

Supporting Cultural Spaces in Lebanon



A Cultural Policy Paper by
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Introduction

Since the proclamation of the State of Greater Lebanon in 1920, its stages of growth and turmoil can be categorised roughly into 15 to 20 year periods. In 1943, Lebanon acquired its independence. In 1960, the Lebanese economy flourished, and the country witnessed the rise of its financial and cultural golden age. The year 1975 marked the beginning of the Lebanese civil war which would persist for 15 years. The following decade and a half was an age of reconstruction and growth, halted suddenly in 2005 by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. This initiated a spate of killings, thereby ushering in an era of instability. Lebanon currently grapples with dire inflation and a crumbling economy. The country's economy collapsed in 2020.

The aim of this report is not to delve into the causes of these historical events, nor is it an analysis of their political and historical impact. This report aims to contextualise these events and assess their effects on the Lebanese cultural sector. The purpose is to reflect on public policy related to culture, so as to further understand Lebanon's trajectory and improve its potential.

This paper aims to provide cultural recommendations for Lebanon during this critical moment in its history. Engaging in a collective reflection would enable a thoughtful implementation of new cultural policies over the next few years. These proposals will be backed by legal documents which are imperative in tackling policy change in general.

After the civil war (1975-1990) in Lebanon, an attempt to enhance the cultural sector emerged: several private initiatives promoted the creation of cultural spaces, while artistic works increased in Beirut, as well as other regions. Human capital played a major role in post-war cultural development, particularly individuals who acquired education and experience abroad during the war. Cultural initiatives rose, which led to the establishment of cultural associations. In post war Lebanon, cultural entities were primarily funded by private sources. The state institutions entrusted with the cultural sector, specifically the Ministry of Culture, accounted for a scarce percentage of financial support.

The Cultural Sector: Main Challenges and Issues

The Ministry of Culture's Cultural Policies in Lebanon

In Lebanon, the Ministry of Culture was formed in 1993, originally as part of the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. The local concept of cultural policies did not exist then. In 2000, the Ministry of Culture became a separate entity (the Ministry of Higher Education was merged with the Ministry of Education). The aim was to focus on the cultural sector, which was previously fragmented across several ministries, including Tourism, Education, and Information. When this institution was created, new laws were drafted to define its role and responsibilities. For the first time in Lebanon, the concept of cultural policy emerged through these laws, though they remain to this day underdeveloped from an official standpoint.

In 2008, eight years after the Ministry was created, outdated laws related to the cultural sector were reformed, as many of them dated back to the sixties and early seventies. The work of cultural spaces was redefined, and the cultural policies that the Ministry of Culture implemented were detailed in Law No. 35/2008¹. This law was intended to support cultural production in the country by restructuring the Ministry of Culture, and setting clear, sustainable policies for people working in the sector or investing in cultural spaces. The cultural policies were aimed at supporting artists, actors, and those working to achieve cultural growth in Lebanon.

It is also noteworthy that Law No. 35/2008¹ deemed cultural development a means to progress and growth on a socio-economic level. The law stated that this progress would allow a transition to what was called 'knowledge society.'

Law No. 35/2008 is significant in what it defined, but 13 years later, it is still not upheld due to inadequate funding. This vital law is not enforced because the necessary implementation decrees have not been issued yet. The Ministry attributes this delay to the lack of human, financial and logistical resources required for implementation. The budget that has been allocated to the Ministry of Culture does not cover the costs of enforcing the law. The Ministry of Culture has not taken either any initiative to cooperate with existing cultural organisations.

Consequently, the Ministry has failed in its duty to formulate and adopt cultural policies. It has inhibited the expansion of cultural entities by disregarding the potential in cooperating with other Lebanese organisations. Spaces, artists and collectives could benefit and grow if only the Ministry would trust the expertise of leading cultural institutions, separate from the state.

¹-<https://mawred.org/research-publication/study-on-legislation-governing-the-culture-sector-in-lebanon/>
Study prepared by lawyer Nayla Geagea on the laws governing the cultural sector and the reforms they need, Culture Resource, 2013

Three other significant laws were passed in 2008 with regard to cultural policy: Law No. 36 to regulate the work of public institutions under the Ministry of Culture, Law No. 37 on the administration and protection of movable and immovable cultural property, including public spaces, and Law No. 56 on the definition of artistic professions, artist trade unions and their admission requirements.

