

Building Back Better with Strong Institutions and Women Leadership

Informal Discussion with Ms. Najat ROCHDI, UN Deputy Special Coordinator for Lebanon.

The Institute of Finance Basil Fuleihan convened on the 2nd of September 2021, a pool of talented women public leaders for an open discussion with Ms. Najat Rochdi, UN Deputy Special Coordinator for Lebanon, and key partners from the international community and Civil Society Organizations. Discussions revolved around the daily challenges public sector senior officials are facing amidst an unprecedented budget crisis, the covid-19 pandemic, a policy vacuum and limited international support to their institutions. Discussions also focused on their efforts to prevent institutional collapse and contribution to frameworks for recovery designed by the donor community.

The following note presents a summary of the discussions as well as recommendations for immediate action.

The Challenges

After a welcome and an introduction by the Institute's team, participants listened to the testimonies of four women public sector leaders who explained the immense challenges they are facing in:

- 1. Sustaining the operations** of the institutions they lead amid shortages in fuel, electricity, recurrent internet cuts etc., in addition to budget cuts and currency devaluation- challenges that are causing serious deterioration in the quality of public services (norms and standards, health, communications, etc.), jeopardizing recent investments in new facilities/services (telecommunications), and curtailing efforts to maintain existing infrastructure and facilities.
- 2. Retaining talent**, and keeping their teams motivated especially highly qualified staff who have been groomed and trained throughout the years to deliver quality work, whose skills and competence are internationally recognized and who are facing a sharp drop in their living conditions.
- 3. Navigating the storm** alone in the absence of policy directives, vision, way forward or rescue plan.
- 4. Preserving their institution** so that the institutional memory can serve the recovery phase once a plan for Lebanon is sealed.
- 5. Participating to an inclusive discussion** for public sector reform/restructuring, worried that such an exercise be implemented ad-hoc, without enough consultations with stakeholders and clarity on objectives and outcomes.
- 6. Facing and fighting a growing trend of corrupt practices** and paying the price for choosing to work under the rule of law and in transparency (many cases were mentioned).

Challenges mentioned also related to understaffing (reaching 80% of vacancies in some institutions), over presence of political appointees often financed by donor agencies and/or international NGOs, political interference in policy decisions, and limited support to whistleblowers among public administrators who finally are the only ones paying the price.

Political interference in the judiciary was discussed especially in administrative justice. This is due to the fact that judges are politically appointed. The case of the court of accounts was mentioned; a key institution whose incapacity to bring accountability and challenge corrupt practices is deemed to be an ingredient of the collapse. The absence of legal prosecution of civil servants and the exclusion and marginalization of independent judges were two main points raised as well as the efforts of the independent Club of Judges to fight back.

“Had the administrative courts done their jobs independently of politics, we would not have suffered such a crisis.”.....“ The Club of Judges is determined to change the culture and practices in place and hold the judiciary accountable”.

(Paula HAYKAL, Judge at the Court of Account and member of the Club of Judges)

Public sector women leaders who have been fighting on the front lines for the past years expressed their frustration to see the image of public service constantly shattered and the roles of “good” institutions and ethical civil servants and judges completely overshadowed by the negative perceptions (partly justified but too extreme). Indeed, this perception prevailing among both the civil society and the international community is often a result of a mix-up between state institutions -their legitimate and key role -and the elite capture by the political system. It is caused as well by a limited interest/knowledge of potential anchors of competence, ethics and technicity in the public administration and certainly by limited support to those who are on the front line fighting for justice and strong institutions.

“If you are government, then you are corrupted. No, we are not all corrupted. We are people working 12 hours per day for little salaries”.

(Diana BOU GHANEM, Engineer, Ministry of Telecommunications)

Messages

The discussion pointed to the upcoming reform and rehabilitation projects (3RF including) that are led by NGOs and funded by the international community in thematic areas that are nation-wide and usually necessitate regulation or intervention from the public sector (e.g. in the telecommunication sector), and called upon the international community to contribute to the reform momentum by associating trustworthy public leaders and institutions, especially women led institutions to the process, and building bridges with them instead of walls.

“Women public leaders are the vital organs of the country. They are the resilient builders and the skilled professionals working to make a positive change”.

(Lena Dergham, Director General of LIBNOR).

After listening carefully to their testimonies, Ms. Najat Rochdi acknowledged that **“Women leaders are the backbone for change. They are part of the elite and they play a crucial role in mobilizing others”**.

She emphasized the role that women could play in restoring strong, transparent, effective, and accountable institutions in Lebanon, amid the huge trust deficit that was created among all members of the international community, and recognized that women leaders are paying the price of many years of bad practices, of corruption, and of silence.

She insisted notably on the way forward and on change coming with greater collectiveness and togetherness: if the path is clear, however, the questions remain: **“Who will do it and with who? Not against who! There is the need of a change of narrative”**.

She called for “reformers and change makers” from all boards (public, private and civil society) to come together and form a critical mass (“force de changement”) and collaborate in order to create a positive change and make propositions (“force de proposition”).

However, she warned of the inherent risk that **“There is not a single change that came to a country without those who were on top of it willing to pay the price”**. She also pointed out to the need to shifting culture and mindsets from a culture of impunity to a culture of justice.

Participants concurred to the necessity for:

- **Women-leaders in the public sector to self-organize in a network** to exchange experiences, identify needs, crystallize ideas, advocate for change and reform, etc.
Such network could work in support of strong institutions and women leadership and be included in policy dialogues of concern.
- **UN and 3RF partners to advocate stronger for gender-balanced reforms with Government and Parliament** and support the objective of women empowerment in reforms and in the public sector.
- **Re-evaluating the position of the international donor community in what concerns “working with the State”** and redirect aid to “critical and performing” public institutions that enjoy a track record of achievements and trust, in order to sustain the change in process.
- **Engaging a policy dialogue** between the international donor community and senior public sector leaders' especially women leader in order to:
 - a. Identify/design new approaches and
 - b. Explore new financing instrumentsthat would keep critical public services from being disrupted, and key institutions from losing their best talents so that they survive the current crisis and be ready for the recovery phase.
- **Solicit contribution of those leaders** in designing institutionally well anchored approaches for the delivery of reconstruction recovery and reform projects.
- **Invest in digitalization of services** to guarantee more transparency and accountability to the public sector.

“When there is the will, there are many ways and there are many qualified and well-intentioned men and women in public institutions that will find these ways and will implement them”, concluded Gloria Abouzeid, Director General of Cooperatives at the Ministry of Agriculture.

List of participants to the meeting (by alphabetical order):

- Gloria ABOUZEID, Director General of Cooperatives
- Hazar ASSI, Lebanese Transparency Association, Member of the 3RF Independent Oversight Board
- Diana BOU GHANEM, Engineer, Ministry of Telecommunications
- Iskandar BOUSTANY, President of Financially Wise
- Lena DARGHAM, Director General of LIBNOR (The Lebanese standard institution)
- Rola DARWICH, Director of Cooperation and Partnerships, Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan
- Rachel DORE-WEEKS, Head of UN Women in Lebanon
- Angela EL ZIR, Labor market specialist and gender focal point, World Bank
- Nadine GHANDOUR, Financial Officer, Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan
- Sabine HATEM, Senior Economist, Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan
- Paula HAYKAL, Judge at the Court of Account and member of the Club of Judges
- Henrik LINDROTH, Technical Advisor (Governance), UNDP
- Lamia MOUBAYED BISAT, President of the Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan
- Najat ROCHDI, UN Deputy Special Coordinator for Lebanon
- Ghassan ZEENY, Financial and Administrative Director, Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan