

# Growing In A Minefield: the politics of organic agriculture, food security and sustainable development in Lebanon

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## ABSTRACT

On a global level, debates on food security and sustainable development of food systems have shifted from merely economic debates, focusing on a trading rationale, to social debates discussing the role and responsibilities of citizens and states, and the underlying social and political relationships of food systems. Concepts like sustainability, resilience and agency are centralized in international policy frameworks and scientific debates on food security and sustainable development. On the local level, the development of the Lebanese political-economic system over the last decades and the current crisis-context have led to an increase of food insecurity in Lebanon and food security is approached through a trading rationale. This research paper pays attention to food systems as socio-political systems through an examination of local agricultural initiatives that respond to food insecurity in Tripoli, Lebanon in the context of the Lebanese crisis. The responses manifested in a particular set of social relationships structured by values of productivity, cooperation and independency. Their motion of practice can be understood as a practice of 'survival navigation' within a metaphorical 'minefield' wherein citizens experience oppression and limited abilities to take control over their lives. This particular social reality structures the local processes of meaning making. Understanding the local meanings of 'sustainability', 'resilience' and 'agency' contributes to understanding how these concepts work in relation to food security at the interface of Sustainable Development and crisis. The unpacking and analysis of the concepts in this paper shows that they are experienced as part of a socio-political reality, revealing an ideological gap and a gap on the level of sustainable development practice. The Commons paradigm offers a framework of thinking to bridge this gap by acknowledging that the social world is grounded in the material world and that agency manifests in socio-political relationships around the access to resources.

## KEYWORDS

Sustainable Development - sustainability - resilience - agency - Lebanon - crisis - Commons

## Introduction

### 1.1 Lebanon in crisis; economic collapse and food insecurity

Since her independence in 1943, Lebanon has not seen any long-term stability. Currently, the country is facing multiple crises, among them a deep economic crisis that is resulting in nationwide unrest. The Lebanese Lira has lost 200% of its value against the dollar, while the Central Bank of Lebanon keeps printing currency to pay off its debt, resulting in hyperinflation. Tremendous price hikes are hitting the economy daily, leading to increasing

accounts of people fighting over scarce goods in supermarkets and pharmacies, while gas stations are closing or becoming scenes of long queues and deadly disputes due to fuel shortages.

While more than half of the population in Lebanon is worried whether or not they will have enough food on the table (World Food Program, 2020), "sufficient and good food is available, but it is not always accessible for everyone" (United Nations Development Program Lebanon, n.d.). Following the rising food prices, the increase of food insecurity in Lebanon is closely linked to the inability to buy

food (American University of Beirut, 2020, p.3). The lack of access to food is a direct result of the current economic collapse in Lebanon since the majority of the food for the domestic market is imported and the hyperinflation of the lira led many into poverty. Dollars needed to pay for the import of goods for the domestic markets are not accessible for the people that get their income in Lebanese Liras. Hence, a division between those who have access to dollars and are able to accumulate their capital, and those who do not, is deepened.

### *1.2 Developing a food secure Lebanon*

Many external, (supra)national authorities have ideas about ending poverty, improving food security, and the sustainable development of countries like Lebanon. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is the main framework through which sustainable development is articulated on a global level, with the aim to guide the funding and governing of development programs (United Nations, 2016). ‘Sustainability’, ‘agency’ and ‘resilience’ are central concepts in the policies and development programs that are following this framework. The relationships between States and citizens are envisioned as relationships wherein national governments support development, while citizens have the right to act upon their rights and act upon their responsibility to become resilient to inevitable crises (Anholt & Wagner, 2020). However,

“Lebanon’s current political framework limits the voices of its citizens and inhabitants, those individuals lack a degree of agency in determining which agri-food system they would like for themselves and their country” while simultaneously “the food system in Lebanon continues to be a major contributor to environmental degradation and a threat to sustainable development and to the health of citizens” (American University of Beirut, 2020, p.3).

Recognizing agency in international policy frameworks, while citizens are limited to act to contribute to that development (American University of Beirut, 2020) shows the ambiguity in the current Lebanese system. Cultural studies on sustainable modes of living show that, although there is a focus on local communities in policies, their underlying local perceptions and beliefs are often left out of the

discussion (Brightman & Lewis, 2017). Local, cultural realities should not only be central in policy but in practices as well, since policies are often general while outcomes and implications of those policies are local.

It is unclear whether local Lebanese initiatives share the same interpretation or meaning of the concepts that are central in the policy-driven, top-down governed development programs. Anthropologists have expressed their concerns about the inability of development planners to “acknowledge adequately the importance, and potential, of local knowledge” and the variety of social, political, and cultural realities (Gardner and Lewis, 1996, p.67). Acknowledgment and recognition of local knowledge and realities are needed to socially and culturally appropriate projects, for them to be successful. The need to understand and acknowledge local realities necessitates looking into ‘bottom-up’ local grassroots responses, and to examine whether local communities support the development that is written out for them and whether they share the beliefs and ideologies reflected in these policies.

This research aims to fill that gap and to contribute to the Sustainable Development debate by describing the social-, political- and cultural reality of local food-producing and agricultural initiatives that are contributing to the development of a food secure Lebanon. Researching and understanding these responses in Lebanon will thus contribute to understanding how concepts like ‘sustainability’, ‘agency’, and ‘resilience’ work in relation to food security at the interface of Sustainable Development and crisis.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *2.1 Lebanon’s political economy; the coming into being of a minefield*

In the period following the independence of Lebanon in 1943, certain families – mostly linked to the ruling president at the time - dominated and monopolized the different economic sectors and controlled important positions within banks, infrastructural companies, and had large holdings in real estate. Consequently, the productivity of the sectors became subordinated to international trade and Lebanon took an ‘intermediary’ or ‘middlemen’ role in the trade between Western, Arab, and African markets. Throughout the

years preceding the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 the “commercial and financial oligarchy continued to dominate the economy [and] the salient characteristic of this period was the rising encroachment by the commercial/financial complex over industry and agriculture” (Traboulsi, 2012, p.158). The trade deficit gradually increased, since the import of materials to produce for export increased at a higher rate than the actual export of goods to foreign markets.