According to the Lebanese law, the concept of cultural spaces includes any place that hosts individual or collective cultural work. Law No. 37/2008 is significant in that it includes cultural spaces which are part of the intangible cultural heritage; it declares that these spaces must be upheld and supported, as their preservation is imperative to the continuation of cultural activities.

In 2008, a great deal was legislated concerning the importance of maintaining and defining cultural practices in Lebanon. However, little has been done to implement this compelling legislation. The aforementioned development, or lack thereof, has barred cultural spaces from growing. If laws were properly enforced, many entities and artists would be exempt from certain fees, allowing for reinvestment in their spaces and practices.

For example, the 'cultural spaces lease agreement' is a contract between the landlord (owner or property investor) and the cultural institution (cultural space operator). Relevant regulations deem non-profit cultural spaces eligible for the same financial exemptions as non-profit organisations. However, these regulations are not enforced, leaving cultural space operators to the mercy of high rental prices. For-profit cultural spaces such as theatres and cinemas do not even have legislation to protect their existence, and are subject to the same fees and rent as hotels and nightclubs. It is in the best economic interest of Lebanon to protect these spaces that contribute to tourism and culture against closure.

There is no current or past database in Lebanon that lists cultural institutions. Archiving this information would benefit cultural spaces and accommodate research being conducted on such entities. There is movement within the NGO community to document the existence of cultural spaces, but it is unfortunate that the Ministry of Culture has not taken such an initiative.

Before 2008, there was not an operational definition of cultural policy. Even post 2008, legislation remains theoretical and lacks implementation. The legislative reform of that same year was a small step in the right direction but the laws introduced thirteen years ago do not cover every aspect of cultural work. The legislation also does not address many of the needs in this sector, nor accommodate its workforce. The policies are unclear in Lebanon and, according to some specialists, the non-application of such policies acts ironically as a policy itself.

In 2009, Beirut was designated World Book Capital. The budget was ample: EUR 6 million to implement 160 projects throughout the year. The Ministry of Culture gave artists and institutions the opportunity to apply for funding if they wanted to present a cultural work during this event. A plan was established, an agenda developed, and necessary funds were allocated to proposed projects and team members. Beirut's designation as World Book Capital is a good example of the power and potential the Ministry of Culture holds. The Ministry worked relatively efficiently when given a specific, finite event to organise. However, initiatives were not revived, and budgets were not matched in the following years; actions and plans created around Beirut's designation did not serve the long term development of the cultural sector.

The lack of continuity and commitment to long term projects can be explained by the frequent changing of ministers of culture. Furthermore, the ongoing crisis in the country makes it difficult to commit to long term goals. There is a dire need for continuity between ministers and political shifts. Lebanon also deserves a commitment to sustainable development within the cultural sector.

In 2017, the Ministry of Culture launched a five-year project to study the needs of the sector. The project involved a series of meetings with people working in the field; the aim was to develop and regulate cultural policy. There have been complaints that the parties employed to develop the policy did not engage in discussions and rarely opened the floor to questions. The overall reception of such endeavour was that sessions felt directionless and did not seem participatory.

Cultural Policies at the NGO Level²

In Lebanon, the concept of cultural policies was not included in the work of NGOs before 2009. That year, the Culture Resource (*Al Mawred Al Thaqafy*), based in Egypt, launched the cultural policy programme. It was the first of its kind in the Arab region. The institution managed the programme for 10 years and issued a number of publications tackling cultural policies in Lebanon. These publications researched the cultural situation from a logistical and legal point of view and were used as a reference in the domain for years. In its wake, other regional institutions launched programmes of the same nature, including the *Ettijahat* and Action for Hope organisations.

