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GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN LEBANON: DAVID VS GOLIATH?

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This discussion is the third of AUB-NCC's 2023 series of roundtables, titled “Navigating Climate Change and environmental activism in the MENA region: Challenges and Opportunities”.

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The series is co-designed with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, the AUB-Asfari Institute for Civil Society & Citizenship, Arab Reform Initiative and the AUB-Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.

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HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
BEIRUT
Middle East



Arab Reform Initiative

PANEL:

Suzanne Baaklini

Head of non-political features in [L'Orient-Le Jour](#)

Julien Jreissati

Program Director at [Greenpeace MENA](#)

Samer el Khoury

Environmental and development activist

Ounsi el Daif

Environmental civil society actor and co-founder of Jibal

Christophe Maroun

Environmental Justice Program Coordinator at Heinrich Böll Stiftung (moderator)

BACKGROUND

On October 17th, Lebanon experienced its largest uprising to date, often described as a revolution.

Lebanon faced many uprisings fueled by collective anger over the socio-economic situation and political tension. However, environmental degradation such as the recent forest fire debacle and the Bisri dam, which symbolized years of government corruption, proved to be a main trigger for protests. On October 17, 2019, thousands of Lebanese citizens flooded the streets, demanding the resignation of the government, after the introduction of regressive taxes to address the looming financial crisis. The weeks and months that followed were marked by sustained protests, providing reasons for optimism.

Coincidentally, around the same time, a popular movement had gained momentum in the fight to save the Bisri Valley from a World Bank-funded dam project. At first glance, these two seemingly unconnected movements—the uprising against the government and the campaign against the dam—found a connection through the activists of the Save Bisri Campaign. What initially appeared as a localized environmental struggle gradually transformed into a broader conversation about public spaces and environmental policies in our nation.

Lebanon's activist scene has always been characterized by ambitious initiatives designed to oppose projects that place individual interests over collective welfare. Whilst successes are not always guaranteed, many groups continue to confront daily injustices with relentless advocacy campaigns, protests, and community mobilization. Under the banner of adopting a grassroots approach to instill long-term bottom-up change, some of these movements, such as the Save Bisri Campaign, have earned the admiration of thousands around Lebanon and abroad.

Nevertheless, these initiatives have oftentimes emerged in opposition to projects portrayed as threats to social and environmental justice. In a context of deep communitarian and political ruptures, these popular movements have often been built on the idea of opposing a certain threat, rather than advancing a shared vision. These movements find it difficult to transcend the projects' timeline and become indispensable actors in Lebanon's civil society, which prevents systematic advocacy against similar threats when they arise. As a result, Lebanon's grassroots activism scene is highly dependent on dispersed initiatives and the nature of the threat they are opposing.

CLOSEUP ON THE SAVE BISRI CAMPAIGN

Based on a [study](#) conducted by Roland Nassour, coordinator of the campaign.

The Bisri Valley situated between Chouf and Jezzine in Lebanon, holds important natural, historical, and cultural significance. However, the area was threatened by the World Bank's largest investment in the country: a dam amounting to 625 million USD.

The project was framed as a gateway to supplying water for domestic use in the Greater Beirut area. However, this came at the expense of nature, as the dam would destroy six million square meters of land, dismantle tens of historical sites, and pose serious threats to the local community's safety.