“The increasingly outward-looking nature of the economy, the absence of any price controls to check merchants’ lust for profits and monopoly control directly impacted the standards of living of the majority of Lebanese. Between 1967 and 1975 the cost of living had doubled [and] the price of imported goods rose by 10-15 percent” (ibid, p.161).

Sectarian distinction, a growing middle-class that was suffering from high costs of living, and labor exploitation within the productive sectors were the main elements of the social crisis that followed. Protest movements arose, which then turned into armed groups backed by political parties to pressure political and economic change, subjecting politics to capital interest and further deepening the sectarian distinctions. The absence of structural change, combined with a rhetoric of providing security within the respective sectarian communities were the prerequisites of the civil war (1975-1990) that further structured the Lebanese political economy.

“[...] the Lebanese civil war created its own order, an order that was a monstrous mutation of its prewar political and economic system: the autonomy of the sects mutated into armed control and ‘sectarian cleansing’, whilst the laissez-faire economy transformed into mafia predation” (Traboulsi, 2012, p.238).

During the last period of the war, the sectarian militias took over the economic sectors, the states’ infrastructure, the states’ monopoly on violence, and its income generation through taxes. While corruption flourished, the State became almost completely marginalized. It divided the country into different socio-political spaces, based on sectarian backgrounds and monopolies. In the forming of a new government in 1989, the militia warlords of the civil war took place in the parliament. Most of them still occupy these positions and their

political system is built upon the idea that (the 18 recognized) politicized religious sects should share their power. Sects in Lebanon are recognized as political entities and the entrenchment of their power is visible in every part of daily life in the form of clientelist systems.

Clientelism is “a network of transactional ties, where economic and other services are distributed to the clients in exchange for political loyalty” (Hamzeh, 2001, p.172). The development of clientelist systems in Lebanon followed the changes in society with respect to the intertwining of sectarianism, politics, militias, and business, and became increasingly repressive, resorting to local monopolies and corruption. “Clientelism has crippled the role of the legislature and eroded the power of the state” (ibid, p.172) and reproduces the power of religious, political, and militia groups. Especially prior to elections, social insecurity, poverty, food insecurity and dependency on the system are useful gaps that are filled with armed security, money, food, and privileges in order to buy votes.

This had far-reaching consequences for the development of the Lebanese agricultural sector and the food system.

“The Lebanese civil war further stratified the country into fragmented political spaces [...] This situation has led to the creation of agro-political spaces, whereby the different political parties of influential landlords determine their agricultural and rural development policies” (Hamade, 2019, p.256).

The absence of policies and regulations, complemented with a strong focus on export created large inequalities within the sector. In cooperation with the ruling elite, large industrial and agricultural businesses were able to create monopolies by accumulating their wealth, thus having an advantage in competition with small-scale farmers in a non-regulated sector with high costs for the import of resources (Hamade, 2019). The growth processes of industrial farming were furthermore on the expense and exploitation of refugees for cheap labor and destructing traditional agriculture to replace it with large-scale investments and trade. As a result of these processes, the sector is characterized by; a decline in agricultural productivity, due to a lack of supporting infrastructure; fragmented agricultural lands; a

lack of technological modernization; an aging farming population, and; a lack of efficient agricultural cooperatives (Hamade, 2019). Funding of the sector comes mostly from external and international donors, leaving the course and development of the sector and the larger food chain entirely in the hands of private, often politically affiliated parties.

## *2.2 Dimensions of Food Security*

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO):

"Food security exists 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." (FAO, 2020)

Food security is not a legal concept, but based on the international human right to adequate food, which legally obligates States that have recognized international human rights to enable citizens to produce or procure adequate food (HLPE, 2020; OHCHR, 2006). Since good and nutritional food is available in Lebanon (UNDP, n.d.) food insecurity in Lebanon is merely an issue of a lack of access to food and a lack of the ability to structure the food systems according to their preferences. Lebanon is not agricultural self-sufficient (Harrigan in: Babar & Mirgani, 2014), and her dependency on the import of food means that rising food prices lead to an increase in food insecurity.

The debate on whether Lebanon should adopt a food security strategy focused on self-sufficiency has been merely a debate on economic advantages and disadvantages. The line of thoughts regarding increasing the access to safe and nutritious food in Lebanon focuses merely on increasing and improving trade (Hamade, 2019). Increasing self-sufficiency comes with an economic cost that should not be underestimated and striving for self-sufficiency would inefficiently use scarce resources like water and land. Even if Lebanon would increase its domestic cereal production to 25 %, it is still dependent on imports (Harrigan in: Babar & Mirgani, 2014). Agricultural self-sufficiency does not automatically lead to more food security, as this depends on the local context, environmental possibilities or limitations, population size, and dietary patterns (Babar & Kamravi, 2014).

The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security (HLPE) recently included 'agency' and 'sustainability' as dimensions of food security (HLPE, 2020). Babar and Kamravi (In: Babar & Mirgani, 2014, p.3) point at the notion of vulnerability and claim that any food security approach should focus on "securing vulnerable populations from the structural violence of hunger". These additions indicate that the global, academic debate moves to a more social instead of a mere political-economic perspective on food security.

What is needed is a "holistic, comprehensive multi-agency approach" to address food security at all levels" (Harrigan, 2014, p.68) while taking into consideration also environmental and social concerns instead of a merely economic rationale. Any food security strategy should include the support from national or supranational authorities, but in close cooperation with, and participation of, locals and local communities, for it to be sustainable(Babar & Mirgani, 2014; Cheeseman, 2016; Gardner & Lewis, 1996; Leitgeb et al., 2016). When national policies support agricultural activities, producers become more food secure, and (urban) agriculture can provide as a safety net (Hamadeh et al. In: Babar & Mirgani, 2014).