The Lebanese revolution which commenced October 17, 2019, established a structure for cultural sector workers. The protests birthed groups whose aims were to organise culture-related professions and conceptualise cultural policies. Many of these groups are still growing. Their existence has been a substantial benefit to the continuity of the sector. Such groups have keen networking abilities and stand together in solidarity. They call for clear and certified cultural policies and have proved an asset to the community, especially after the Beirut August 4 explosion when they took part in rescue operations. It is worth noting that the explosion damaged a region of Beirut home to many cultural workers and spaces.

²-It is recommended to read a series of studies tackling cultural policies in Lebanon and covering the work of NGOs and the funding of the sector. This study will be published on the Cultural Resource (*Al Mawred Al Thaqafy*) website in the first months of 2021.

Centralised Cultural Spaces in Beirut

It was mentioned that there is no comprehensive database of cultural spaces and their roles in Lebanon. However, estimates show that Beirut contains more than half the total number of cultural spaces in Lebanon. There are approximately 700 cultural institutions in Lebanon and 60% of them are located in the greater Beirut area, which covers 200 sq.km (2% of the country's surface area). It can be deduced that populations living in rural areas, or even anywhere outside of Beirut, have limited access to cultural spaces.

It is worth addressing the role of municipalities in supporting cultural production. The scarcity of cultural spaces outside the capital questions the sustainability of cultural work in other regions. According to the legislation governing the work of municipalities, particularly Laws 47, 49 and 50, municipalities are empowered to allocate budgets aimed at supporting cultural activities within their scope, by providing spaces for cultural purposes (of public utility) or exempting cultural spaces from taxes. These laws dictate municipalities must enhance cultural production by supplying the logistics required for producing the cultural work and making it available to the public. Such prerogatives are not widely used in Lebanese municipalities, which limits cultural production in said regions. The aforementioned set of laws approved in 2008, particularly Law No. 37, afforded a significant role to municipalities in supporting cultural spaces; they should take it upon themselves to enrich their communities and provide means to potential cultural initiatives.

Unsustainable Cultural Work

The creative sector is often hit the hardest during times of economic adversity. Lebanon currently struggles with inflation and uncertainty; this financial crisis will certainly lead to change within the cultural sector. Self-funded spaces will suffer in the face of economic meltdown, some entities will move due to high rental prices, others may vacate the country entirely as there is more security in operating abroad.

Clear cultural policies would establish a safety net for cultural spaces and workers who cannot prosper in the current climate. Clear cultural policies would create certainty and address the difficult position many artists are forced into during times like the present. Clear cultural policies would also address the disparities relating to funding. For example, cultural spaces that produce contemporary art, and are mainly located in Beirut, receive disproportionately more funding than folk art. Balanced funding comes with cultural systems that operate in accordance with clear cultural policies.

Absence of a Clear Identity in Cultural Production in Lebanon

Beirut has lacked a clear cultural identity since post-war times, due to ineffective cultural policies. Sustainability is difficult to achieve in the face of a system that does not support its own creatives at a ministerial level. Without enforced policies in the cultural sector, it is difficult to fund and develop projects despite signs of cultural prosperity in Lebanon.

The Lebanese creative community depends on both European and Lebanese concepts in developing cultural spaces. Those who work in the cultural sector are flexible, adaptable and open minded. Lebanon deserves a set of cultural policies that reflects this mentality.

Policy Recommendations for Cultural Spaces in Lebanon

Regulation and Classification of Professions in the Cultural Sector

The Ministry of Culture must regulate and classify professions. Law No. 56/2008 organises artistic professions, declares artists must benefit from mutual and retirement funds, and supports production. It also suggests creating a unified artists' association/syndicate (which is not necessarily the most effective solution to supporting artists). However, this law failed to consider workers who are not artists, but who enable creative work through managerial roles. This law must include those who contribute to artistic production. The regulation and classification of professions would support those who work in management, logistics and policy. It would enable further conceptualisation of cultural policies in Lebanon by classifying and supporting this group in the cultural sector. Law No. 56/2008 must be revised in partnership with the relevant jurists and workers. It should reflect their needs and emphasise the development of trade unions to ensure workers know and assert their rights.