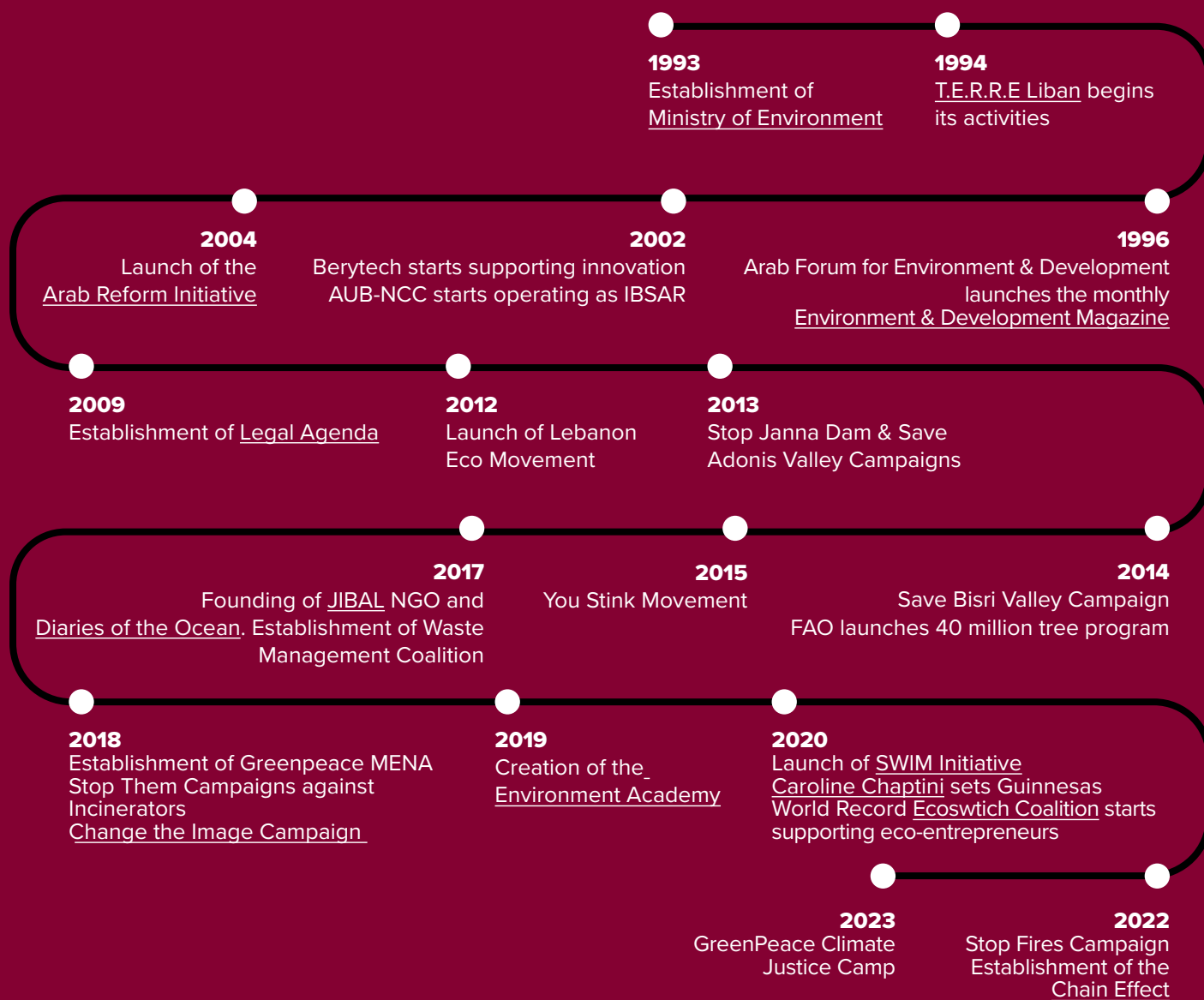
Efforts to stop the Bisri Dam project started in 2017, where activists were able to threaten the feasibility of the project by elaborating a set of multi-scalar strategies to mobilize local and international support. The 3 main tactics that allowed the success of the campaign are:

- 1-** Shifting the public debate from purely technical to political terms
- 2-** Ensuring systematic communication, mobilization and negotiation
- 3-** Upscaling the problematic from a local issue into a national one



Several factors contribute to the success of environmental campaigns, and their ability to drive systemic change, in a context of rooted corruption and communitarian ruptures. To expand on this topic, the panel representing various stakeholders involved in grassroots initiatives at the local and regional level, shared their success stories and lessons learned, highlighted gaps, and mobilized the audience to fight daily injustices exacerbated by climate change.

SNAPS FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL SCENE IN LEBANON FOR THE PAST 30 YEARS



SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

The panel discussion shed light on environmental activism in Lebanon, its structure, pressing issues, involved stakeholders, and sectoral implications, with interventions from actors representing international organizations, the media, NGOs, and grassroots movements.

