

Children



I. Situation of Children

The attitude of society towards children is indicative of how it views its future, and of the values that govern the present. Modern developmental thinking stresses the importance of children not only from the point of view of the need to care for them, but also from a humanitarian and legal perspective, namely, that children have rights which society should guarantee. Hence, the importance of safeguarding these rights and preparing children to assume their future role. This issue assumes special significance, given that children (age group 0-14 years) constitute 29.2 percent of total population in Lebanon.

1. Health conditions

Significant improvements were recorded in the health of children during the past decade. Notwithstanding an increase in child mortality from one to five years, the mortality rate for infants (less than one year old) fell by 11 percentage points (Table III-36).

Table III-36: Infant and child mortality rates, 1987-1991, 1992-1996

Category	Rate per thousand live births	
	1987-1991	1992-1996
Neonatal mortality (less than 28 days)	29.3	20.3
Post-neonatal mortality (28 days - one year)	9.6	7.6
Infant mortality (less than one year)	38.9	27.9
Child mortality (1 to 5 years)	1.8	4.4
Child mortality (Less than 5 years)	40.6	32.2

Source: League of Arab States - Republic of Lebanon, Lebanon Maternal and Child Health Survey - Pan Arab Project for Child Development, 1996.

The figures reveal a significant risk of dying during the first 28 days following birth. In effect, the neonatal mortality rate is 20.3 per thousand live births, but drops to 7.6 per thousand for the post-neonatal (28 days - one year).

The relatively favorable situation at the national level conceals important regional and social disparities, as shown in table III-37.

It is clear from the table below that the risk of dying at the age of one year or less for children born in North Lebanon and the Bekaa is more than twice that for those born in Beirut, and 30-60 percent higher than the risk at national level. Neonatal mortality shows a similar pattern.

Table III-37: Infant and neonatal mortality by mohafazat (per thousand live births)

Mohafazat	Infant mortality rate	Neonatal mortality rate
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	(less than one year)	(less than 28 days)
Beirut	19.6	17.5
Mount Lebanon	27.6	21.6
South Lebanon	27.2	16.4
Bekaa	39.8	32.2
North Lebanon	48.1	32.7
National average	27.9	20.3

Source: League of Arab States - Republic of Lebanon, Lebanon Maternal and Child Health Survey - Pan Arab Project for Child Development, 1996.

Universal child immunization and infectious disease eradication and control programmes have been instrumental in reducing child mortality. Immunization coverage for oral polio vaccine (OPV) and diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus (DPT3) reached 91.6 percent among children under one year, and 97.1 percent for children aged 12 to 23 months. Measles vaccination, however, remains an area of concern, through national efforts have resulted in almost doubling coverage between 1990 and 1994 for children under one year (85.7 percent).

Over the last five years, there has been a significant decrease (28 percent) in the incidence of diarrhea in children under five, and 50 percent less use of medicaments in these cases. Oral rehydrating solution (ORS) utilization has improved from 45 percent to 76.5 percent during the same period. Considerable savings in the cost of medical consultations and use of medicaments, and decrease in diarrhea - associated mortality are among the major benefits resulting from the improvement in the situation.

Children below five years are exposed to respiratory infections seven times a year, on average, and 3.6 times to diarrhea, but with marked regional differences; the exposure being higher in rural areas. This is consistent with the spread of poverty and the disparities in the availability of basic services and preventive measures. Unsafe drinking water remains a major cause of diarrhea; poor living conditions and lack of means to keep warm are among the main causes of respiratory infections.

Lebanese children continue to suffer from the experiences and shocks they were exposed to during the war. This has affected their attitude towards themselves and society, and their relations with others. It is also possible that some of them may suffer from psychological problems later in life, if the effects of the war experience are not attended to, though civil organizations have made some effort to limit the negative mental and psychological influences associated with the war. In large measure, this negligence is due to the lack of sufficient awareness and recognition of this kind of problems.

2. Nutritional conditions

The overall rate of protein and calory intake is above the needed average. It is estimated that 10 percent of children - mainly those living under poor conditions such as children of refugees and displaced families - suffer from malnutrition. Recent information also indicates that 2.9 percent of children are thin (insufficient weight relative to height); 12.2 percent are short (insufficient height relative to age); and 3 percent are underweight (insufficient weight relative to age). These observation

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are equally applicable to male and female children.

The most widely-spread problem, however, is related to the quality and variety of diet. This is apparent in the significant deficiencies in the iron, vitamin A and iodine intake, and in the high frequency of tooth decay among children.

3. Educational aspects

There are about 148 nurseries in Lebanon - located mainly in cities. Of the total, 9.5 percent are public, 25 percent belong to non-governmental organizations, and 65 percent are owned by individuals. These nurseries serve about 2.2 percent only of children aged below three years. Moreover, many of these nurseries are housed in inadequate premises and lack equipment and satisfactory health conditions and surroundings. Their personnel also lack experience and qualifications and the activities of most of them are profit oriented.

The absence of government policies dealing with early childhood care has been reflected in the limited and marginalized role of public institutions, and the transformation of early childhood care from a national and public concern into an unregulated civil or private commercial activity. This is evident in the lack of information and studies on needs in this field; the absence of family awareness and guidance programmes through the media and other means of social mobilization; and inadequate conditions and standards.

The negative implications of the absence of a government policy, and the difficult economic situation which obliges mothers to seek work outside the house, render the formulation of a child-care policy - taking into consideration modern educational notions and practices and the provisions of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child - an urgent task.