Strengthening the Role of Municipalities

It is of vital importance that municipalities are considered a partner in supporting cultural spaces. The crises in Lebanon make the government less reliable as a single pillar of support; it is thus necessary to look to municipalities for financial and logistical support of cultural spaces. Decentralisation is a crucial step to ensure that the cultural sector is not exclusively supported by the Ministry of Culture. This partnership can be carried out at several levels:

1. Provide material and moral support for all workers in the cultural field by spending the budgets allocated for this purpose in accordance with the law.
2. Adopt annual programming in cultural spaces affiliated with municipalities, but also support non-affiliated cultural spaces by providing the logistics needed to develop artistic activities within the municipalities.
3. Assist cultural institutions in developing/renting their space by including them in the pertaining law classification and exempt them from taxes.
4. Secure shared spaces in unused public buildings and restore them to make them available to cultural institutions and thus create participatory cultural spaces.
5. Support cultural institutions in restoring unused buildings by designating them 'buildings of public utility.' Municipalities can act on this to help institutions rent and restore them, creating new cultural spaces.

6. Use twinning agreements with cities and towns in other countries by giving them the opportunity to expand their networks, obtain funding, and participate in exchange programs. Many municipalities in Lebanon have used twinning agreements; they empower cultural spaces and workers. It is an effective way to secure new equipment, and host artists and cultural players from other countries. This would create new work within the municipality and present new opportunities to creatives.

7. Municipalities should incentivise artistic industries through tax exemption. Municipalities should also establish links between crafts people, tech industries, and factories to enhance production and prominence of cultural entities.

Decentralisation of Cultural Production

Decentralisation means making culture available in different regions: this includes refugee camps in the country. In Lebanon, centralisation is characterised by the high number of cultural spaces in the greater Beirut area, resulting in the exclusion of the suburbs and rural regions from participating in cultural production. Funding projects outside of Beirut would foster inter-regional relationships and break down social barriers, particularly where displaced people reside. Municipalities and municipal unions have access to local knowledge, municipal budgets, and law enforcement; they harbour significant potential in decentralisation of the cultural sector. However, it remains largely a political decision that requires the official approval of the Ministry of Culture and government. The partnering of government and municipalities could facilitate the creation and protection of cultural spaces. It is also imperative to monitor the equitable distribution of budgets according to transparent and professional standards, far from the usual sectarian quota system.

Development of Cultural Production

In Lebanon, there is a funding crisis and a lack of resources in the cultural sector. The Ministry of Culture's budget is insufficient if it is to restructure and enforce policies. Cultural entities rely on the support from international organisations and donors and, to a lesser extent, partnerships with the private sector. Despite a grim trajectory for the Lebanese economy, there is opportunity for the cultural sector to become a contributor to the local economy. There are several ways that this can be implemented:

1. Cultural investment by implementing profit-making projects for cultural spaces such as selling products or making space and equipment available for rent. Profits should be reinvested to support projects and preserve the non-profit cultural dimension.
2. Financial investment by participating in profit-making projects inside and outside of the country.
3. Implementing a participatory approach through shared rent of cultural spaces which could be used by several institutions to lower rent and logistics costs. This would also develop participatory action, which in turn secures the needs of institutions within a wider network.

It is true that the first cultural spaces in Lebanon, despite being few, continued working steadily in the face of international funding crises, as they did not rely on external financing. Those who rely entirely on the Lebanese economy are currently struggling. This is the best argument for diversification. Cultural spaces should develop plans in digital production, a keystone of sustainability. They should diversify their income to cater to national and international streams.

COVID-19 has had a colossal impact on cultural spaces worldwide: events were cancelled, spaces were closed, and flights halted. Many cultural institutions replaced programmed activities with virtual ones. This change offered new digital fields that promote innovative methods. These developments require addressing legislative gaps, as the existing regulations do not protect digital artwork as intellectual and literary property. Digital artwork is also not included in the list of activities for which 'support budgets' are allocated.

Restoring the Ministry of Culture's Role

Although the cultural sector continues to operate without clear policies, and despite the Ministry of Culture's weakened role financially, it is important to restore and restructure the Ministry's approach to the sector. This is necessary to guarantee the sector's sustainability, ensuring its long term protection. However, demanding clearer cultural policies is not solely the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture. Cultural policies cannot be effective if they are not the product of a collective effort involving the relevant official bodies, including unions and other regulatory branches. This project should be different from the one launched in 2017, in which no clear, public recommendations were reached.