Mr. El Khoury started the discussion, by providing an overview of the environmental and cultural characteristics of the Bisri valley. In that area, perseverant activists successfully stopped a multimillion USD project. Framed as Beirut's gateway to clean water, this project would have surely led to ecosystem degradation, displacement of the locals, and heritage destruction, had it been implemented. Towards the end of his intervention, Mr. El Khoury also provided advice for aspiring activists, emphasized the need to consult experts, and stressed the importance of leveraging scientific facts when fighting to protect livelihoods.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ACTIVISM

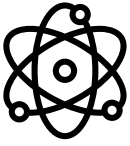
- Formulate unified messages to build a momentum
- Share personal stories that the audience can relate to
- Seek expert support to offer alternatives and defend your statement
- Ensure consistency in the face of oppression
- Be passionate about what you're fighting for
- Build networks with diaspora and communities with the same struggles
- Make use of all available tools most importantly social media
- Reach out to international organizations for any help

Expanding on that, Mr. Jreissati from Greenpeace highlighted the role of international organizations in supporting community-led campaigns. He spoke about the various technical and media tools alongside scientific research methods offered to locals to sustain their mobilization against powerful lobby groups. As a local example of these power imbalances, he referred to the cement industry in Chekka (North Lebanon) where the environmental degradation caused by these companies is often wrongly dismissed as a minor concern in comparison to the economic benefits that these factories generate. In his closing remarks, the panelist emphasized the power of networking and turning common struggles into unified transboundary campaigns, through initiatives like the [International Climate Justice Camp](#).

Ms. Baaklini talked about the role of media organizations as partners in these campaigns. She insisted that journalists must shed light on the perspectives of local communities and relay the concerns of marginalized groups. Ultimately, she believes that journalists have a moral obligation to take a clear position in these struggles rather than adopting a seemingly neutral stance. Ms. Baaklini also provided an overview of the [Climate Change Conference of the Parties \(COP\)](#), and highlighted the importance of specialized journalism in translating complex discussions into simple messages for the general public.

Mr. El Daif described Lebanon's current environmental activism landscape by shedding light on various initiatives and campaigns that have taken place all over the country, commenting on the importance of creating interlinkages between them. Mr. El Daif emphasized the role of narratives and imaginaries in mobilizing communities and shaping public opinions. To conclude, he encouraged individuals to participate in municipal and parliamentary elections citing the importance of influencing local politics and decision making as a way to elevate grassroots ideas to the policy level.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



SCIENCE AT THE CORE OF ACTIVISM

Grassroots movements should be evidence-based and supported by concrete alternative solutions designed by the experts to meet the specificities of the local context. Real change can only be achieved if activists and experts join forces and engage in discussions with the local communities. By understanding the specific local needs, experts are able to shape public opinion and encourage citizens to take action in opposition to projects or the system as a whole and be part of decision making. All stakeholders should be involved in collecting data, conducting research, and disseminating outcomes to the public with the support of the media. Through scientific evidence, communities can build momentum to influence policymakers and prevent environmental degradation.



HARNESSING THE POWER OF NARRATIVES

It is crucial to underline that environmental conflicts cannot be perceived through a binary lens (livelihoods vs. environment) but rather need to accommodate a multitude of perceptions based on individual experiences and constructs. Moreover, nurturing such dilemmas has proven to be a strong tactic to oppress activists' influence.

Storytelling is therefore essential for community mobilization. Relying on imaginative scenarios based on real data can also be used to link the environment to socio-economic, political, and cultural aspects, inciting communities to rally around a shared vision rooted in evidence.



COMMON STRUGGLES, UNIFIED CAMPAIGNS

International organizations and their regional offices have a defining role to play in highlighting community-led activism and advancing the needs of local activists. Historically, local activism campaigns have often echoed beyond their immediate surroundings, leading sometimes to spillover effects transcending country and regional boundaries. Nevertheless, it is crucial to preserve the native values of these movements and sustain their ability to represent the voices of local majorities. The real debate today is about aid and knowledge localization; while knowledge-sharing across borders is beneficial to achieving a larger-scale impact, communities will only respond to familiar messages that articulate their concerns and personalized struggles.