## *2.3 Shift to the Sustainability and Resilience paradigms*

Since combating hunger is one of the adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), food security is on the agenda of political bodies like the UN, EU, and other international organizations. Sustainable Development is considered development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Howell in Brightman & Lewis, 2017). In relation to food security and nutrition, the HLPE defines sustainability as:

"the long term ability of food systems to provide food security and nutrition today, in such a way that does not compromise the environmental, economic and social bases that generate food security and nutrition for future generations" (HLPE, 2020, p.9)

Specific policy has been written for the countries like Lebanon that touch the outskirts of the European Union in the 'European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). In the ENP the EU expresses its wish to cooperate with the

neighboring states in order to promote democracy and create security through development (Stroetges, 2013). Following the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) presented a strategy on how to meet the SDGs within the Mediterranean Region (UNEP/MAP, 2016). Their policies focus on how to challenge food insecurity through local development, the use of traditional knowledge, and the protection of the environment and natural resources (UNEP/MAP, 2016).

Both 'sustainability' and 'resilience' have become frequently used concepts in EU foreign policy, serving as a new paradigm through which the EU wants to create security and approaches the 'Southern neighborhood' (Anholt & Sinatti, 2020; Anholt & Wagner, 2020). The sustainability discourse has become more and more socio-economic-focused; in line with neoliberal thinking and the commodification of nature; institutionalized in order to serve development through economic growth (Howell in: Brightman and Lewis, 2017; Brightman & Lewis, 2017).

Furthermore, the term seems to be universalized and embedded in development thinking, as a buzzword. Buzzwords are concepts that are agreed upon in abstract terms, but not unpacked in meaning in practice (Cornwall, 2007). Because of their abstract character, the concepts are open to multiple interpretations and meanings. Therefore, the use of these buzzwords in development practice, can lead to ambiguity and serve several political agendas. Studying the meaning of sustainability in its local context explains how it is used by different social actors and shows that sometimes the underlying premises of the different actors seem to conflict, leading to unsustainable practices in the name of development. "Unpacking these layers of meanings brings identifiably ideological differences into clearer view" (Cornwall, 2007, p.478) like is the case with 'sustainable development'. According to Brightman and Lewis (2017) sustainable development does not so much lead to sustainability, but towards 'reducing unsustainability' because it doesn't challenge the neoliberal and modernist framework which is the root cause for the unsustainable practices responsible for the ecological crisis. Thus, studying the local

meaning of buzzwords used and practiced contributes to their 'constructive deconstruction' – reflecting on them, breaking them down in meaning in order to 'reclaim that meaning' in order to make them 'work' for the people that should be benefiting from them.

"[Resilience is] the ability of an individual, a household, a community, a country or a region to withstand, adapt and quickly recover from stresses and shocks" (European Commission, 2012, p.5)

The UN adds to this concept: "[and] to recover from those stresses, and to work with households, communities, and national and local government institutions to achieve sustained, positive and transformative change" (UNDG, 2014, p.13)

Critics of the term argue that using resilience in policies has implications, like the fact that crises are perceived as inevitable while people have to learn to live with the complexity and uncertainty of their lives. Governments are unable to provide security, so citizens are made responsible for their own security through self-organization. Where the concept of food security put attention to the vulnerability of the communities, the concept of resilience binds this vulnerability to responsibility since it is "portrayed as a learnable skill rather than a natural capacity, a human attribute that can be reconfigured into coping strategies and skills that can be learned by anyone" (Anholt & Wagner, 2020, p.7-8). Ambiguities appear within the UN's conceptualization because it simultaneously reflects the wish for sustainable, positive, and transformative change of crises that are perceived as inevitable. This part of the definition does point at the root cause for crises and uncertainty which means that the crisis itself, is not inevitable (Anholt & Wagner, 2020).

These discussions point at the ambiguity that communities are expected to become resilient, but that it is unclear how much support there is for them to grow and produce their own food and in some cases to become independent, and, who is there to support them. The concept resilience thus implies that it should be discussed in relation to 'agency' within the local context of (food) security in Lebanon, while taking into account the different social and power relations that are at stake.

## 2.4 Agency

The notion of 'agency' entered the development discourse in the 70's, with the "recognition that people actively engage in shaping their own worlds" instead of being passive agents, subject to the structures that are imposed on them (Gardner & Lewis, 1996). In shaping their worlds they adapt to their circumstances in different ways with unique experiences (Currie-Alder, 2016). In relation to food security, agency is "the capacity of individuals or groups to make their own decisions about what foods they eat, what foods they produce, how that food is produced, processed and distributed within food systems, and their ability to engage in processes that shape food system policies and governance"(HLPE, 2020, p.7).

Governments should support agency by supporting democracy and "inclusive and participatory processes and institutions" (ibid.) while simultaneously challenging unequal power relations within the discourse on food security and nutrition.

While the HLPE's definition of agency seems to imply that people should be free in their choices, Giddens (Giddens & Pierson, 1997) shows that this can only be partly the case based on the nature of their relationship with a certain structure. Society exists through the social relationships between people as conventions, processes and continuous reproducing actions of individuals in regularized and institutionalized ways. People produce institutions, which in turn structure the processes and practices from which they are subject. There are two ways in which agency is structured; through conventions and through the unintended consequences of their actions that structure future actions. Agency is thus more than just structured by an institution or social structure; it involves "practical consciousness" (ibid p.7); the intentionality to make certain conventions and reproduce these conventions in order to make them work. Any relationship between structure and agency should be studied within its context, since it can have different meanings in different contexts (Altorki, 2016).

