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Governing Displacement Without Money: Reclaiming State Responsibility in Lebanon

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Lebanon's recurring crises have produced a familiar and troubling reflex: when displacement surges, responsibility drifts outward. The state recedes, and the burden shifts to international agencies, NGOs, and improvised local networks. This pattern is often justified by the language of fiscal collapse, as though the absence of funds absolves the state of obligation. Yet sovereignty cannot be contingent on liquidity. A government that cannot spend is not a government that cannot act. The core question is not whether Lebanon can finance a response, but whether it can organize one - mobilizing what it already owns, coordinating what already exists, and structuring credible channels through which society can support itself. This policy brief argues that the Government of Lebanon can and must lead the displacement response by repurposing underutilized public assets and building transparent mechanisms of coordination and support, even in the absence of new public spending.

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Lebanon's constraint is real, but it is often misdiagnosed. Displacement response is less a problem of budgets than of governance. The country possesses a wide array of public assets that remain underutilized or unevenly deployed: schools that sit empty outside teaching hours or during closures, public hospitals with idle capacity in certain units, stadiums and large venues used intermittently, municipal buildings that can host services, ports that can organize inflows of goods, and transport infrastructure that still connects the national territory despite its deterioration. These assets, dispersed across institutions and regions, constitute a latent response system. What is missing is not material capacity, but the coordination needed to activate it at scale.

The first task, then, is to make the state legible to itself. A rapid, nationwide inventory of public assets can be compiled within days if mandated at the highest level and executed through existing administrative channels. Ministries, municipalities, and public institutions can be required to report the facilities under their control, their current utilization, and their capacity to absorb displaced populations. This is not a technocratic exercise; it is a political act that signals intent. Once mapped, these assets can be repurposed with minimal adaptation. Public schools can function as temporary shelters, with classrooms reorganized into family units and shared spaces adapted for basic services. Public hospitals can designate specific wings or schedules to accommodate increased demand, while mobile clinics extend care into shelter sites. Stadiums and large venues can serve as intake and coordination centers, where displaced families are registered and directed to appropriate facilities. Municipal buildings can become local hubs for administration and service delivery, anchoring the response within communities.

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Ports and logistics hubs can be reorganized as controlled entry points for in-kind assistance, ensuring that goods are sorted, tracked, and distributed according to identified needs rather than ad hoc availability. Transport assets - public buses, contracted fleets, and even school transport - can be pooled into coordinated routes linking shelters, hospitals, and distribution points. None of this requires large new expenditures; it requires reallocation, prioritization, and the authority to act. The state already owns the infrastructure. The challenge is to use it deliberately.

Such a response cannot be centralized in Beirut alone, but coordination cannot be assumed. Lebanon's fragmented authority - across overlapping ministries, resource-constrained municipalities, and diverse local actors - imposes real limits on enforcement and alignment. Incentives diverge, and directives risk dilution without credible mechanisms of follow-through. The task, then, is to make coordination operational: linking access to public assets to basic reporting requirements, applying simple and transparent allocation rules, and using public disclosure to make gaps visible. The risks - fragmentation, selective access, and uneven quality across locations - are not incidental but structural. They can be mitigated through clear minimum standards, light but consistent verification, and arrangements that reward participation rather than presume it. In this way, political feasibility is not taken for granted but constructed - through modest, enforceable rules that allow the state to coordinate effectively even where its authority is constrained.

A critical component of this framework is the structured mobilization of NGOs as operational partners within a state-led system. Rather than allowing parallel and often fragmented interventions, the government can establish a light but binding coordination mechanism that assigns NGOs to specific facilities or service functions based on their expertise - healthcare provision, food distribution, psychosocial support, legal aid - while requiring alignment with nationally defined standards and reporting protocols. Through simple memoranda of understanding, NGOs can be granted access to repurposed public assets in exchange for delivering clearly specified services and sharing real-time data on activities and needs. This approach preserves the flexibility and responsiveness of NGOs while embedding their efforts within a coherent national strategy, reducing duplication and ensuring more equitable coverage across regions. By positioning itself as the central coordinator rather than a passive observer, the state can leverage NGO capacity to extend its reach without relinquishing responsibility.

