and long-term implications.

Multidimensional child poverty refers to the various forms of deprivation that impact children's childhoods and growth into adulthood. It takes material deprivation as a key cause for children being deprived from acquiring their basic human rights, grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Relevant impacted areas of a child's life include shelter, nutrition, education, water and sanitation, and protection ([UNICEF Lebanon, 2022, p. 4](#)). By not having access to these basic resources, children's development is hindered, and their future—as well as the future of subsequent generations—is threatened, risking the establishment of an intergenerational poverty trap.

Background

After three years of an ever-deepening crisis, Lebanon is at the brink of complete collapse. The country has suffered from multiple interconnected shocks simultaneously—the economic and financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Port of Beirut Blast. The [consequences](#) of these compounded crises are all around us, lived every day. Most notably, unemployment is widespread, reaching 29.6% in January 2022 ([ILO and Central Administration of Statistics, 2022](#)). This constitutes an 18.2% increase from the 11.4% unemployment rate determined for the 2018-2019 period ([ILO Lebanon, 2022](#)). Moreover, the currency has lost nearly 95% of its value, prices are soaring, and purchasing power continues to drop to historic lows. Basic goods and services have become only accessible to limited individuals, while public infrastructure is falling apart and failing to meet the daily, collective, and individual needs of the country's residents.

Lebanon has entered a new phase of the crisis—a state of perpetual [deprivation](#). While the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) has raised the alarm [elsewhere](#) on the creeping international poverty trap in Lebanon, this policy brief aims to draw attention to the still overlooked crisis of multidimensional child poverty.

In no uncertain terms, the crisis in Lebanon is depriving children of their [childhoods](#). Unpacking the multidimensional state of that deprivation and its impact on children and their families helps underscore the wider socio-economic implications of poverty that continues to be neglected.

Explaining Multidimensional Childhood Poverty

Examining the pre-crisis years in Lebanon, the annual GDP growth rate demonstrated economic growth prior to the Syria crisis, with an average growth of more than 9% during the 2007-2010 period, before slowing down to below 2% during the 2011-2017 period and reaching below 0% in 2018. From 2018 onwards, a recession began taking place, with GDP annual growth rate marking negative percentages of -6.9% in 2019 and as high as -25.9% in 2020 ([The World Bank, 2022](#)). In turn, GDP per capita exhibited a downward slope over the 2018-2021 period, falling from USD 8,003.8 in 2018 to USD 2,670.4 in 2021 ([The World Bank, 2022](#)). The 173.573% yearly change in the consumer price index noted in October 2021 reached an all-time high of 239.69% in January 2022 ([Central Administration of Statistics, January 2022](#),

[p. 10](#) and [Central Administration of Statistics, October 2021, p. 10](#)). The low growth environment led to a recession, and the above data helps highlight the extent of the concomitant crises' impact on Lebanon's economy and contextualize the gradual deteriorating economic conditions that fostered pervasive poverty across the country.

Poverty is ultimately rooted in deprivation. It is not, however, limited to money-centric approaches of deprivation. More specifically, while the deprivation of money or income may have a significant impact on an individual or household's living standards, they alone, do not fully capture the spectrum of deprivation or, in turn, the living standards of the respective individual or household. A more multidimensional approach to poverty focuses on the deprivation of different dimensions of core rights like adequate housing, essential utilities, healthcare, safety and security, or education.

Such multidimensional approaches to poverty are instrumental to understanding and explaining the vulnerability and deprivation of children in Lebanon, today. After all, children do not generate income and, in turn, are dependent on their caregivers to ensure their basic rights and wellbeing.

In a new qualitative study titled '[Deprived Childhoods](#),' UNICEF helps introduce such a rights-based approach to evaluating multidimensional child wellbeing. Notably, the report grounds itself in the UN's CRC, to help identify the level to which these basic rights are being deprived. The qualitative approach of the report also helps bring forward real stories that communicate the reality of peoples' lives, the hardships they endure, and the implications such poverty has on their emotional and mental health, as well as the pressures it puts on the relationships between children and their caregivers.

To compliment this qualitative study, UNICEF also carries out a regular rapid assessment on child wellbeing. Every six months, the same families are approached, making it possible to track the situation over time. This empirical study—known as the [Child-Focused Rapid Assessment \(CFRA\)](#)—was carried out again last June and found that 84 percent of households in Lebanon did not have enough money to cover basic necessities. In addition, the study showed that one in four children had recently gone to bed hungry and household debt was on the rise.

Read together, both reports are cause for alarm. It is worth restating: children are being deprived of their core rights and their childhoods.

Lebanon's Children and the Deprivation of their Basic Rights

The compounded crises and rising multidimensional poverty in Lebanon have infringed upon children's fundamental rights. Ultimately, poverty forces undue responsibilities on children, depriving them of their childhood. And yet, the right to childhood is one of the most fundamental rights children are entitled to. Childhood is irreplaceable and has such a formative impact on one's human development, making the consequences of its deprivation potentially irreversible. Indeed, all these rights, as we will come to demonstrate, are intimately connected.

Children have the right to live in a nurturing family where caregivers can provide these basic needs and caregivers have a right to not be deprived of their ability to fulfill these responsibilities. The widening net of deprivation is also undermining the physical and mental wellbeing of children, further stifling children's ability to healthily grow into adulthood. Mental healthcare, for its part, remains significantly underprovided in Lebanon, while children must grapple with the pressures brought on by multidimensional poverty and the concomitant crises.

Notably, the right to play, which is often sidelined, constitutes an inherent part of children's wellbeing and an important component in children's ability to develop their social, emotional, and analytical skills. Lastly, the right to equitable assistance and its deprivation sounds the alarm on the government's shortcomings in assisting children and families in need, while stressing the dire needs for resources and help. Combined, these rights and their collective deprivation point to the depressing consequences of multidimensional poverty on Lebanon's future.