"In between these there is the knowledgeable use of convention in practical consciousness-and there is power [...] So it's agency, structure and power. Agency is an elemental basis of power. It is the capability to do otherwise and that is the basis of power, no matter how large-

scale any given structure of power may be" (Giddens & Pierson,1997,p.84).

## 2.5 *The Commons paradigm*

"Everywhere we hear it said, all day long – and this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength – that there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neo-liberal view, that it has succeeded in presenting itself as self-evident, that there is no alternative [and] dresses up the most classic presuppositions of conservative thought of all times and all countries in economic rationalizations" (Bourdieu, 1998, p.29).

This self-evidence has been created and crafted through procedures and discourse and affirmed the notion of the inevitability of maximum economic growth, productivity and competitiveness, which 'cannot be resisted by the people'. "A radical separation is made between the economic and the social"(ibid. p.31) wherein the neo-liberal system is projected as a liberation and built upon the idea that societies have to develop through distinctive stages of economic growth, to eventually come to a stage of modernity (Rostow, 1959) which is the ultimate goal for nations. This idea of development legitimizes the economic rationale that is underlying for the neoliberal system as it was produced and structured the relationship between States and markets. These political-economic rationalizations and the socio-economic distinction are at the core of the food security debates, reflecting a lack of acknowledgement for the environmental and socio-cultural dimensions that should be more centralized in these debates (Cheeseman, 2016; Gardner & Lewis, 1996; Hamadeh et al. In: Babar & Mirgani, 2014; Harrigan in: Babar & Mirgani, 2014). This is further complemented with the conceptualization of resilience, wherein crises are perceived as inevitable, implying that the root causes for the kind of crises like in Lebanon cannot be avoided (Anholt & Sinatti, 2020; Anholt & Wagner, 2020). However, the rationale Bourdieu (1998) points at can be understood as the kind of structures Giddens (1997) relates to agency, the Commons paradigm proposes an alternative view on this structure and its inevitability.

The Commons are spaces, resources, experiences or ways of living and sharing that are not structured according to a logic of

scarcity, exploitation and privatization (Brigstocke et al., 2016) but part of a “system of provisioning and governance [which] give participating members a significant degree of sovereignty and control over important elements of their daily lives [...] while meeting human needs in more equitable and ecologically responsible ways” (Bollier, 2014, p.1). Common practices oppose the practices of individualization and privatization that ‘enclose’ the environmental, material or even intellectual resources into properties that cannot openly be accessed. Instead they emphasize affective, reciprocal relationships between nature and culture, between humans and non-humans – the natural world as well as created resources (Brigstocke et al., 2016). Not taking into account this relationship is what legitimizes the principle of enclosure; that the natural world is separated from the cultural world and social practices and outside of what constitutes us as humans, which makes it suitable as a subject for privatization. This distinction carries a risk of the inevitability of the degradation of for example that natural environment, if it's not taken into account that it is our relationship with it that causes that degradation and, in turn, the degradation of us human beings, because we are part of that same world. These relationships of production and reproduction exist within or through the neoliberal and capitalist system while challenging the notion of scarcity upon which this system thrives. When resources are not managed for their surplus or profit, but for their use, the circulation of surplus for use in turn results in the growth and sustainability of the system itself. Thus, through using and reproducing them, the notion of scarcity is undermined while the wealth of the Commons grows and strengthens the relationships upon which the network and system exists (Bollier, 2014; Bresnihan in: Brigstocke et al., 2016). Following this logic is the emergence of a solidarity economy as opposed to a liberal political economy. Common practices are thus the collective production and (re)claiming what should be common, whether it be spaces, resources or ideas and through this undermining the self-evidency of growth and private property.

Although the risk of enclosure within neoliberal and capitalist systems might be present, the Commons are not separated from capital relations. Rather, it is a case of

interdependency wherein Commons are responses to the threat of enclosure and thus gives it their ideological ground and “operate through the neo-liberalizing forces that both restrict and produce the possibilities for common life” (Brigstocke et al., 2016, p.2). The common world is a world “within the neoliberal landscape [and is] altering subjectivities, relations and spaces” (p.4). This argument reflects the relationship between structure and agency as discussed by Giddens (1997) where the Commons appear as a form of agency. Recognizing the Commons as practices within the neoliberal landscape, implies an acknowledgement of the making of our worlds through shared practice and thus opens a window of opportunity for change. However,

“by assuming that it is possible to speak ‘for’ future generations, there is a risk of assuming that the future will look similar to the present, that the future is knowable and calculable. Yet this precludes [...] the possibility of a drastically altered future [...]. By using the representation of future generations as a way of calling for change (and averting undesirable change), it seems to implicitly assume a model where the future does not radically change. It performs the stability that it aims to undermine”. (Brigstocke in: Brigstocke et al., 2016, p.161).

In the interwovenness of past, present and future within narratives of a common future, stories and memories serve as an incentive for collective moral agency to collectively produce that future (Skillington in: Brigstocke et al. 2016). However, when these memories are used as a form of power “collective capacities to learn are diminished” (p.177). For this moral agency to work it requires to “break down the kind of distinctions between self and other that hypostatized memory communities insist upon” and focus on allowing “multiple cultural perspectives and layers of representations of entangled pasts to speak knowingly to ‘our common future’” (ibid., p.177-178).

The Commons paradigm illuminates that our common future does not rely upon the seemingly unescapable logic of private accumulation and inequality. It connects with the concept of resilience and agency as discussed above, since it opens a window of opportunity to question whether the outcomes of neoliberalist and capitalist processes, like food insecurity in Lebanon, cannot be prevented and whether or not choices can be

made according to what is grown, produced and consumed. Acknowledging future generations within policy frameworks and definitions like the Sustainable Development, acknowledges a common future and thus ideally ties sustainability to shared practice. This could imply that the logic for the sustainable development of food systems follows the logic of the Commons as opposed to capitalism within the neoliberal political economy. However, here appears a gap, since the discussions above show that the debates on food security in Lebanon are still tied to a logic of economic growth and articulated through a political-economic analysis, while the country is deeply divided.