In a context where trust in public institutions is deeply eroded, communication becomes as important as logistics. A zero-cost communications strategy should be embedded at the heart of the response, centered on daily public updates detailing what the government has done, where resources have been deployed, and what needs remain unmet. These updates can be disseminated through television, radio, social media, and municipal networks, ensuring that displaced citizens and host communities alike can see the state in action. The objective is not merely informational but relational: to demonstrate presence, responsiveness, and care. In crises, silence breeds suspicion, while visibility - even when imperfect - can begin to rebuild confidence. Regular, transparent communication transforms the state from an abstract entity into a tangible actor, narrowing the distance between citizens and institutions at a moment when that distance is most damaging.

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Transparency must extend beyond communication to the management of resources. Lebanon has a unique opportunity to harness the willingness of its residents and diaspora to contribute, provided that credible mechanisms exist to track and verify the use of funds. A real-time digital dashboard can serve this purpose. By mapping all active facilities, their capacities, and their specific needs, the platform would allow individuals to direct contributions to clearly defined purposes - funding supplies for a particular school shelter, supporting medical equipment for a designated hospital unit, or covering transport costs for a specific route. Each contribution would be linked to procurement and delivery updates, creating a continuous chain of accountability.

This approach does more than raise funds; it redefines the relationship between the state and society. Rather than bypassing public institutions, contributions flow through a transparent system overseen by them, reinforcing their central role while subjecting them to scrutiny. Independent verification - through professional associations, civil society, and public reporting - can further strengthen credibility. In a country where mistrust has often paralyzed collective action, such a platform offers a way to align individual willingness to help with institutional responsibility.

Critics may argue that without new spending, such measures are insufficient. But this objection misunderstands the nature of the problem. The immediate challenge is not to build new systems, but to activate existing ones. Public employees can be reassigned temporarily to support operations in repurposed facilities. Maintenance budgets can be redirected toward urgent repairs that enable safe occupancy. Private sector actors can contribute logistics, supplies, and technical support as part of structured partnerships. International organizations can provide expertise and complement the national response without displacing it. The objective is not to exclude external support, but to ensure that it operates within a framework defined by the state rather than in parallel to it.

At its core, this is a question of accountability. When the state defers responsibility, it does not eliminate the need for response; it fragments it. The result is a patchwork system in which gaps persist and inequalities deepen. By contrast, a state-led approach, even under constraint, creates a focal point for coordination and a standard against which performance can be judged. It reasserts the principle that those displaced within a country remain the responsibility of that country, regardless of fiscal circumstances.

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The stakes extend beyond the immediate crisis. How Lebanon responds to displacement will shape perceptions of state capacity and legitimacy for years to come. A response that is visible, coordinated, and transparent can begin to reverse the erosion of trust that has defined recent years. It can demonstrate that governance is not synonymous with spending, and that even in conditions of scarcity, the state retains the ability to act meaningfully.

In the end, what is required is not a declaration of intent but a sequence of decisions taken with urgency and clarity. Policymakers must authorize, within days, the nationwide inventory and repurposing of public assets; mandate municipalities to operationalize shelters and local coordination cells; issue and enforce minimum standards for service delivery; and launch a real-time digital dashboard that makes needs, allocations, and outcomes visible to all. They must commit to daily public communication that documents actions taken and gaps remaining, not as a public relations exercise but as a core instrument of governance. They must convene private sector and civil society partners within a unified framework that the state defines and oversees. None of these steps require new spending, but all require political will. The task before Lebanon's policymakers is therefore precise: to move from managing scarcity as an excuse for inaction to governing through it - using the authority of the state to organize resources, align actors, and restore a measure of trust in the very idea of public responsibility.