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PATHWAYS TOWARDS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN LEBANON

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1. Introduction

Lebanon faces a profound and compounding food crisis. According to the latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) – an initiative comprised of 21 organizations and intergovernmental institutions to jointly classify the severity and magnitude of food insecurity and malnutrition – 1.26 million people in Lebanon are currently in crisis phase (IPC Phase 3), of whom 85,000 are in emergency phase (IPC Phase 4). This indicates an urgent need for humanitarian action.[1] Syrian and Palestinian refugees are disproportionately affected, with 34% and 45%, respectively, in Phase 3 and above.[2] The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Food Program (WFP) now consider Lebanon a "very high concern" hot spot for food insecurity, due to conflict escalation, displacement, and economic deterioration.[3]

The roots of this crisis are neither recent nor simply economic. They are entrenched in political legacies of colonial governance, neoliberal reforms, and a state structure that has repeatedly failed to support rural and agriculture development, persistently privileging an export-oriented agriculture sector over local needs. The obstacles impeding Lebanon's path toward food sovereignty are shared across many countries in the Global South: years of financial mismanagement and extractive developmental schemes that benefit a tiny local moneyed elite and global financial actors; physical challenges, such as the increased stress of climate change on local agricultural practices in the form of heat waves and droughts; and administrative and political blocks to major land reforms that could democratize local farming.

Over the past half-century, local policy-makers, international experts, and major food business representatives molded Lebanon's food system into one that is largely dependent on food imports for everyday consumption, while centering the agricultural sector on export-oriented products. These circumstances have undermined the food system's ability to withstand financial, climate, and political shocks, subsequently diminishing the autonomy, livelihood, and political power of local growers. Furthermore, over the last two decades, Lebanon has witnessed the harms of climate change and a rise in temperatures, with fires, droughts, and dust storms becoming common occurrences. Lebanon is also located in a geopolitically tenuous region. To its South lies an ever-expansionist, intransigent, and militarized Israel, whose latest war against the country decimated the urban fabric of its southern districts, killed thousands of people, and irreparably harmed thousands of acres of farming land in Lebanon's fertile valleys to the East and South. Israeli actions have also repeatedly threatened Lebanon's water security.[4] Lastly, Lebanon is yet to emerge from a six-year financial crisis brought on by its kleptocratic political class, a crisis that has decimated the middle and working classes, diluted their purchasing power, and increased their dependence on imports for sustenance.[5]

At the same time, in response to deepening precarity, food sovereignty initiatives and grassroots movements are emerging in Lebanon – as they are globally – to try to retain control over food systems through resistance, innovation, and advocacy. This study highlights the difficulties facing farmers and food sovereignty activists in organizing a coherent and influential political bloc, due to fragmented efforts, structural political obstacles, limited resources, and a lack of institutional support. A particular focus is placed on governance and accountability mechanisms, both within the Lebanese government and among international financial institutions and other key stakeholders. Attention is given to the availability and transparency of information on food-related projects and initiatives, as well as the roles and responsibilities of different actors in shaping policy and implementation.

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[1] Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), "Lebanon: Acute Food Insecurity Projection Update for April - September 2024", https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1157035/?iso3=LBN (IPC, Lebanon: Acute Food Insecrity); World Food Program (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *Hunger Hotspots: FAO–WFP Early Warnings on Acute Food Insecurity: November 2024 to May 2025 Outlook*, WFP-FAO, https://doi.org/10.4060/cd2995en (WFP and FAO, *Hunger Hotspots*)

[2] IPC, Lebanon: Acute Food Insecrity; WFP and FAO, *Hunger Hotspots*.

[3] IPC, Lebanon: Acute Food Insecrity; WFP and FAO, *Hunger Hotspots*.

[4] Mark Zeitoun, Karim Eid-Sabbagh and Jeremy Loveless, "The Analytical Framework of Water and Armed Conflict: A Focus on the 2006 Summer War between Israel and Lebanon", *Disasters 38*, no. 1 (2014) pp. 22-44, https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12039

[5] Edmund Blair, "Explainer: Lebanon's Financial Meltdown and How It Happened." Reuters, 17 June 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-financial-meltdown-how-it-happened-2021-06-17/

The research argues that a food-sovereign system that centers local producers is internally self-sufficient, provides dignified wages for farmers, satisfies local market needs, and is durable and adaptable to climate change – imperative for food security. To make progress on food sovereignty, farmers, advocacy groups across the political spectrum, as well as experts, educators, and civil society organizations must organize at the local, municipal, national, and regional levels into an effective political block capable of challenging the status quo, forcing their demands on the state, and ensuring the sovereignty of farmers. Moving beyond food security toward food sovereignty, Lebanon must invest in land reform, support grassroots cooperatives, and resist donor-driven input models. Only by returning power to producers and communities can the country build an adaptive, robust, just, and sovereign food system.

2. Methodology

Several guiding questions frame this inquiry: Who benefits from Lebanon's current food policies and systems, and who is marginalized or excluded? What regions, sectors, or groups are most vulnerable to food insecurity under the present conditions? To what extent are civil society organizations (CSOs), unions, and local communities involved in shaping food policies, and who is excluded from these processes? When CSOs are included, what forms do their participation take, and what are the tangible impacts – both positive and unintended – of their involvement?

The first component of the research involved an extensive desk review, with a focus on three key dimensions in the literature on food sovereignty in Lebanon: the financial implications of food insecurity, the uneven distribution of food access, and the vulnerabilities facing certain social groups. The review also examines how these issues intersect with broader questions of governance, rights, and sustainability.

The primary research incorporates a qualitative component involving individual and group interviews, as well as field observations with a range of key stakeholders: farmers, policy-makers, civil society actors, activists, and representatives from international organizations. The aim of the interview component was to gather firsthand accounts and experiential knowledge of the challenges and dynamics shaping Lebanon's food systems today. Interviews were conducted with 15 individuals pooled from several segments invested in the issue of food sovereignty and security in Lebanon: local producers, CSO representatives, farmers' advocates and organizers, and scholars and experts on the agricultural sector and political economy of food production and consumption.

The researcher also participated in consultation meetings and roundtable discussions – spaces that allowed for deeper dialogue and an exchange of ideas among stakeholders from diverse sectors, fostering collective reflection on pathways towards food sovereignty. Except for local experts who consented to using their names, the remaining interviewees have been anonymized. Additional information about interviewee selection and interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

3. The Roots of Food Insecurity in Lebanon

Food security and food sovereignty, while sometimes used interchangeably in public discourse, represent two distinct paradigms. Food security refers to the availability, accessibility, and affordability of food, whereas food sovereignty emphasizes the right of people to define their own food systems, prioritizing local food economies, agroecology, and community control.[6] In Lebanon, the entanglement of these concepts is not merely semantic. Instead, it reflects deeply embedded historical, political, and structural forces that have shaped the country's food landscape.