Since sustainability is a way to address a common, desirable future, it should be viewed through value sets, norms, principles and commitment connected to an underlying vision of that future (Rival in: Brightman and Lewis, 2017). Values, norms and principles structure the social relationships between people and the actions which are the outcomes of these relationships. The politics involved in the choices that need to be made regarding land and resources, reflect the relationship people have with their natural environment. The underlying values of that relationship interact with discourses about society, development and political friction, as the debate on the Commons reflects. Thus, imagined worlds (futures) are connected to "the material conditions that give rise to them" (*ibid.* p.202) because how people adapt to their environment is grounded in these imagined worlds.

This view ties the different debates together and centralizes the socio-political dimensions that come forward in the debates. This in turn implies that any of the here discussed concepts should be approached through its socio-political relationships, in order to fill the gap between the political-economic rationale and the socio-cultural relationships, and give an account of the kind of social relations and practices that structure the local realities and meaning of concepts in the interface of sustainable development, food security and crisis.

Researching local agricultural and food producing initiatives in Tripoli, Lebanon -once one of the most prosperous cities at the Mediterranean, with a rich history of trade, agriculture and artisanal products- now Tripoli, located in the North of Lebanon, is nationally

the poorest and most neglected city, with high poverty and food insecurity rates. Over 80% of the population of the city is food insecure, while the abundance of food and food culture remains present in local society. On the other hand, throughout recent history Tripoli continuously represents resistance and opposition towards the 'modernizing' powers of the French Mandate (1920-1943) and the following Christian-based power in Beirut, the Syrian occupation during the 80's and 90's and in the endurance of the uprising in 2019 and 2020 (Mahoudeau, 2016).

On the 17th of October 2019 a large-scale uprising took place in different places in the country. Thousands of people went into the street protesting against the system and its corrupt local and national power structures. During the uprising a couple of activists in Tripoli connected with each other during the protests and expressed the need to cooperate. Within the uprising one of the activists started cooking in the main square in Tripoli while others provided him with resources to cook. A small-scale cooperative logic emerged and it made the newly formed group realize this logic could work on a larger scale and they started connecting with food producers and farmers in other regions of Lebanon, resulting in the creation of a larger network of like-minded farmers and food producers that share their cooperative logic. It led them to the idea that productiveness and cooperation were shared values, not only among the group, but among a larger group of people; values needed to survive in the current political-economic context. Through farming and networking activities they create and manage resources which are shared with members among the network, like seeds, lands and knowledge. Their main goal is the establishment of an alternative economy characterized by productivity for use, solidarity and open access to resources in order to create food sovereignty. The group itself wants to be a catalyst, a support group that builds communities around the ideas of solidarity, productivity and cooperation. Through the establishment of their network they aim to challenge and undermine the current system of dependency wherein 'everything is politics'.

Just a couple of years before, Tripoli was the scene of an ongoing local war between different neighborhoods and sectarian groups that lasted for over six years. The conflict stopped when

the Lebanese army permanently stationed in between the neighborhoods, but any sustainable and structural changes within the communities were not established. Soon after the fighting ended, a local initiative efforted to fix broken houses in the area, to clean public spaces and to connect with key figures within the community to start assessing what possibly could prevent conflicts in this area. During the time of voting, it became clear that the dependency of people on local politicians for money, food or services makes them vulnerable for participating in conflict. As a solution, focus groups were set up within the community and connected people (mostly women) from the different sectarian backgrounds which each other to let them discuss possible solutions to improve their environments and to start processes of peacebuilding. They started with the idea to collect and recycle plastic garbage. In their attempt to challenge the dependency cycle, food insecurity and social insecurity, selected households are encouraged to recycle their garbage and to hand it in with another local NGO, to receive basic food items and goods in return, which they cannot afford due to the economic crisis. In order to fund the provision of these goods and to not rely on external funding, the initiative cultivates organic crops to sell them on the local market and use the profit to provide food packages.

### *3.1 The metaphorical ‘minefield’*

Before turning to discussing the socio-political relationships in order to give an account of the local, contextual and ‘unpacked’ meaning of the concepts, it is important to understand that the initiatives interact with their socio-political context as if it were a metaphorical minefield. The minefield metaphor points at something larger than solely referring to the political-economic system. The full Lebanese system – with its clientelism, fragmented socio-political spaces, monopolies and corruption – can be understood as a fine-grained network of mines. These mines together create a field of repression, dependency and tension, wherein there is barely any space to walk. It illuminates the systems’ ability to operate as an endangering entity, a field created which in itself poses a risk, not just merely the people within that field that are metaphorically planting the mines. As long as mines don’t explode it almost seems as if you can walk around freely, but anyone familiar with the system knows

better. Attempts to adjust the network result in small (sometimes mortal) detonations but ideally leave the rest of the network intact. Rather than being the result of certain historical processes, the system is consciously designed and planted to reproduce itself through the correlation between politics, religion and the private sector.

### *3.2 Operating in the minefield; the meaning of organic agriculture*

In finding ways to adapt to their circumstances, the initiatives’ motions of operating and navigating indicate that other motives than environmental and public health are at stake to choose for organic cultivation methods. As part of economic strategies, organic agriculture holds meaning as a tool to improve the access to resources (seeds, money and knowledge) and thus can indirectly contribute to improve food security. The non-use of chemicals allows farmers to receive a certification for organic cultivation, which in turn allows them to sell their crops for a higher price and to get access to particular types of funding from international donors. However, since organic crops are often smaller and come in smaller yields, families that are food insecure due to a lack of economic access to food, would have to buy more vegetables for higher prices to feed their family. Cultivating organic crops is thus not directly contributing to food security, but a strategy to yield profit that can be used to buy food for food insecure families. Choosing using organic methods in this context means using environmental friendly and culturally known ways in order to make more profit that are used for the goals of the project.