The following will focus on key children's rights protected in the UN's CRC and draw attention to the state of their deprivation in Lebanon: the right to a childhood, the right to live within a nurturing family, the right to healthcare, the right to mental wellbeing, the right to play, and the right to equitable assistance.

The Right to a Childhood: Children are highly aware of their environment and surrounding. This awareness in times of crisis can foster serious pressures and stressors on children who can feel responsible for the deprivation of their families, caregivers, and communities. Study findings also reveal that children in Lebanon are aware of their rights as children and the deprivation of those

rights ([UNICEF Lebanon, 2022, p. 9](#)). For example, study findings reveal that children are feeling burdened and worried to ask their parents for goods and necessities, while also repeatedly expressing that their rights were violated and their future adversely strained due to their circumstances ([UNICEF Lebanon, 2022, p. 6](#)).

The Right to Live within a Nurturing Family: One of the most shocking findings of the study is the rise in child labor brought on by the debilitating pressures of the economic crisis. The intimate bonds between children and parents, fundamentally rooted in trust, are being undermined by the inability of parents to meet children's basic needs. Children, on the one hand, are experiencing declining confidence and trust in caregivers who are unable to provide for them. Parents, on the other hand, are stricken by the guilt of this inability to provide such basic needs and the loss of their children's confidence and respect in their caregiver's abilities. This effect was particularly pronounced where basic household roles had been reversed and children were now the income earners, while parents were forced into unemployment. Based on UNICEF's CFRA, among the 1500 surveyed families, 9% of children were sent off to work, depriving them of time to learn, play, and live their childhoods.

The Right to Healthcare: Children in need of healthcare, medications, or treatments and support for disabilities are largely not receiving the necessary care or support due to the combination of medicine shortages and increased prices ([UNICEF Lebanon, 2021](#) and [UNICEF Lebanon, 2022](#)). As one Lebanese female caregiver explained, 'My son broke his shoulder, but I have not yet been able to treat the fracture. He needs to be treated in the hospital, and the cost of his treatment is beyond our financial capabilities' ([UNICEF Lebanon, 2022, p. 11](#)). Based on UNICEF's CFRA, 60% of households reduced expenditure on health.

The Right to Mental Wellbeing: Like the rest of the population, children in Lebanon have been impacted by several extreme shocks—being swept into poverty, the Port of Beirut Blast, and the Covid-19 pandemic—that seriously affected their mental health. Refugee children also faced the additional pressures brought on by their experiences with conflict, discrimination, or loss. The accumulation of these traumas has clear mental health repercussions on the psycho-social wellbeing of children and their families. Yet, access to mental health care and services is seriously lacking and often limited.

The Right to Play: Children have a fundamental right to play, a right that has been severely impacted, with girls being especially vulnerable. The rise in electricity cuts, transportation costs, and limited public spaces for children to play are forcing children to play on the streets, therefore exposing them—particularly girls—to the threat of harassment and unsafe spaces. The CFRA conducted in June 2022 shows that 50% of children between the ages of 3 and 5 lived in households without toys to play with.

The Right to Equitable Assistance: In response to the gaps left by the state, INGOs and NGOs have attempted to respond to the rising needs of households hit by poverty. Yet, the study reveals that caregivers and participants expressed that such engagement was often too limited or short in time and failed to meet or address their changing needs. Overall, however, participants stressed that the government was responsible for providing these needs, implementing reforms to recover from the crisis, and supporting vulnerable communities.

Taken together, the deprivation of these rights, as well as UNICEF's quantitative results emanating from the Child-Focused Rapid Assessments, showcase the impacts of multidimensional poverty on the status of present and future childhood and adulthood in Lebanon. Collectively, they point to reduced physical and mental wellbeing, as well as the shifting of dynamics between parents and children, thus producing a crack in current and future social cohesion. In addition, there is a clear deterioration in overall happiness coupled with an increase in tensions and lack of tolerance (particularly among the most vulnerable).

The following and final sections summarize key takeaways concerning multidimensional poverty and child poverty in Lebanon and pave the way for implementable measures to reverse the trends, ultimately aiming to prevent lost generations.

Takeaways

1. Caregivers and families in Lebanon are drowning in multidimensional poverty, increasingly unable to provide their children with their basic needs.
2. Children are left particularly vulnerable to multidimensional poverty, demonstrating acute awareness of their understanding of the deteriorating situation and an increased sense of responsibility.

3. The core rights of children affected by multidimensional poverty are being violated with irreversible consequences on their wellbeing and development, leading to a breakdown of trust between children and their families.
4. Vulnerable children are being left behind by a broken social protection system and short-term and limited interventions.

Recommendations

- Establish a unified, coherent, and inclusive multidimensional poverty index that includes child deprivation.
- Strengthen legal and social capacities to respond to the rise in extreme violations of children's rights, like child labor and child marriage.
- Establish a national child grant to ensure immediate alleviation of multidimensional child poverty.
- Provide emotional and psychosocial support for children and caregivers affected by multidimensional poverty, especially in instances of breakdown of relations.
- Ensure children access to education and health, and the development of more public spaces for children to play safely.

LCPS

About the Policy Brief

A Policy Brief is a short piece regularly published by LCPS that analyzes key political, economic, and social issues and provides policy recommendations to a wide audience of decision makers and the public at large.

About LCPS

Founded in 1989, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies is a Beirut-based independent, non-partisan think-tank whose mission is to produce and advocate policies that improve good governance in fields such as oil and gas, economic development, public finance, and decentralization.

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