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[6] Jibal, "Food Sovereignty السيادة الغذائية", https://www.jibal.org/food-sovereignty/, accessed 5 May 2025.

Colonial Legacies and Land Tenure Transformation

The origins of food insecurity in Lebanon are intertwined with colonial transformations of land tenure systems. The Ottoman Tanzimat reforms, particularly the 1858 Land Code, marked a major shift by privatizing mushaa (communal) lands and transferring control to local notables and elites. This change laid the foundation for an extractive agrarian order where land became a commodity rather than a communal resource.[7]

French colonial policies further marginalized the peasantry and entrenched urban-elite control over agricultural production. Infrastructure projects such as the Beirut port, designed to facilitate imperial trade, prioritized export crops like silk and wine over subsistence farming.[8] As Elizabeth Williams demonstrates, agricultural investment by French Mandate authorities in the 1920s-1930s Syria and Lebanon was based on two principles that weakened food sovereignty in the Levant: a) agriculture investments sought to extract maximum profit for Paris-based businesses; and b) the investments would be located in regions already pacified or supportive of French colonial rule. The first tied the agricultural fates of the mandates to the business interests of the metropole, and the second led to uneven regional development.[9]

Post-Independence Political Economy

After independence, Lebanon adopted a "merchant republic" model that emphasized trade and finance over rural development. During the 1940s and 1950s, regional capital and Palestinian refugee labor drove the expansion of export-oriented agriculture. However, this growth did not translate into equitable development. Traditional agropastoral systems were displaced, women were marginalized in agriculture, and social cohesion declined.[10] Efforts at rural reform, such as President Fouad Chehab's 1950s policies, aimed to reduce geographic inequality but failed to alter structural imbalances. The civil war (1975-1990) and post-war neoliberal reconstruction further fragmented rural spaces, leaving agricultural policy in the hands of international donors and sectarian non-state actors.[11]

Integration into Global Capitalism

Since the 1980s, Lebanon has become increasingly integrated into the global corporate food regime. This model prioritizes agro-export economies, import dependency, and donor-driven agricultural inputs. As Riachi and Martiniello (2023) argue, Lebanon's incorporation into global food regimes mirrors broader patterns of capitalist accumulation in the Global South. Trade liberalization, structural adjustment policies, and privatization of land and resources have undermined food sovereignty and accelerated vulnerability.[12]

Crisis of Agricultural Production and Finance

The collapse of the Lebanese pound since 2019 and the financial engineering policies of the central bank have devastated Lebanon's food systems. Farmers face rising costs for imported inputs, collapsing access to credit, and devaluation of their produce. Donor-driven input regimes compound these financial crises that push imported seeds and fertilizers, locking farmers into dependent and unsustainable cycles.[13]

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[7] Roland Riachi and Giuliano Martiniello, "Manufactured Regional Crises: The Middle East and North Africa under Global Food Regimes", *Journal of Agrarian Change* 23, no. 4 (2023) pp. 792–810, https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12547 (Riachi and Martiniello, "Manfactured Regional Crisis")

[8] Giuliano Martiniello and Julia Kassem, "The Corporate Food Regime and Lebanon: Machgara and Adverse Incorporation", *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 51, no. 5 (2024), pp. 1120–1140, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2023.2273849 (Martiniello and Kassem, "The Corporate Food Regime in Lebanon")

[9] Elizabeth R. Williams, *States of Cultivation: Imperial Transition and Scientific Agriculture in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Stanford University Press, 2023.

[10] Kanj Hamadé, "Lebanon's Food Insecurity and the Path Toward Agricultural Reform", Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 13 November 2020, https://tinyurl.com/mu7e9why

[11] Martiniello and Kassem, "The Corporate Food Regime in Lebanon".

[12] Riachi and Martiniello, "Manfactured Regional Crisis".

[13] Martiniello and Kassem, "The Corporate Food Regime in Lebanon".

War and Ecocide

Lebanon's agriculture has also suffered immense damage from Israel's most recent war on the country. Between October 2023 and November 2024, Lebanon's agriculture sector incurred over USD 700 million in damages and losses, primarily in southern Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley. Olive and citrus orchards, poultry, livestock, and fisheries have been heavily affected, significantly disrupting food production.14

In sum, the existing literature on food systems in Lebanon shows that the country's food insecurity is not a sudden calamity but the result of long-standing forces: colonial legacies of land tenure and uneven development, neoliberal policies and global capitalist integration, sectarian governance, and geopolitical conflict. These dynamics have transformed the agricultural system into one marked by export dependency, deep precarity, and structural inequality.

4. Analysis of Grassroots and Sovereignty-Based Responses

Within the cracks of Lebanon's food system, movements for food sovereignty are taking root. The 2019 financial crisis – from which Lebanon has yet to emerge, coupled with the shock of Beirut's port explosion in August 2020 that devastated Lebanon's main food import hub – revealed the fragility of food security models based on global supply chains. As Anahid Simitian (2022) argues, the collapse of food logistics could offer an opening for rooted, regional emancipatory food systems.[15] The potential lies in what Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen (2020) call "alimentary infrastructures": life-giving systems of food production rooted in land, labor, and community.[16] As will be shown, there is a growing recognition that food must be decoupled from global markets and recentralized in local hands. Across interviews with farmers, experts, organizers, and advocates, a collective diagnosis is clear: the dominant model of agrifood development has failed – and a radically different, justice-centered alternative is both necessary and possible.

Understandings of Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is not a static concept. As Edelman et al. (2014) emphasize, it is a dynamic process shaped by ongoing debates among scholars, peasants, and activists.[17] Questions around trade, governance, and the balance between agroecological ideals and market realities challenge practitioners to refine and adapt sovereignty frameworks. Critical perspectives insist on clarity about who exercises sovereignty, how much pluralism is tolerated, and how food sovereignty intersects with rights-based frameworks and state structures. This self-reflexivity is vital for Lebanon, where international aid regimes and sectarian politics often compromise sovereignty. Grassroots food sovereignty movements must grapple with questions of scale, legitimacy, and strategic alliances to navigate a context marked by protracted crisis and external intervention.

Among agricultural advocates interviewed, food sovereignty was consistently articulated as a deeply political, justice-oriented concept grounded in autonomy, local control, and resistance to imposed systems. For SL, a member of the nonprofit association Jibal, food sovereignty is "the right of people to define their own food systems – not just to access food but produce it, decide how it is produced, and who benefits". SL critiqued the dominance of international aid agencies and the Lebanese government's alignment with large agribusiness interests, asserting: "You cannot talk about sovereignty while relying on global aid agencies to feed your people or shape your agricultural strategy." Similarly, WO from Mada, an NGO that works extensively with small farmers

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[14] WFP and FAO, *Hunger Hotspots*.