However, it is not merely an economic rationale that underlies these choices. From a cultural point of view, it symbolizes a way of farming as it has been done traditionally, from before domestic agriculture became subjected to international trade. ‘Going back to this original way of farming’, is a way to contrast with the culture that has been imposed on them by the system. This politicized and symbolic meaning corresponds with an often heard phrase: “here in Lebanon, everything is politics”.

People actively engage in the making of their worlds and structures exist through the conventions, processes and continuous reproducing actions between people (Gardner & Lewis, 1996; Giddens & Pierson, 1997). The

(re)production of the minefield as an institution manifests through the underlying sets of social relationships, particularly characterized by division, exploitation, corruption, accumulation of private property, and dependency. The total of these social relationships form a culture; in this context a culture that is rejected from the point of view that it represents the culture of the ruling elite, and pointed at as the root cause for food insecurity. Understood through the relationship between structure and agency, the minefield is a structure that is counterposed by the initiatives' attempts to regain power over their lives. They show their capability to do otherwise (Giddens & Pierson, 1997) by creating new conventions, new relationships, based on a set of contrasting values. In doing so, a culture of sharing and a cooperative logic is underlying for operating within a network of food producers and navigating within the minefield, as opposed to the capitalist trading culture manifested as the basic structure for the system.

Notions of commonness are visible in the daily interactions between the initiatives and their communities. On a personal level they value, praise and empower each other in their strengths, capacities and for what they are productive for, and provide each other with opportunities to complement their own productivity, indicating an absence of competitiveness on the expense of the other. Within the building of their relationships, a logic of sharing and cooperation is widely recognizable among the network of young people that establish initiatives in Tripoli. In a reciprocal way they share their resources, as essential elements for a local productive economy; the public use of machines and kitchens; lands; seeds; crops; money; spaces; and knowledge.

Their facilitating and empowering approaches reflect the belief that through sharing and cooperation, the community can grow because the scope of choices to make will grow, independently on whether or not they are financially accessible. The value of resources are thus seen in light of the community; the value for the community is bigger when resources are shared than whether they are privatized and accumulated. Social and community development is seen as the root solution to break through the cycle of dependency because it mitigates the need for

protection, or provision of resources from local militias.

Since the agricultural sector is comprised of different socio-political spaces, they believe that in order to cooperate, it is essential to have a deep understanding of the local social, historical, political and cultural 'fabric' and to embrace that socio-political diversity. In the embracing of diversity and identifying the minefield as the opposer, commonness is foregrounded between different ideologies and make it able to work on the same root cause for the shared problems they are facing, articulating a common future descending the divisions in society. In order to act as a community within a society where division is exploited for power, trust is the basis for both the notion of commonness as for agency and cooperation. Having the trust that they can make a change and have an effect on their future and environment, while in turn cooperate based on that trust, leads to a foundation that is needed for development. Shared values are perceived as the glue for that trust. Opposing a culture of dependency, exploitation, competition, individualism and private accumulation, within their relationships and activities they enact values like independency, solidarity, cooperation, reciprocity and empowerment.

### *3.3 Navigating in the minefield; Survival mode*

However, the initiatives responses to their context and how this structured their ideology partly explains their social reality. As a result of their situatedness within the socio-political context, every activity is characterized as a political act and there is an overall awareness that they have to operate within the current system, as this system cannot be altered and there is no escape from it. Taking into constant consideration the limitations that are imposed on them while finding ways to survive and get through the day, their actions reflect a constant reaction to events in their social environment, that require them to act now, to find continuity in their lives and to survive, merely than just operating. It points at something larger than merely challenges on the road of an initiative; it is its specific situation within a minefield that thrives on the insecurity and dependency and thus requires political strategies. Their agency thus can be characterized as survival navigation; actions that regard surviving in the present to secure the future and trying to

establish basic continuity of personal lives through the continuity of the projects and are thus put within a frame of the inextricability of both the personal and the collective, connected to both the present and the future.

At the core of these navigating practices is the essence of sustainability; finding the ability to continue with their lives while working on these projects. The lack of basic needs, like food, electricity, fuel and the continuous search for these basic needs, consumes time and energy that cannot be spent on actions for the projects. Daily conversations are more than often about how the crises affect personal lives. Not having the ability to earn money or to sustain a basic lifestyle, or feeling limited in the ways one envisions his or her personal growth, plants a seed that grows out to a wish to leave the country and build up a life elsewhere. Leaving the country seems to be in everyone's head, although these ideas are refuted with a feeling of responsibility to stay. Jobs, money, food and safety are central elements in creating a 'sustainable' future on the personal level. Without a stabilization in the here and now, the future seems unimaginable in specific and in communal terms. Accomplishments and continuity on the initiative level means an accomplishment and continuity on the personal level as well, and the other way around. In order to continue with the initiative, their personal lives have to find continuity.

The insecurity, tensions and fear connected to notions of the near past wherein war and conflict were so present in daily life, have structured life in Lebanon. Since the current socio-political processes have similarities with the socio-political processes prior to the last civil war, these worries connect more easily to the past than to the future. Worries about unemployment, the ability to make important life choices, whether there will be enough food on the table and whether your loved ones will be safe, consume the energy that is needed to imagine a better future and contribute to a feeling of being out of control. It problematizes the coming into being of actions towards a common future. It is not the absence of the ideas about the future itself, but the lack of money, jobs, food, safety and trust in the near future that challenges the imagination of how these ideas can be enacted without having a stable present.