The Ministry of Culture should also develop internal resources by including specialists for consulting purposes. They should provide additional, relevant training to its current civil servants. The Ministry of Culture should empower municipalities and encourage them to employ cultural specialists to support local cultural institutions as well.

Cultural Mapping in Lebanon

Despite numerous initiatives, it remains that there is no database for cultural spaces in Lebanon. A thorough database would require up to date information on whether spaces are active, closed, or in need of restoration. Cultural mapping helps determine the actual size of the sector, and thus, investment potential. It also contributes to identifying human capital and logistical requirements. Public surveys are especially useful in tackling cultural mapping. Surveys on cultural practices should be conducted so the Ministry and municipalities can harmonise cultural production with the consumption of cultural products.

Public Funding for Culture

It is impossible to establish fair cultural policies in Lebanon without investing in culture, no matter how plentiful the external funding, and regardless of the current financial meltdown. Most recommendations in this paper rely on an increased budget for the Ministry of Culture; it is the bare minimum in the sector's development and crucial to the implementation of supportive legislation. It is the Ministry's responsibility to exert political pressure on the rest of government and demand bigger budgets, enabling them to decentralise the cultural sector and develop cultural production. This involves engaging other departments for support. The Ministry must convince other branches of government that culture is an essential cog in the machine. It also falls on the Ministry to seek financial exemptions for the cultural sector. For example, returning part of the taxes spent on cultural builds to the organisations that are producing arts and culture in these spaces.

Complementary Relationships between the Cultural Sector and Other Sectors

The cultural sector is not an island; it is intertwined with many aspects of Lebanese livelihood. For instance, education plays a significant role in the outcome of talent and drive within the cultural sector. Schools breed thinkers and artists who, if trained accordingly, will contribute to the cultural legacy of Lebanon. When considering these relationships, the following is advised:

1. Develop and modernise culture-related specialisations. Establish international relations that put students in contact with universities outside of Lebanon, whose programmes have a similar focus.
2. Expand scientific research in the field of culture and arts, and build centres to carry out these studies.
3. Develop school curricula to include updated subjects in arts and culture. The current meagre artistic curriculum does not suffice. Students should be immersed in lessons on cultural diversity, cultural history, and contemporary arts. The school system should provide counselling sessions for those who are interested in culture-related professions.

The role of technology in culture is growing every year. There are facets of culture which can be studied, improved and preserved with the help of data science and digitisation. Cultural informatics and cultural production are easier to navigate with the help of technology. Technology is more relevant and necessary than ever, and it would be in the cultural sector's best interest to focus on this field.

Revising and Improving Culture-Related Laws

Based on the recommendations, it is of utmost importance to apply clear, participatory cultural policies, while thoroughly overseeing their implementation. It is essential to review culture-related laws, particularly the ones approved in 2008. These should be improved, amended and enforced accordingly. They must focus on decentralisation, partnering with municipalities, while shifting to include non-artistic workers in the sector. Legislation must consider the value of technology and the role of digital spaces in the post-pandemic world.

Law No. 56/2008 should be expanded to include all professions that fall within the cultural sector. Law No. 37/2008 should be expanded so that mechanisms to grant funding to cultural spaces are automatic: they deserve the right to public support without the current bureaucratic obstacles. Their designation as registered cultural spaces must be incentivised by the Ministry. It is up to the Ministry of Culture to lead the revision of this poignant legislation from 2008 so that it is inclusive and can be effectively implemented.

Beyond the 2008 legislation and its revision, it is time to draft new laws that guarantee funding to cultural bodies. The Ministry must facilitate investment in worthy cultural causes, whose existence contributes to the prosperity and image of Lebanon as culturally significant on the world stage. New legislation is impractical without an emphasis on inclusion; cultural policies must be clear and fair. Lebanon's cultural sector can only reach its potential when policies are focused on growth, decentralisation, diversification, and sustainability.

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