[15] Anahid Z. Simitian, "Infrastructures of Food Security and Food Sovereignty in Lebanon", *Society and Space*, 12 December 2022, https://tinyurl.com/3bf9jxf3

[16] Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen, "Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2020) pp. 243–268, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8177747

[17] Marc Edelman,et al., "Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Food Sovereignty", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 41, no. 6 (2014), pp. 911–931, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.963568

in Akkar, emphasized the importance of regional autonomy and sustainable farming tailored to local needs. "Sovereignty means communities being able to produce food in ways that suit their land, their seasons, and their traditions – not importing tomatoes from Spain," WO noted.

Through an urban lens, LP of the Badaro Urban Farmers Market linked food sovereignty to reclaiming market power from corporations: "It's not just about the farm – it's about people in the city having alternatives to supermarkets. Food sovereignty is also about who profits from your dinner." FL, who works at Arcenciel's Beit el Mouzareh – an NGO that runs farmers support services across the country but predominantly in Beqaa – described sovereignty through the lens of dignity, particularly for marginalized producers: "Most of our women farmers don't speak of sovereignty with big words. But when they choose what to grow, how to feed their families, that's sovereignty."

Three representatives expanded on this vision from the Agricultural Movement in Lebanon (Agrimovement) – a social justice group working within an explicitly political framing towards a food-sovereign system that is equitable, fair, and dignified for local growers. PY called for economic justice, asserting: "If a farmer can't sell his produce without losing money, there's no sovereignty." DN emphasized the importance of seed sovereignty: "We're importing hybrid seeds every season. That's dependency, not sovereignty." KM added: "Food sovereignty is not isolationist. It's about fair systems of exchange, not colonial ones." Across these interviews, food sovereignty emerges as a call for structural transformation – one rooted in reclaiming agency, building localized alternatives, and ensuring justice across food systems.

Among local growers interviewed, food sovereignty was described as both a practical necessity and a political goal, intimately tied to agroecology, market justice, and producer dignity. AB, a farmer and member of SOILS dedicated to permaculture, emphasized that trust is the cornerstone of food systems: "If you don't know the farmer, you won't buy from them; trust is invaluable for us." AB argued that farmers should be compensated not only for their produce but for the services they provide – namely, producing food that is sustainable, clean, and healthy. They advocated increased consumer awareness and called attention to the structural imbalance between small-scale farmers and donor-backed, export-oriented agriculture: "The ministry has always been for the big farmers who export, for bigger agricultural producers who aren't the majority of farmers but a powerful, monied, and well-connected minority." AB also acknowledged the challenges of farmer organizing, noting: "We don't have functioning cooperatives… farmers don't have a practice of working with each other."

XY, a farmer and advocate affiliated with Jibal, defined food sovereignty in concrete terms: "To have the staples of our diet produced locally and sustainably [requires] at least 50%." XY promotes agroecological practices, such as poly-cropping and crop rotation, and supports consumer-producer solidarity through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) – an alternative system of mutual support and risk-sharing that allows the consumer to subscribe to the yield of a certain farm or group of farms.[18] XY believes that sovereignty also requires structural interventions, from subsidies to the enforcement of protectionist laws and equitable water governance. Like AB, XY criticized the dominance of middlemen and the failure of organic certification systems, which create barriers for small planters: "Farmers in Lebanon are too tired to organize and advocate on their behalf. So, another organization has to step in for this role."

UT, founder of Buzuruna Juzuruna – an agricultural cooperative, mutual aid group, and seed bank – offered the most holistic articulation of food sovereignty. For UT, it is a deeply personal, political, and ecological project: "It means having the right to produce food that is locally appropriate and beneficial – ecologically, nutritionally, culturally, socially, and economically." UT's work is rooted in rebuilding full agroecological value chains – from seed to bakery – and fostering trust through radical transparency. Their critique of state structures is clear: while they remain open to collaboration with the ministry, they ultimately work at the margins to build alternatives resilient to systemic fragility.

Together, these growers envision food sovereignty as a reclamation of autonomy, a restructuring of food markets, and an ethic of care that places farmers – and their communities – at the center of agricultural transformation.

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[18] Jibal, "Community Supported Agriculture", https://www.jibal.org/food-sovereignty/community-supported-agriculture/, accessed 5 May 2025.

The perspectives of local experts reveal food sovereignty as both a policy challenge and a strategic imperative – requiring institutional reform, political coordination, and deeper attention to historical inequalities. Rita Khawand, founder of SOILS and member of the international agroecology grassroots network Urgenci,[19] calls for a localist approach to food systems: "We have to satisfy our needs locally." She critiques Lebanon's dependency on imported food and inputs, arguing that local production for local consumption – built on direct relationships between producers and buyers – is essential for a resilient future. While optimistic about the new Minister of Agriculture, Khawand is critical of Lebanon's cooperatives, many of which she describes as donor-driven and functionally ineffective: "There is no structure or vision."

Kanj Hamadé, a political economist and agricultural policy expert, defines food sovereignty as a matter of putting the farmer first – through subsidies, anti-cartel policies, and political agency. "The ministry has to become the ministry of the farmers," he asserts, warning against the apolitical stance of many rural actors: "You cannot advocate without a political agenda." Hamadé critiques donor logic, noting how support has favored agricultural "pioneers" rather than building mass movements. He is also skeptical of niche initiatives like farmers' markets or CSA schemes if they fail to scale or remain disconnected from broader policy goals: "If you don't want to grow, why should I help you?"

Finally, Noa Sanad approaches food sovereignty through a historical and grassroots lens, studying how agricultural alternatives have evolved in post-crisis Lebanon. Sanad sees initiatives like Nohye el Ard – which organize through neighborhood-based committees – as models for decentralized, locally embedded transformation. However, Sanad is critical of the state's inaction, especially its reliance on praising farmer "resilience" instead of providing structural support. "The elephant in the room is land ownership and access," Sanad emphasizes, arguing that without addressing colonial-era land tenure inequalities, food sovereignty will remain elusive. Sanad advocates for a mediating body to bridge the gap between exhausted farmers and advocacy organizations capable of pushing for systemic change.

Collectively, these experts call for a multi-level transformation: from reforming cooperatives and subsidy regimes, to coordinating policy across sectors, to reclaiming land and political power. For them, food sovereignty in Lebanon demands both radical imagination and institutional coherence – an alignment of values, policies, and practices in service of producers, consumers, and the environment alike.

For these local experts, food sovereignty is about power, justice, and systemic reform, not merely an issue of production. Key shared understandings include:

- Producer-centered models: Empowering farmers with choice, autonomy, and voice is foundational.
- Localism over dependency: Strengthening domestic food systems, while recognizing limits to total independence.
- Structural barriers: Land access, dysfunctional coops, fragmented aid, and donor-driven agendas all inhibit sovereignty.
- Need for coordination and organization: Whether through reformed ministries or grassroots networks, food sovereignty depends on collective strategy and political organization.