It is estimated that in 1993 some 43 percent of children in the age group 3-6 years were enrolled in kindergartens; of these, 15 percent only were in the public sector. This stage suffers from weak curricula, teaching techniques, and education goals. The absence of an effective state role has contributed to widen the gap between the public and private sectors with respect to access and quality of education.

Despite the keen interest of parents and society in education, a high ratio (25-30 percent) of children do not receive adequate basic education (up to 15 years) due to high rates of failure and drop-out (see also section E above). This filtering is further compounded by the unsatisfactory state and quality of vocational education, which leads children to leave school to work at an early age without any preparation. This is one of the causes of marginalization and of persistence of socio-economic disparities; in addition to the fact that the system of education does not provide - except marginally - for the integration of children facing special problems in public education.

The modern notions of education stress the importance of developing the different dimensions (social, physical, mental, and psychological) of a child's personality. However, most schools concentrate on academic achievement, measured by the results of examinations. Moreover, the system of education does not provide sufficiently for children to express themselves whether at school or within the family and society. The child is often at the receiving end and not a participant who contributes ideas and views within the limits of his/her ability and knowledge. The attitude of the state in this respect - reflected in weak educational and recreational programmes; scarcity of parks, playgrounds and amusement centers; and in poor

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television and media programmes directed at children - does not help either. Also, children's summer camps organized by non-governmental organizations have been declining, while the private sector is becoming increasingly active in this domain.

4. Legal aspects

The family occupies an important place in the system of values and customs prevailing in society. But, while society accords a great deal of attention to children and their upbringing, the approach remains conventional. Society and parents continue to regard the child as a weak being with no actual rights, and one that has no existence of its own outside complete subordination to the family or guardian.

Despite the signing by Lebanon of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, national legislation does not provide adequately for the protection of children's interests, nor for respecting their preferences and likings with respect to study, work and recreation. Moreover, existing legislation that guarantees children some rights is not generally enforced. There are also no legal instruments to protect children against acts of violence or neglect to which they may be exposed within the family, at school or otherwise. Though the law is strict when it comes to acts of physical or sexual abuse perpetrated against children by strangers, these events are surrounded with complete secrecy when the perpetrator is a relative or a member of the family itself. Furthermore, there are no specialized institutions, or alternatives, for children who are mistreated by their parents.

5. Children facing special problems

There is no specific law governing child and youth labor. There is, however, a section to that effect in the labor law that dates back to the 1940s. This law - which needs to be fundamentally revised - allows the employment of children who have reached the age of thirteen, except in mechanical industries or other types of work that could pose a threat to their health and life. These provisions, though inadequate, are not observed in practice as the mechanisms of control and enforcement are not effective.

A limited field survey that was carried out by UNICEF in 1995 on the situation of working children in the country indicated that 31 percent of those covered by the sample were less than ten years old, while the age of another 43 percent was between ten and thirteen years. The survey showed also that 36 percent of the children began to work at an age between thirteen and eighteen years, and that 86 percent of them were Lebanese; the rest being of Syrian, Palestinian and Egyptian nationalities.

According to the same study, all the children included in the sample were previously enrolled in school but left either for economic reasons (27 percent), or due to academic failure (71 percent); and that most of them lived with their families and were paid low wages ranging between one-third and two-thirds of the minimum wage. Moreover, 57 percent of these children worked under conditions that posed a direct or indirect threat to their health.

Another inquiry by UNICEF showed that 36 percent of the questioned child beggars were between seven and twelve years old; the rest (64 percent) being between twelve and fifteen years old. Of these child beggars, 22 percent were Lebanese and 78 percent from other nationalities, contrary to the situation of working children. These beggars, it should be noted, form parts of networks run by adults which expose them to organized physical and moral exploitation and force them into

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delinquent behavior.

National law deals with the phenomena of begging and homelessness from a penal perspective that could culminate in imposing custody, social surveillance, or reformatory and disciplinary action. The law stipulates mandatory cooperation with the Union Organization for the Protection of Youth in Lebanon and with the Reform Institute and Monitoring Center in connection with crimes committed by youth. There is a large backlog of cases awaiting trial due to the non-functioning of concerned institutions and lack of places where they could be looked after. It has also been the practice to jail youth and adults together where conditions from a humane and health point of view are inadequate. Since 1994, however, a separate floor has been assigned to delinquent youth at the prison of Roumieh.

6. Summary

It is evident from the preceding discussion that there is no effective child policy in Lebanon. The prevailing conventional notions consider child care purely as a family concern with no role in it for public authorities, or for society as a whole. From this perspective, a child is considered as a minor having no legal rights or opinion, except as the guardian sees fit. In case a child suffers harm within the family, priority is given to secrecy to protect the family from scandal, even if it is at the expense of the child.

National policies to ensure a suitable environment for bringing up children are largely absent. The attention of the state and cooperation with the civil sector and non-governmental organizations are practically confined to limited programmes and do not reflect a long-term vision or effort. The authorities are to increase efforts to provide adequate physical infrastructure to improve the situation of children, to develop the legislative aspects and mechanisms for protecting children from physical and psychological exploitation and violence.

The attitude of government and society towards children and the protection of their current and future interests, defines their attitude towards sustainable human development itself; it is also a guarantee of the interest of society as a whole, and of the sustainability of development, and a sure investment in the future.

**DON'T STOP HERE .. THERE IS MORE TO READ IN CHAPTER THREE
GOT TO SECTION J:
YOUTH AND SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**