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DONOR-DRIVEN AGRICULTURAL POLICIES IN LEBANON: PUTTING FARMERS LAST?

Kanj Hamade

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About the author

Kanj Hamade is the co-founder of Economic Development Solutions (EDS). He is a development and agricultural economist, and an expert in food security/sovereignty. He holds a PhD in Economics and Politics of Agriculture and Food.

About the study

This study is part of the Arab Reform Initiative's project DIRAIA, "Knowledge" in Arabic, short for "Developing Inclusive Research through Activism and Informed Advocacy". Focusing on fieldwork and multi-method research in Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia, DIRAIA explores how frontline communities and organizations are mobilizing around environmental grievances as they intersect with socio-economic and political injustice across the region. DIRAIA is part of the network of Knowledge Alliance for Environmental Defenders (KALLIED), which brings together 32 organizations from 22 countries across the Global South and is funded by Canada's IDRC.

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Cover photo: Beekeeper extracting honey sample from hive for tasting - Mtein, Lebanon - May 2025.

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1. Introduction

Lebanon has consistently failed to design and implement agriculture policies that prioritize farmers and rural communities. Since the French mandate period, political, social, and economic dynamics have instead favored capital accumulation across the agricultural value chain – benefiting input suppliers and financial capital upstream, and prioritizing agroindustry and trade downstream. Even during the Chehab administration (1958-1964) – when the state recognized the need for wealth distribution and developed what appeared to be, at least on paper, a coherent agricultural policy – Lebanon’s ruling class was able to divert resources toward influential and well-connected farmers and landlords.¹

Lebanon emerged from the civil war (1975-1990) as a mosaic of territories and political spaces, with varying power distributions between state and nonstate actors. In this political landscape, the state bargains and negotiates with political and economic actors, often accepting the coexistence and superposition of multiple systems of power, decision-making, and legitimacy.² This dynamic applies to agricultural policymaking, where a weak and uninterested state with limited power is ultimately instrumentalized or simply sidelined by capital, political parties, international organizations, or donors, all of whom primarily aim to advance their own agendas.

Compensating for the state’s limited capacity and willingness to design and implement nationwide policies, donors have become central actors in Lebanon’s agricultural sector, shaping its priorities and programmatic directions since the mid-1990s. Tracing donor intervention is therefore essential to understanding how agricultural development has been envisioned in Lebanon and why challenges persist.

Understanding the trajectory and limitations of

1 Zeead Yaghi, “Planning National Disunity: Modernization and Development in Rural Lebanon 1958-1970”, PhD dissertation, University of California – San Diego, 2024.

2 Franck Debié, Danuta Pieter, and Eric Verdeil, *La Paix et la Crise: le Liban Reconstitué?*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2003 (Debié et al., *La Paix et la Crise*).

the donor-Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) policy framework in Lebanon is particularly necessary in the current moment of profound economic and political transformation. Since 2019, three severe shocks that have significantly impacted agricultural input prices: The 2019 financial crisis, the 2022 war in Ukraine alongside post-COVID inflation, and the 2026 closure of the Strait of Hormuz and its consequences for energy and fertilizer costs. Compounding these economic shocks, since 2023 Lebanon has faced successive waves of Israeli military escalation culminating in the 2026 invasion of border villages in south Lebanon and Israel’s large-scale, deliberate destruction of homes and infrastructure, ethnic cleansing, and ecocide.

This study analyzes how donor-funded projects have been constrained not only by political-economy dynamics, shocks, and crises, but also by donors’ reluctance to challenge established government perspectives and advocate policies centered on farmers. It argues that donor projects have not put farmers at the center of their action and, with few exceptions, have not led to farmers’ empowerment and integration into fair food systems. Specifically, the study reviews various thematic areas of donor support, including improved competitiveness and sustainability, export-oriented development, stabilization amid the Syrian crisis, and support to the cooperatives sector. The analysis also tackles the rising interest in agroecology since 2019 and the 2025 shift in the discourse and policies of the MoA.