But the interviews also expose tensions:

- Between grassroots experimentation (Sanad) and state-led reform (Khawand);
- Between depoliticized resilience narratives and the need for explicit political agendas (Hamadé, Sanad);
- And between ethical niche markets and scalable, just systems (Hamadé, Turkmani).

Ultimately, these expert voices converge on the idea that food sovereignty in Lebanon must be both practical and radical: practical in rethinking market systems and production chains, and radical in reimagining governance, ownership, and justice.

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[19] Urgenci, "About Us", https://urgenci.net/about-us/

Views on the Scalability of Food Sovereignty Models

Cautious Optimism Rooted in Grassroots Practice

Among food sovereignty advocates, the question of scalability elicits measured optimism coupled with structural critique. SL (Jibal) emphasized that while agroecology and local food systems are scalable, this can only happen if the state reorients its support toward grassroots actors. "Scalability depends on shifting political will," SL argued, "you can't scale agroecology while subsidizing pesticides and imported seeds." SL further underscored that without long-term infrastructure investments and protectionist policies, grassroots projects risk being locked in pilot mode – replicable in theory but unsupported in practice.

WO (Mada) similarly believes in the scalability of agroecological and community-led approaches but insists it must be contextual and regionalized. "What works in Akkar might not work in the Beqaa," WO noted. They stressed that bottom-up learning and networked experimentation are the most realistic paths forward. LP of the Badaro Urban Farmers Market was more skeptical of traditional scaling logic, arguing that replication is not always desirable: "We don't want a mega CSA. We want many local ones embedded in their neighborhoods." For LP, the goal is proliferation, not centralization.

FL (Arcenciel) emphasized the need for scaling the values, not necessarily the structures: "The dignity, the agency, the justice – these are what need to spread," warning that efforts to scale cooperatives often result in bureaucratization and loss of autonomy. "Once you formalize too much, you risk losing the spirit of the thing," FL cautioned.

The Agrimovement representatives (PY, DN, and KM) echoed these concerns. PY asserted: "You can't copy-paste a food system. You need to grow it with the people." DN highlighted the difficulty of expanding seed-saving networks under current land and donor restrictions. KM warned against NGO-driven scaling models: "They always want a toolkit. But you can't reduce sovereignty to a toolkit."

Overall, advocates recognize the need to scale up food sovereignty models, but argue this must happen through horizontal replication, adaptation, and systemic support, not through top-down or technocratic expansion. The scalability of these models, they argue, is political rather than simply technical – and success depends on real shifts in state priorities, donor practices, and cultural paradigms.

Scaling Through Solidarity, Not Size

Among local growers, the possibility of scaling food sovereignty practices is deeply tied to trust, autonomy, and support systems. AB (SOILS) was cautious, arguing that scalability is hindered by the structural marginalization of small-scale farmers. "The ministry still supports the big exporters," AB said, "so how can we scale what they don't even recognize?" AB also cited mistrust among farmers and the lack of functioning cooperatives as barriers: "They're very independent… You still need a middleman."

Still, AB sees potential in farmer-to-farmer organizing and direct-to-consumer relationships. "It's not about becoming big, it's about becoming many," they said, echoing the idea of distributed growth over vertical expansion.

XY, who combines farming with advocacy through Jibal, also expressed conditional belief in scalability. "Scaling up is possible if done sustainably," XY explained, "but it makes you evaluate the quality of life – every farmer weighs the pros and cons." XY pointed out that state-subsidized farmers are the ones surviving, suggesting that without public support, scaling agroecological practices remains out of reach. They also criticized the commodification of organic certification, which blocks smallholders from accessing markets: "The ones following the rules can't afford the labels, and the ones with labels don't follow the rules."

UT (Buzuruna Juzuruna) offered the most strategic and comprehensive vision of scaling through a model they termed spreading out, not scaling up. "We don't want to become a big farm," UT said, "we want many farms, many seed banks, many bakeries." For UT, scalability lies in creating a resilient ecosystem: one that can weather shocks, remain decentralized, and replicate in diverse conditions. UT imagines: "A seed bank in every Lebanese village, and eventually in every village across the Arab world," articulating a vision where food sovereignty is grown through interdependence, not hierarchy.

Local growers reject industrial concepts of scale in favor of distributed networks, community replication, and state-supported autonomy. Their experiences underline the limits of voluntarism: while peer-to-peer models can grow, they require systemic support, land access, infrastructure, and policy alignment to scale in meaningful, just, and lasting ways.

Scaling Requires Coordination, Strategy, and Structural Reform

Local experts provided the most critical and system-wide scalable evaluations, insisting that food sovereignty cannot be scaled without a supportive political economy. Khawand argued that local production can be expanded, but only if the system shifts away from donor dependency and fragmented cooperative structures. “We can reduce import dependency,” she stated, “but only with better coops and real institutional frameworks.” Khawand remained hopeful about government reforms under the new minister but warned that cooperatives are largely dysfunctional: “There is no structure or vision.”

Turkmani was more critical of institutional incoherence and donor silos. “They don’t work together towards a unified vision,” she said, referring to the Ministry of Agriculture, FAO, and international donors. For Turkmani, agricultural initiatives remain small and disjointed because they are driven by external agendas. However, she noted that women-led agro-processing cooperatives offer a scalable alternative: “They’ve done solid organizing.” These cooperatives work because they are embedded in communities and culturally rooted, not donor-scripted.

Hamadé delivered the sharpest critique of scaling through niche models like farmers’ markets and CSAs. “There’s a saturation,” he said, warning that some initiatives remain socially narrow and economically unsustainable. He questioned why public funds should support projects that do not serve broader constituencies: “If they don’t want to grow, why should the state support them?” Hamadé called for state-driven agricultural reform, focused on building producer autonomy through subsidies, pro-farmer and anti-cartel policies, and cooperative renewal.

Noa Sanad tied the challenge of scaling to historical inequalities and the absence of a political strategy. While networks like Nohye el Ard show promise through hyper-local organizing, Sanad warned that scaling is impossible without land reform and institutional intermediaries. “The elephant in the room is land ownership,” Sanad declared. Moreover, expecting farmers to scale initiatives while simultaneously producing, surviving, and advocating is unrealistic. “You need a structure that carries political weight,” they argued – a body that can connect grassroots efforts to broader policy influence.

Experts agree that scalability requires more than replication – it requires system redesign. They identify key preconditions for scaling food sovereignty in Lebanon:

- cooperative reform (Khawand);
- strategic policy coherence (Turkmani);
- public investment and producer-first frameworks (Hamadé);
- and land reform and political mediation (Sanad).

Together, they insist that technical solutions cannot substitute for political alignment. Without addressing the underlying structures of inequality, governance, and resource distribution, food sovereignty will remain fragmented and marginal.