### *3.4 The past, present and future of war and development*

The reproduction of the minefield, is a continuing of the past into the present. This presence of the past – with its active memories of the civil war and other conflicts, the emergence and continuing of the current political-economic system and the resulting crises – threatens the future since thinking about the future is structured and limited by a focus to surviving in the present. The 2019 uprising is perceived as a momentum of change, to detach society from the shackles of the past reflected in the socio-political relationships that dominate the ruling of society. However, change didn't happen on a big political scale but on the small scale of building new social relationships. While reflecting on the uprising it is sometimes perceived as a defeat and part of the loop; the system they wanted to change is the same system that limits them in the agency to do so; the crisis is both their hope and fuel to change the future as the endangerment of it.

The country's ruling elite reflect a culture my respondents don't identify with, while their identification on the city level means that it is almost impossible for them to formulate a future unless they develop their communities as a safety net. The civil war deepened divisions and created several socio-political spaces in which the daily social reality takes place. While this division is a constitutive part of the hegemonic power structure, the initiatives embrace diversity and find commonness in a restructuring of their social relationships. Worries about a reproduction of the past are less foregrounded, when they focus on the initiative. In not wanting to reproduce the past, the initiative and the communities are the conceptualizations of the future since they are intended as being radically different than the system. Change of the future is perceived in the change of values and relationships through the use of resources; a change of culture through the development of their communities. The future has to be radically different but it cannot fully escape the current context it is situated in; structuring the navigation of the initiatives within the minefield according to their position on a historical continuum. As a reaction of how the past – the emergence and continuity of the socio-political system – is still present, they have structured their relationships according to conflicting values. The future is thus

conceptualized as an opposition of the near past, manifested in the development of the community and her underlying culture.

### 3.5 The socio-political lens; the meaning of sustainability, resilience and agency

Through the relationships built and structured within the socio-political and historical context, sustainability, agency and resilience get their local meaning in connection to the food security debate. Food security is understood through its social dimensions but extends beyond the definition used by the FAO. Like the HLPE (2020) they acknowledge and emphasize the importance of agency and continuity of accessibility of food, as essential elements to define whether one is food secure. However, food security cannot be met with compromises on social security. Whenever attempts to mitigate food insecurity involves igniting social tension in and between communities, or exploitation of labor, both for the workers on the land as for the people that need to do exploitative work to buy basic food items, food security is not achieved, even when accessibility to food is established.

In challenging the exploitation of food insecurity for the reproduction of power structures, food security is unpacked and enacted through notions of dignity and independency and directly connected to agency. The accessibility to food is prioritized, claiming that it's okay to hand out food packages, but it is the way in which this is done which acknowledges people's dignity. Food aid is an exceptional situation and should be complemented with development to work towards independency. In this aid, food security can be reached in dignifying ways, when the aid provider doesn't depict himself as a hero, when it happens low profile without unnecessary attention and when citizens are informed about the root cause and the politics behind food insecurity. Awareness on the underlying dynamics is a prerequisite for agency. People cannot make choices on what to eat because they will take what they can get to survive but also because they are not informed about alternatives. While acknowledging that full self-sufficiency through cultivating organic food is out of reach, in navigating the minefield it is these two factors that both of the initiatives address related to agency.

Sustainability is unpacked in notions of continuity and self-sufficiency. Within the food and social insecurity context, sustainability is understood as continuity and to sustain; whatever is regarded as sustainable does not stop. Although this has overlap with the HLPE's (2020) definition, there is a big difference. Instead of understanding the concept as stretched out into the far future in connection with future generations, sustainability has local meaning on the level of their own projects and their own lives. It gets its meaning through their projects and is as such understood as continuity in order to survive; indicating the effects of the inextricability of the personal and the collective. In the current context, thinking about future generations and future societies is out of reach.

In line with the development of sustainability as the commodification of nature and addressing environmental problems through economic growth (Brightman & Lewis, 2017), sustainability as continuity is in this context related to making enough money to continue or to become self-sufficient and independent. To become sustainable in terms of a continuous, self-sustaining project, financial support is needed. Discussions about whether or not to produce for export and earn money for the continuity of the project, or to produce for domestic food security, reflects the choices they need to make in order to navigate within the system. They have to acknowledge being part of that system, because within the neoliberal and capitalist rationale, this would be the way to make money. In both cases strategies were focused on finding ways to produce for selling in Lebanon, adding value to products or to receive private funding, while contributing to social security and protection of the environment. Continuity in all cases thus needs to be found in financial continuity and shows how their navigation practices work; due to the crises and dependency relationships, economic thinking needs to be foregrounded in order to work at sustainability as an ideal and in its local meaning.

Resilience is understood as coping with the weight of the crises, while still being able to continue. It is perceived as a passive attitude that is connected to the root cause of the problem; within the example of the minefield, it means to cope with the restricted movement and to stay in place between the mines. In its local meaning resilience is part of the

foundation and the reproduction of the minefield, since it implies that people accept and acknowledge that restricted place. However, the alternative is not not being resilient, since resilience is considered something evident in society and the people, understood as that it is nothing to choose or to strive for. It is there, as a way they are already dealing with the crises.

The alternative to resilience is to complement it with action; to take a step out of the loop or create pathways to take within the minefield to provide a safety net wherein people can be independently resilient to the crises. The focus groups, creating access to resources, networks and public spaces, are forms of agency because they are the “the knowledgeable use of convention in practical consciousness” and “the capability to do otherwise” as the basis for power (Giddens & Pierson, 1997, p.84). The activities focus on expanding the scope of choices people may make under the subjugation of that minefield. Where productivity and agency are understood in terms of dignity, resilience is understood as an attitude with derogatory connotations. If resilience in this sense means passivity and reproduction of the unsustainable practices, it thus conflicts with the meanings of agency and sustainability. The notion of survival navigation points at this; sustainability is not merely surviving through coping; its surviving through action; through navigating in the system.