2. EU Interventions and the Resistance to Reform

In the early 1990s, input suppliers backed by open import credit lines from Lebanese banks actively promoted the intensification of agricultural production. In the absence of functioning agricultural extension services (i.e., technical support for farmers) and with no other form of farmer credit, input suppliers leveraged their dominant position to push for an unsustainable production

model based on an intensive and irrational use of inputs.

Instead of enhancing competitiveness, the intensification model had the opposite effect: Farm productivity remained low despite high yields; farm gate prices were constrained by harvest-time oversupply; traders retained their monopoly over postharvest infrastructure; and wholesale market governance remained unfair.³ To make matters worse, excessive pesticide residues and poor product quality hindered access to export markets.

The uncontrolled and unregulated growth also had severe negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts. As early as the late 1990s, studies documented alarming nitrate pollution in rivers and groundwater.⁴ From a socioeconomic perspective, high production costs and low farm gate prices eroded farmers' margins. Most of the value added from agriculture output was extracted by input suppliers, traders, and bankers (through import credit lines). Thus, in the 1990s post-civil war reconstruction and economic growth period, agriculture remained subordinated to banking and trade as it had been before the war.⁵

The 1990s were also characterized by a notable absence of public policies or structured plans to monitor, control, and regulate an increasingly unsustainable and inequitable agricultural production system. It was only toward the early 2000s that awareness began to emerge regarding

the critical importance of establishing a competitive agricultural sector based on sustainable resource use and resilient food production systems. This later period also saw the initiation of donor-funded interventions designed and implemented in close collaboration with the MoA, embedding project staff and offices within the ministry itself.⁶

Despite their integration within the MoA, donors quickly recognized that interventions that neglected institutional capacity-building and policy reform were inherently limited in their impact. For instance, the EU-funded Agriculture Development Programme (2003-2008), which aimed to support the production and marketing of agricultural products, encountered substantial challenges due to the "limited management capacity of the MoA and the lack of institution-building activities", as well as insufficient attention to "structural problems of farmers, such as access to credit".⁷

Acknowledging these shortcomings, the EU's subsequent intervention, the Agricultural and Rural Development Programme (2011-2017), was designed as a comprehensive sectoral support initiative. Its objectives included addressing institutional weaknesses, reforming policy frameworks, enhancing production and quality control technologies, and expanding access to credit through schemes tailored to agricultural needs. Still, this new program fell short of achieving significant reforms and institutional improvements. For example, the program's activities on irrigation infrastructure and agricultural roads achieved significant infrastructure enhancements in targeted areas but failed to establish effective irrigation policy frameworks or improved irrigation management practices. The Kafalat agricultural credit scheme was successful in improving access to finance for medium-size farmers, but it did not offer

3 Lebanon agriculture markets are oligopolistic, i.e., controlled by a limited number of wholesalers, retailers, distributors, and importers. Successful participation requires strong social networks and political connections, creating high barriers to entry that effectively exclude new or small-scale actors from competing on fair terms. These structural inequities are compounded by an unfair wholesale market. Wholesalers operate on a consignment basis, taking a 10% commission on sales, while farmers bear the full cost of transportation, unsold goods, and postharvest losses, retaining virtually no control over actual sale operations. The near-total absence of transparent pricing mechanisms means that most farmers have no access to daily market price information and are forced to rely solely on the goodwill of the wholesaler, placing them in a position of informational disadvantage. See Food and Agriculture Organization, Food Systems Profile – Lebanon: Catalysing the sustainable and inclusive transformation of food systems", 2022, available at <https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/c6cb0242-28e1-4ac4-8a51-361bb945a998>

4 Debié et al., *La Paix et la Crise*.

5 For an analysis of pre-civil war agriculture dynamics, see: Roger Owen, "The Political Economy of Grand Liban, 1920-70", in *Essays on the Crisis in Lebanon*, Roger Owen, ed. Ithaca Press, 1976.