Across all interviewees, there is broad agreement that scaling food sovereignty models in Lebanon is both necessary and deeply constrained. In sum, scaling food sovereignty is not about size but about systems. It demands shifting both power and structure, from markets to ministries, from donors to communities, from technocratic replication to political mobilization.

Views on the Ministry of Agriculture

Structural Distrust and Demand for Paradigm Shift

Across the board, agricultural advocates expressed deep skepticism toward the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), viewing it as historically aligned with elite, export-oriented, and donor-driven models. SL (Jibal) described the ministry as a captured institution, stating: “You can’t talk about food sovereignty when the ministry’s strategy is written by consultants paid by the World Bank.” For SL, the MOA has consistently reinforced a top-down model of agriculture shaped by donor logics and international markets, rather than grassroots or agroecological priorities.

WO (Mada) echoed this critique, arguing that the ministry functions primarily to support "big, politically connected farmers", rather than representing smallholders' diverse needs. "The ministry talks about development, but in practice, it reinforces inequality," WO said. LP (Badaro Urban Farmers' Market) pointed to the urban-rural disconnect embedded in the ministry's policies: "It's like we don't exist to them. They don't think urban agriculture is real farming."

Nonetheless, some advocates noted potential in the current minister's outreach, including FL (Beit el Mouzareh), who said: "The minister invited us to speak – that's a first. But one meeting doesn't change the system." FL emphasized that trust must be earned, and the MOA must institutionalize mechanisms for small-farmer participation, not simply host symbolic consultations.

From Agrimovement, PY articulated a desire for the ministry to shift from being a regulator for exporters to a facilitator for producers: "If they cared about food sovereignty, they'd invest in seed banks and local distribution channels." DN was blunter: "The ministry only cares about appearances. Sovereignty requires infrastructure, not slogans." KM added that real transformation would mean the decentralization of agricultural governance and participatory planning: "Put farmers at the center, not just at the table." Advocates largely see the MOA as an institution in need of radical overhaul. While they acknowledge a window of opportunity with the new minister's openness, they caution that token inclusion and pilot reforms are insufficient. They call for a reorientation of the MOA's priorities – from top-down planning and donor dependency to bottom-up governance and producer-driven sovereignty.

Disillusionment, Skepticism, and Strategic Engagement

Local growers were blunt in their distrust of the MOA, describing it as ineffective, elitist, and structurally biased against small-scale farmers. Despite the minister's recent outreach, AB (SOILS) expressed deep skepticism: "He says the door is open to agroecological farmers, but nothing will change if the ministry still listens to the same big players." AB stressed that the MOA historically caters to export-oriented interests: "They've always been for the big farmers who export. They're not the majority, but they have the money and connections." AB further argued that without shifting this embedded favoritism, any promise of reform remains cosmetic. "Until the ministry stops prioritizing the FAO and donors over farmers, nothing will change," AB insisted. The issue is not only who the ministry listens to but how it defines success: "They don't count sustainability, they count output."

XY (Jibal-affiliated grower) expressed even less confidence: "I have no trust in the regime at the ministry." EA noted that big farmers have captured the state, and even existing laws meant to protect tenant farmers are not enforced. "The system is sectarian and clientelist. The ministry isn't neutral – it's part of the problem," they said. XY also emphasized that the MOA does not regulate critical issues, such as water access, a key determinant of food sovereignty. "They need to monitor and distribute water fairly. Right now, the municipalities control it through political networks."

UT (Buzuruna Juzuruna) offered a slightly more nuanced view. While still skeptical, UT emphasized a pedagogical, rather than confrontational, approach: "If the ministry doesn't obstruct our work, that's already progress," they said. UT noted that the new minister had requested support in scaling agroecological training, which could signal a shift. Still, UT maintained that political independence and grassroots strength are more reliable than ministerial promises: "We work on the margins because that's where change is possible."

Local growers overwhelmingly view the MOA as disconnected from their realities and beholden to elite interests. Their critique is rooted in lived experience, particularly the lack of enforcement, infrastructure, and equitable support. While they express strategic openness to working with the ministry when opportunities arise, they remain fundamentally mistrustful of its motives and capacity. For them, food sovereignty will not emerge from ministry plans alone – it must be built from below and defended at every level.

Policy Disarray, Donor Capture, and Strategic Openings

Local experts offered the most detailed and institutional critiques of the MOA, portraying it as structurally weak, politically compromised, and policy incoherent. Rita Khawand acknowledged that the new minister had shown signs of listening to civil society but cautioned: "One good minister doesn't fix a broken institution." Khawand critiqued the MOA's dependence on donor-led projects and described most cooperatives under its oversight as "barely functional". She called for strategic reform that would clarify the ministry's role: "Is it a facilitator? A regulator? A planner? Right now, it's none of the above."

When asked about the ministry's work, Nur Turkmani identifies a major barrier: the lack of coordination among key stakeholders. International donors, local NGOs, government bodies, and community organizations often work in isolation, pursuing separate agendas rather than a shared strategy. "They don't often work together towards a unified vision of a food-sovereign and secure system," Turkmani notes. Even when these actors formally collaborate with Lebanon's MOA, their priorities frequently diverge, creating overlapping efforts without a cohesive plan. This disjointed approach delays – and sometimes even prevents – progress toward building a resilient and autonomous food system. Despite these structural challenges, Turkmani points to one bright spot: women-led cooperatives in agro-processing. These co-ops, focused on traditional food production like mouneh and preserves, are some of the only truly functional and sustainably organized cooperatives in the country. Their success stands in contrast to the broader cooperative landscape, which often suffers from bureaucratic inefficiencies and donor dependency.

Kanj Hamadé delivered a systemic diagnosis of the ministry's dysfunction. "They have no sovereignty over aid," he argued, pointing out that donors dictate project scope and execution, often without transparency. Hamadé proposed that the MOA redefine its relationship with three critical actors: "First, it must rebuild trust with farmers; second, it must assert control over donor agendas; and third, it must dismantle monopolies in post-harvest and food markets." Hamadé also criticized the reluctance of rural leaders to engage politically: "The ministry won't change unless farmers demand it."

Noa Sanad expanded the critique to a historical and structural level, arguing that the MOA remains bound by colonial-era hierarchies of land and class. "The state praises resilience instead of providing support," Sanad said. They stressed that land tenure reform is the most pressing and neglected domain for ministry intervention. Sanad also warned that without an intermediary structure to advocate politically for farmers, the ministry will continue to ignore the very actors most vital to food sovereignty.

All three groups – advocates, growers, and experts – share a deep skepticism about the MOA's historic and current role. While there is guarded optimism in light of the new minister's outreach, most remain unconvinced that the institution, as it currently stands, can be the engine of food sovereignty in Lebanon.