MEDIA DUALITY BETWEEN SPECTATOR AND ACTOR

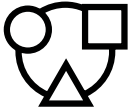
Specialized journalists can help environmental activists better understand, communicate and engage with the public. They can provide a more comprehensive landscape for environmental struggles all while linking campaigns to broader scale public health and policy issues. Furthermore, they can also contribute to mobilizing decision-makers by influencing general opinion and translating environmental campaigns into political issues linked to public accountability.



RECOMMENDATIONS & WAY FORWARD

The roundtable provided an overview of the environmental activism scene in Lebanon. The conversation revealed a consensus over the need to address environmental challenges as a cross-cutting issue. It also confirmed that grassroots movements will remain a significant driving force for immediate change in Lebanon and the mobilization of public opinion.

Moving forward, the following recommendations can play a vital role in sustaining and enhancing the influence of environmental activism in Lebanon.



BUILDING A MORE DIVERSE AND BROADER FRONT

Activists can only acquire their primary legitimacy through the acknowledgment of the community whose benefits they claim to champion. However, achieving concrete results requires the backing of multiple stakeholders, notably media outlets, independent experts, international organizations and policy makers.

Successful movements are often distinguished from those that fail or fizzle out by their robust interdisciplinary approach. This entails leveraging legal tools and resources, conducting thorough document-based research, forging meaningful community connections, and possessing the ability to maintain long-term organizational efforts. The conviction in the potential of citizen-driven transformation towards justice, grounded in knowledge, has played a significant role in the emergence of numerous cause-oriented movements and organizations.



BALANCING FOCUS AND VISION: NAVIGATING THE BIGGER PICTURE

Striking a balance between immediate focus and long-term vision remains a cornerstone for environmental activists. While addressing pressing environmental concerns is undeniable, nurturing a steadfast commitment to the broader vision of a sustainable future is equally paramount. This encompassing vision entails not only safeguarding the environment but also recognizing the interplay of environmental challenges with political, social, and economic dynamics. It is essential to define precise objectives rooted in this vision, develop evidence-based alternatives, cultivate a profound understanding of the far-reaching ramifications of environmental challenges across these spectra, and foster collaborative alliances with diverse stakeholders. Additionally, forging connections with other environmental campaigns and like-minded movements enhances the breadth and depth of impact, contributing significantly to the realization of a sustainable and harmonious future.



MASTERING THE ART OF COMMUNICATION

Large-scale mobilization requires sharp and clear messaging pinpointing not only the importance of the cause, but its intersectionality with various groups and values. It also requires a degree of pragmatism to connect demands to public welfare. Environmental activism, while regarded by many as a luxury, or an agenda countering “economic growth”, must be presented to the public as a fight against the degradation of public health, shared heritage, resource scarcity and human security. Climate threats need to be communicated as growing hazards increasing the likelihood of conflicts, migration and socioeconomic instability.

By communicating the crosscutting dimensions of environmental degradation and climate change, and linking them to specific, tangible and threatening impacts on individual livelihood, activists can succeed in mobilizing larger crowds, and therefore gain leverage during negotiations. Adopting the right narrative, and spreading it using the appropriate channels (e.g., social media, journalism, town hall meetings) are critical to the success of any effort to achieve momentum and amass large scale support.



FOCUSING ON SUCCESS STORIES

Grassroots activist campaigns need to focus on building momentum, as well as maximizing its benefits to create multiplier effects when it comes to mobilizing public opinions and attracting media coverage. Campaigns that achieve multiple succeeding victories in their early stages can force decision-makers to the negotiation table and generate tangible results in the early phases of the moment.

To advertise successes and milestones, campaigns need to define and communicate key outcome indicators that visualize their progress and influence. Shedding light on success stories and positive results provides inspiration as well as credibility for grassroots movements looking to build strong reputations around their ability to reach their objectives.

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Discussion:**



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