## Conclusion

The unpacking of meanings of ‘food security’, ‘sustainability’, ‘resilience’ and ‘agency’ shows that the concepts are part of a socio-political reality whereby the social and communal dimensions are foregrounded. In the seemingly self-evidency of the neoliberal system with the therein interwoven inevitability of the current crises, the radical separation between the economic and the social (Bourdieu, 1998) is at the core of an ideological conflict between grassroots initiatives and the structure of the current food system. By separating food security from social security, economic growth of the few is foregrounded over the social security of many. The shift of the food security discourse from an economic to a more social perspective corresponds with how local initiatives centralize the social dimensions of food security. The data in this context shows that it is the structure of relationships between

state, market and citizens that obstructs the enactment of these social dimensions. In this sense, any sustainable development project focused on improving the Lebanese food system and enhancing food security is inherently a political one. Even in policy proposed resilience (Anholt & Sinatti, 2020; Anholt & Wagner, 2020) in the form of self-organized security, is un-accomplishable since people are limited in ‘self-organizing’ by the mines that are planted around them. Resilience is envisioned as bending communities’ vulnerability to responsibility; while within the local meaning resilience is projected as an inevitability. The responsibility that the initiatives are willing to carry, lies not within the concept of resilience, but in agency to find relief from that resilience through sustainable development on the community level that is perceived as a way to come to transformative and sustainable change.

In this case, communities adapt to their environments through imagined worlds connected to “the material conditions that give rise to them” (Rival, 2017, p.202), through the inextricable link of access to resources like space, knowledge, seeds, land, infrastructures and their social structures. The unpacked meaning of agency as action as an alternative for resilience, requires knowledge, awareness and the use of resources. Agency is in this sense limited on a policy level, because it doesn’t challenge the culture that prevents these communities to access these resources in the first place.

Through a ‘Commons logic’ the hegemonic social structure is challenged and countered by the initiatives. Meanwhile, it is the processes of enclosure of resources in the form of monopolies and corruption that give ideological ground for their solidarity economy that is opposed to a liberal political economy. However, within their political relationships of production, reproduction and management, their common practices (Brigstocke et al., 2016) the natural world is still perceived as a tool, as something outside of these social relationships. In order to challenge enclosure, it should be approached as a reciprocal and interdependent constitutive relationship (Bresnihan, 2016; Brigstocke et al., 2016). The perception that sustainability should benefit the social, indicates a non-reciprocal relationship with the natural world wherein nature is dominated for the benefit and sustainability of the social.

This distinction between human and nature shows that the resources that are perceived as essential for the growth of the community, are not part of a reciprocal relationship but an exploitative one. Not taking into account the affective, reciprocal human-nature relationship is what legitimizes the principle of enclosure (Bresnihan, 2016; Brigstocke et al., 2016) and could actually pose a risk on both the ideological level as on the continuity of the community.

The required focus on continuity in the here and now, in order to survive, risks that the future indeed is going to be a reproduction of the past rather than a drastically altered future (Brigstocke et al., 2016) since it projects the future as the reproduction of a different past and thus “performs the stability that it aims to undermine” (p.161). Radical change in order to change the course of history, requires these kinds of approaches to radically change the social relationships that are underlying for the current social structures. Within the initiatives a common future is merely envisioned within their communities. Although this resonates notions of commonness, this doesn't include a full acknowledgement of ‘others’ that might not share their values and ideologies. Although within the scope of this research it is impossible to assess and question whether commonness can exist when shared values don't serve as a glue for that commonness, it is clear that real commonness is out of the question. When the continuum of past, present and future serve as an incentive for moral agency but are used to produce power structures, the capacity to collectively produce a ‘new’ future is limited (Skillington in: Brigstocke et al., 2016). For the kind of moral agency that the initiatives are envisioning to work, it requires to “break down the kind of distinctions between self and other that hypostatized memory communities insist upon” (*ibid.*, p.177). The ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinctions that characterize Lebanese society thus pose a direct threat to a common future, as has been shown throughout history. Although these distinctions are to a lesser extent sectarianist and built upon other ideologies within the initiatives, they still characterize ‘surviving based upon distinction’; ‘us’, the community, versus ‘them’, the system. Combining the current structure of relationships that still reflect an exploitative human- natural world relationship and a disclosure of partial

commonness, they thus still reproduce what is underlying for a repetitive future.

In order to establish that common future, common practices have to allow the different versions of history to melt together into a common future wherein the diversity of those different social realities are fully embraced and if those outside of the communities can be included in that ownership. Following Brightman and Lewis (2017) that diversity is the “foundation stone of hope for a live-able future earth” (p.7) I would add here that it is both the diversity and the commonness that glues this diversity into a community that can serve as a foundation stone to build a bridge over the minefield.

Understanding the minefield and the navigating practices of local initiatives allows to answer the larger question; whether grassroots development share the meaning of concepts as discussed in international policies. What appears is an ideological and practical gap, that has implications for the interaction between the diverse actors in the field that have ideas about the development towards a food secure Lebanon. Bridging a gap between top-down governed policies and grassroots development means bridging the radical separation between the economic and the social; by foregrounding social dimensions in practice. The concepts used in policy frameworks lack practical meaning without supporting national policies or regulations of the market that enable citizens to act upon their Right to Food. Development of the agricultural sector or any other development to come to food security that doesn't take into account in its practices the agency, empowerment, continuity, independency, autonomy, dignity and diversity of the community are not understood as sustainable development practices. The grounding of the social world in the material world, and the socio-political relationship it represents, points at where practice can manifest these social dimensions. As the restricted access to resources represents the socio-political relationships that underlie the minefield and characterize the relationship between State, Market and citizens, this is a critical point where policies, regulations and practice can have a huge impact on food security, social security and on the agency of communities. To come to sustainable development, authorities should address the socio-political power relations that

currently undermine the sustainability of these communities and their access to resources.

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