Experts agree that the MOA is currently ill-equipped to lead a food sovereignty transformation. However, they see potential leverage points – particularly in the MOA's coordination role, subsidy programs, and regulatory authority. Experts argue for a redefinition of the MOA's function: not merely as a technical body but as a strategic institution capable of democratic planning, equity enforcement, and infrastructural investment. Their proposed reforms – ranging from land reform and donor regulation to cooperative oversight and rural mobilization – go beyond programmatic tweaks, calling instead for a re-politicization of agricultural governance.

In conclusion, transforming the MOA is a prerequisite for any serious food sovereignty project in Lebanon. But this transformation must be deep, structural, and political – not merely technocratic. Without a realignment of power, accountability, and vision, the ministry risks remaining an obstacle, rather than an ally, in the struggle for a sovereign and secure food system.

Dependency and Structural Fragility

Lebanon's food system is dangerously import-dependent – not only for basic commodities like wheat and cereals, but for the very inputs (seeds, fertilizers, fuel) required for domestic production. Khawand and Hamadé both stress how this makes the country acutely vulnerable to external shocks, currency collapse, and global trade disruptions. PY from Agrimovement echoes this, emphasizing how the current model was never designed to prioritize national food needs. Instead, it caters to export markets and entrenched commercial interests. KM, another Agrimovement member, notes this dependency is not a failure but an intended feature of Lebanon's post-war neoliberal trajectory: "The idea was never food sovereignty – it was market liberalization." For KM, food insecurity is the natural outcome of a system that treats food as a commodity, not a right. AB, a grower in the Beqaa, underscores how this macroeconomic fragility trickles down to the field. Increases in input costs and fuel make small-scale production unsustainable, while market prices remain volatile and beyond the farmer's control.

Cooperatives, Donors, and the Crisis of Representation

Many interviewees, including Khawand, Turkmani, Hamadé, and WO, highlight the dysfunction of Lebanon's agricultural cooperatives. Instead of vehicles for solidarity, they have become fragmented, under-regulated, and donor-reliant. DN from Agrimovement attributes this failure to both donor instrumentalization and state neglect: "Most co-ops exist on paper. They were designed for funding cycles, not for farmers." Turkmani adds that many co-ops now mirror elite hierarchies, with a handful of individuals benefiting while broader farmer communities are excluded. Even women-led cooperatives, while more functional, often operate more like small businesses than participatory structures. Hamadé argues this model will not deliver change unless it is reclaimed as a political tool for collective agency. XY, who works through informal sharing networks, offers a grassroots alternative and stresses the importance of mutual aid and hyper-local trust networks, but acknowledges these are fragile without recognition or infrastructure. UT, a rural grower, calls for more horizontal coordination, noting that many small producers feel isolated or invisible in both NGO and government programming.

Alternative Economies and Agroecological Possibilities

Alternative food economies – farmers' markets, CSA models, informal trade – have grown in recent years. LP, SL, and FL are central figures in this shift, advocating for short value chains, direct producer-consumer ties, and agroecological principles. But these alternatives remain niche. Hamadé warns they risk becoming "echo chambers for the urban ethical class" unless scaled and democratized. DN, from Agrimovement, frames agroecology as a social and political project rather than just a new farming method: "Agroecology isn't just about compost – it's about land, labor, knowledge, and power." For Agrimovement, agroecological transitions must be publicly funded, territorially rooted, and collectively governed. Sanad adds that many such initiatives are born from necessity, not ideology. In a collapsed state, people improvise. But unless these alternatives link up, scale strategically, and state pressure is applied, they risk remaining peripheral.

Land, Labor, and the Elephant in the Room

Across all interviews, land access emerges as a central axis of inequality. Sanad calls it the "elephant in the room", while Hamadé and PY argue that no serious food sovereignty agenda is possible without addressing land tenure. In Lebanon, land ownership is heavily concentrated, often inherited across elite or sectarian lines. PY emphasizes how this shapes everything: "Without land, you're not a farmer. You're just labor." KM from Agrimovement also stresses the need to rethink labor. Migrant and seasonal farm workers remain structurally excluded from the food sovereignty conversation – even though they are essential to production. "We can't build food sovereignty on exploitative labor," KM says. Agrimovement's vision includes formalizing labor rights, collectivizing land where possible, and de-commodifying essential inputs, like seeds and water. FL (Beit el Mouzareh) adds that even when land is available, it is often ecologically degraded or priced out of reach. Access without support means little.

Political Power, Organizing, and the Role of the State

A recurring theme across the interviews is the absence of strategic political organization among farmers. Hamadé and Sanad note how donor and state programming have individualized rural actors rather than empowering them as a collective class. Khawand and WO agree that without a political agenda, agricultural advocacy remains fragmented and weak. Agrimovement, through PY, DN, and KM, advocates for a rural political movement. They envision a national coalition of producers, rooted in territorial organizing, negotiating at the state level, resisting harmful policies, and proposing alternatives. "Resilience", they argue, has become a neoliberal alibi – used to celebrate survival while ignoring the causes of suffering. SL and

WO also insist that food sovereignty cannot be reduced to technical reforms or market tinkering. It must include agrarian justice, class politics, and intersectional equity, particularly around gender and youth. XY and UT voice similar frustrations: they are told to be "entrepreneurial", but lack the tools, protections, and recognition needed.

Despite immense challenges, a counter-narrative is taking shape – growers, scholars, and organizers articulate and envision food as a right, land as commons, and agriculture as a site of resistance and renewal. Together, their views outline a food sovereignty agenda that is structural, political, and, most importantly, local:

- Reduce dependency through local production, especially in vegetables and staples.
- Reclaim cooperatives as democratic, farmer-led institutions.
- Redistribute land and formalize labor rights to dismantle rural inequality.
- Recognize agroecology as a systemic alternative, not a niche.
- Build political power among farmers to challenge both state neglect and donor agendas.

What is needed now, as Agrimovement's members emphasize, is not another pilot project – but a movement: one that connects farms, coops, markets, and communities into a coordinated force capable of transforming Lebanon's agrarian future.

5. Policy Recommendations

Based on this analysis and the insights gathered from advocates, growers, and experts, the following recommendations balance the needs for structural transformation with concrete, actionable steps for achieving food sovereignty and agricultural reform in Lebanon.

Near-Term Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations constitute immediate, actionable, and achievable change within current political constraints and without requiring deep structural overhaul –though deeper change will still be needed to build a genuinely sovereign food system.

Low-hanging fruits – such as cooperative revitalization, market access, farmer training, and consumer awareness – may not transform the political economy of agriculture, but they would nevertheless improve the situation meaningfully by stabilizing struggling farmers, building public trust in local food systems, and laying the groundwork for more ambitious reforms.

Strengthen and Support Functional Cooperatives

- CSOs and MOA should build on the relative success of women-led agro-processing cooperatives.
- Advocacy groups must continue to provide farmers with targeted support, such as training and legal aid, while the MOA should set up a low-interest loans program.
- Food sovereignty organizers and advocates must encourage peer-learning between functional and struggling cooperatives.
- Legislators and the MOA must introduce new cooperative legislation that ensures transparency, accountability, and participatory governance.
- The MOA must prioritize support to cooperatives serving local markets over donor-driven export cooperatives.
- Advocacy groups and CSOs must provide capacity-building and legal aid for the democratization and revitalization of existing cooperatives.

Decentralize Agricultural Training and Agroecology Knowledge Hubs

- Donors pursuing food sovereignty initiatives must invest in localized farmer-to-farmer training centers led by groups like SOILS, Buzuruna Juzuruna, and Nohye el Ard.
- Donors and the MOA must fund workshops on composting, seed-saving, and soil health with the help of NGOs already doing the work.

Reinforce Transparency in Organic

Certification

- The MOA must simplify and subsidize organic/ agroecological certification for smallholders.
- Advocacy groups should introduce participatory guarantee systems (PGS) as alternatives to expensive third-party certification.

Establish Protected Farmers' Market Zones

- Advocacy groups and the MOA should offer rent-free or subsidized space for weekly CSA distributions and farmers' markets in underserved areas.
- Donors, advocacy groups, and the MOA must prioritize small producers with verifiable agroecological practices.

Create a Farmer–MOA Liaison Committee

- Advocacy groups must set up a rotating advisory group of small-scale farmers to meet quarterly with representatives of the MOA.
- The MOA should institutionalize the recent outreach efforts and ensure follow-up.

Regulate Water Distribution Fairly in High-Need Regions

- The MOA, in coordination with advocacy groups, should pilot transparent, monitored water-sharing systems in politically marginalized farming regions like the Beqaa.
- The MOA must publicly report allocation decisions to reduce sectarian and clientelist abuse.

Longer-Term, Structural Policy Shifts

The recommendations discussed above should not be mistaken for sufficient solutions. Interviewees repeatedly pointed to structural exclusions – in land, capital, water, and political access – that limit the transformative potential of small interventions. Without addressing these root issues, even successful grassroots projects remain fragile. The following recommendations require political reform, stronger state capacity, or significant changes in the economic model.

Land Reform and Fair Tenure Systems

- The legislator must address discriminatory inheritance laws and secure tenure for tenants and women farmers.
- The MOA must develop a national land registry to reduce informal land claims and monopolies.
- The MOA, in coordination with farmers' organizations and advocacy groups, must launch a land access program targeting youth, women, and small-scale farmers. This entails land reforms where the state would negotiate access or outright expropriation of major landowners' private property, freeing up fields and farming hectares for the above-mentioned communities.
- Advocacy groups in coordination with the ministry must establish a national land bank to lease underutilized land at subsidized rates for agroecological use.
- Legal experts, advocates, and legislators must review and reform inheritance and landownership laws that prevent equitable access.
- Reorient State Subsidies toward Smallholder Production and Shift Agricultural Policy from Export Orientation to Domestic Food Security
- The MOA should reclaim sovereign control over donor aid and require alignment with national food security priorities.
- Phase out export-focused, elite-captured subsidies.
- Create a national coordination platform that includes the ministry, donors, NGOs, and farmer groups to prevent overlaps and silos.
- Shift from project-based aid to long-term public investment in rural infrastructure and services.
- Redirect state support toward staple crop production, especially wheat, pulses, and vegetables, for domestic consumption.
- Prioritize crops for local consumption, particularly vegetables, legumes, and cereals.
- Provide subsidies, credit, and infrastructure support to producers growing for domestic markets.
- Revise trade agreements and regulate donor-subsidized farming, either from private

initiatives or major International NGOs (INGOs) that push farmers toward export-only crops like avocados, apples, and grapes.

Establish a National Seed Bank Network

- Legislators and the MOA should legally recognize community seed systems and fund decentralized seed-saving initiatives in collaboration with advocacy groups and local municipalities.
- The ministry must protect farmers' rights to save, exchange, and breed local seeds.

Create a Unified Food Sovereignty Strategy across Ministries and Support Agroecology and Short Value Chains through Public Investment

- Require coordination between the MOA, the Ministry of Economy, and relevant NGOs and donors under a shared food sovereignty framework.
- The state must establish a national agroecology support fund for training, seeds, composting, and technical assistance.
- Invest in territorial food systems: local processing hubs, seed banks, and distribution platforms.
- Scale up CSAs and farmers' markets through infrastructure support.

Legal and Financial Recognition for Alternative Market Models

- The state must recognize CSAs and community-based markets as legal entities eligible for support.
- The ministry, along with legislators, has to develop tax breaks or micro-subsidies for community food programs, seed swaps, and alternative food chains.

The Lebanese state, through its executive, legislative, and judicial branches, can put in place the mechanism to undertake the structural overhauls described above. The state, however, will not shift resources towards these changes without significant political pressure – hence the role of advocacy groups, donors, and farmers' representatives in developing a political strategy and campaign that pressures the state to wield its instruments for the public good.

6. Conclusion

The narratives and analyses gathered from farmers, agricultural advocates, and experts across Lebanon reveal a deeply fragmented but vibrant landscape of struggle, innovation, and resistance within the country's agrifood system. Despite diverse perspectives, there is a shared diagnosis of Lebanon's agricultural vulnerabilities: historical inequities, entrenched donor dependency, state neglect, and a heavy reliance on export-oriented and import-dependent models shaping the system. These challenges have only intensified in the wake of Lebanon's ongoing economic and political crises.

Farmers and grassroots actors – from the organizers at Agrimovement to local producers in Akkar, the Beqaa, and Mount Lebanon – express both frustration and resilience. They emphasize the need for territorialized food systems rooted in community, access to land, and agroecological principles. Agricultural experts echo this emphasis, calling for a structural shift toward food sovereignty – defined not solely as the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate, ecologically produced food, but also as the right of communities to define their own food and agricultural systems.

As outlined, the problem is not a lack of alternatives, but the absence of enabling conditions: access to land, stable infrastructure, democratic cooperatives, political organization, and coordinated state policy. Many cooperatives are donor-driven, elite-dominated, or dysfunctional. Women-led agro-processing co-ops stand out as promising models, but they remain isolated. Youth-led collectives and movements like Agrimovement are reimagining what agriculture can look like, but face burnout, exclusion from decision-making, and limited support.

The recommendations that emerge are clear. Lebanon must reorient its agricultural policy away from export markets and toward food sovereignty by supporting local production for local consumption. The state must reclaim its role – coordinating donor support, investing in agroecology, democratizing land access, and reviving cooperatives as collective institutions rather than profit-driven enterprises. Farmers must be seen not merely as producers, but as political agents. Without meaningful inclusion of their voices in governance, reform efforts will remain fragmented and ineffective.

In sum, Lebanon's food system needs both pragmatic near-term interventions and bold structural change. The state can immediately act on several fronts to empower producers, decentralize food systems, and stabilize local markets – but long-term sovereignty requires tackling the core inequities of land access, economic policy, and political voice. Achievable short-term change must be pursued with a view toward deeper, systemic transformation.

Ultimately, food insecurity is not a technical crisis but fundamentally a political one. Building a food-sovereign Lebanon requires a national strategy rooted in justice, equity, and ecological resilience. It must empower small-scale farmers, address the structural conditions of exclusion, and resist the pressures of market liberalization and donor capture. As multiple voices in this study make clear, the seeds of transformation already exist. What is needed now is the political will – and collective organization – to cultivate them.

7. Appendix: Interview Methodology

Interviewee Selection

Interviews were conducted with 14 individuals. In December, the Arab Reform Initiative organized an agricultural stakeholder meeting through which five were selected, and within their networks, several other individuals were interviewed as well.

These local advocates represent the field of environmental organizations, agricultural advocacy groups, and political activists pursuing food sovereignty and justice goals in Lebanon.

WO: A representative from Mada, "a non-partisan, non-sectarian Lebanese NGO which aims at reinforcing the relationship between local communities and their natural environment",[20] and works extensively with small farmers in Akkar.

SL: A founder and representative of Jibal, "a not-for-profit association founded in Beirut in 2017" that seeks to promote and advance "social and environmental justice – or the fair and equitable distribution of environmental and social benefits (and burdens) – in Lebanon through the furthering of collective organization, accessible and open knowledge, and regenerative principles."[21]

LP: A founder of a Lebanese coalition of farmers' markets and organizer of the Badaro Urban Farmers Market.

FL: Works at the Beit el Mouzareh (Farmer's House) initiative at Arcenciel, a Lebanese NGO that runs farmers' support services across the country but predominantly in Beqaa.

PY, KM, DN: Three representatives from the Agricultural Movement in Lebanon (Agrimovement), a populist, green, social justice group working towards establishing a food-sovereign system that is equitable, fair, and dignified for local growers within an explicitly political framing.[22]

Three small local producers were interviewed, all of whom are young farmers trying to break the monopoly the MOA and international donors have over large landowners and farmers, as well as challenge the primacy of export-dependent agricultural practices. They advocate for an agricultural sector that preserves the dignity and livelihood of the farmer first, satisfies the local market before the external one, and exports whatever excess produce remains. Given the political nature of their work, it is hard to distinguish these individuals from the interviewed advocates beyond the sole criterion that they are legitimate farmers just as much as there are agricultural pioneers; they are attempting to make a livelihood out of their agricultural practice.

AB: Farmer and member of SOILS, an organization dedicated to "the teaching, training and sharing of skills and resources related to sustainable and environment-friendly practices" and works towards "applying permaculture ethics and principles in design systems that work with nature – not against it – to provide food, energy and shelter in both rural and urban communities."[23]

XY: Farmer and active member of Jibal.

UT: Founder of Buzuruna Juzuruna, an agricultural cooperative, mutual aid group, and seed bank that invests in a variety of sustainable, locally sourced food products in Lebanon. "Lebanese association and School-Farm, active since 2016 and registered in 2018, based in Saadnayel, Beqaa" which specializes "in the selection and multiplication of heirloom seeds, from a collection gathering more than 300 ancient and local varieties."[24]

The heavy toll of farming life in Lebanon made it difficult to schedule additional interviews from the broader farming community in a manner that would have been representative of its various sectors, regions, and expertise. Instead, this report relies on the voices of advocates and bodies who themselves engage much more broadly with the wider farming community through their own organizing and initiatives.

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[20] Mada,"Who We Are", https://mada.org.lb/who-we-are/

[21] Jibal, "About عن جبال", https://www.jibal.org/about-us/

[22] Agrimovement, "Agricultural Movement in Lebanon", 4 January 2021, https://agrimovement.org/2021/01/04/hello-world/

[23] SOILS, "About Us", https://www.soils-permaculture-lebanon.com/about-soils.html

[24] Daleel Madani, "Buzuruna Juzuruna - Supporting Agroecology in Lebanon", 8 May 2024, https://daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/buzuruna-juzuruna-supporting-agroecology-lebanon

Finally, the interviews included four experts who provided deep knowledge on labor practices of agrarian farming in rural Lebanon, especially the social and gendered dimensions of these communities.

Kanj Hamadé: Expert on the political economy of agriculture in contemporary Lebanon. He is an astute observer of the political dynamics between the state, donors, and local activists that have shaped the sector over the past few decades.

Rita Khawand: Founder of SOILS and an expert and surveyor of alternative agricultural schemes.

Noa Sanad: PhD candidate conducting field research on agricultural alternatives in Lebanon since the financial crisis.

Nur Turkmani: Expert on the network of women-led agrifood cooperatives and offers unique insights on the gendered nature of food production and its materialities. She has spent years interviewing farm laborers in the Beqaa valley, studying the socioeconomic factors that dictate their daily lives.

The research period coincided with the announcement and selection of a new government and Minister of Agriculture, which made it difficult to set up interviews with the ministry. However, many of the advocates and experts interviewed for this report attended meetings organized and held by the minister and his team. They were asked about their discussions with the ministry, their plans for pushing its political commitments, and their overall impression of the current team in charge.

Interview Questions

The interview structure aimed to unpack obstacles, structures, and policies impeding the emergence of a food-sovereign and secure system in Lebanon. To that end, distinct sets of questions were posed to interviewees depending on the nature of their work.

Local advocates were asked to define what food sovereignty means to them and to identify any gaps between state and donor understandings of food sovereignty, on the one hand, and that of local producers and advocates, on the other. They were also asked about what sort of changes can be advocated for and what sort of activities can be organized to expand market access for small-scale producers.

Local producers were queried about immediate- and long-term needs to sustain their businesses and achieve their developmental and sustainability goals, as well as the structural obstacles and regulatory hurdles they face.

Local experts who have worked with international developmental organizations were asked about the type of support that the state, international NGOs, and other interested parties offer local producers, where they perceive a gap in support needed, and their short-, medium-, and long-term visions of these partnerships.

All interviewees were also asked a second set of general common questions around the following:

What does the ideal food-sovereign and secure system look like to you in Lebanon, within the country's constraints?

What are the major political and economic obstacles that prevent local small-scale farmers from accessing the broader market?

What are your expectations of and hopes for the Minister of Agriculture?

What is your assessment of farming cooperatives, and what is preventing farmers from mobilizing into an effective political block that advocates on their behalf?

The interviews were analyzed from several vantage points: the viability and sustainability of agricultural practices; the viability of integrating new farming models within local communities and village life; labor practices and dependence on migrant workers; the presence or lack thereof of state support; and the structural, ecological, and regulatory hurdles producers face to preserve their viability and access to local markets.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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