6 Prior to this period, only one major donor-funded program was implemented. The UN Development Programme supported an "alternative development" program in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, seeking to replace cannabis with legal crops and rural infrastructure investments. The program was chronically underfunded – only about US\$17 million of the originally estimated US\$300 million was mobilized, and alternative crops proved less profitable. As a result, most farmers eventually reverted to cannabis cultivation. This information comes from personal communications between the author and former UN Development Programme staff.

7 EU, "Action Fiche for Republic of Lebanon", 2010, available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-04/aap_liban_2010_ad4.pdf

a sustainable, long-term solution for agricultural financing. Similarly, technical assistance provided to farmers had limited impact, failing to enhance public extension services or mitigate the dominance of input suppliers who continued to encourage unsustainable use of inputs.

The limited impact of EU agricultural initiatives at policy and institutional levels underscores a critical insight: Perceived institutional capacity gaps often reflect deeper issues related to political unwillingness or resistance to reform, and in some cases intentional political sabotage. A flagrant instance was the closure by the MoA of 12 milk collection centers established between 1998 and 2002 by the International Fund for Agricultural Development. In the dairy sector, large producers had direct control over milk prices and abused their dominant position to drive the milk price down, putting significant pressure on farmers' profit margins. To address this, the fund and the MoA established regional milk collection centers to aggregate small producers' milk supplies and stabilize prices. As soon as the project ended, however, the MoA closed the centers. The official reason was their alleged economic nonviability; however, there is substantial evidence suggesting that large producers strongly lobbied the MoA to close the centers. As this example illustrates, resistance to reform stems primarily from the MoA's efforts to maintain a status quo beneficial to nonfarming powerful actors, such as input suppliers, traders, and large agri-business. As a result, the policy and institutional constraints identified at the design phases of the Agricultural and Rural Development Programme remained unchanged upon its completion.

Overall, EU efforts to improve agricultural competitiveness and sustainability have yielded limited results. The persistent issue of irrational input use remained unresolved, as neither the MoA nor donors have been able or willing to overcome the influence of input suppliers. Similarly, EU programs have struggled to integrate small farmers into agricultural export value chains.

In contrast, private sector initiatives have successfully leveraged the 2002 EU-Lebanon agreement's export opportunities, namely preferential tariff rates and quotas. Trader-led semi-integrated value chains emerged, where traders provided technical assistance to medium-size farmers to ensure export-quality production in terms of varieties, grades, and

pesticide residues. Traders aggregated production in modern cold storage facilities and marketed it in branded packaging in the EU. A notable example is the export of table grapes to the EU during the December-January festive period.

3. USAID Goes Solo: The Consequences of Sidelining the MoA

The private-sector-led responses to EU trade agreements became a key reference for the value chain projects of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which prioritized access to export. The US government invested heavily in the agriculture sector through multiyear projects, such as the Lebanon Value Chain Development project (2012-2018) and the Lebanon Agriculture and Rural Empowerment project (2019-2024), averaging around US\$10 million annually – a significantly greater level of funding than that of other donors.

By relying on strong private sector actors, USAID's approach brought significant changes in several value chains, particularly avocados, cherries, apples, table grapes, olive oil, honey, and traditional food products (*mounneh*). USAID's model was subsequently adopted and expanded by other donors such as the EU private sector development projects (2019-2023), and the Netherlands SADER I and II projects (2019-2023 and 2023-2027, respectively).

Despite its relative success, USAID's approach was highly politicized. By operating independently of the MoA and supporting nonstate, politically affiliated actors, the US government used USAID projects as a tool to advance political agendas. These projects prioritized support for Christian rural areas and directed substantial funds and capacity-building assistance to politically affiliated organizations such as the Hariri, Moawad, Safadi and Daher foundations, as well as organizations created through the US Offices for Transition Initiatives (2007-2010) that have become major partners in the implementation of donor-funded projects (both USAID and non-USAID). More importantly, USAID's approach set a precedent: Implementing projects

without coordination with the MoA is not only more efficient but also facilitates the instrumentalization of agriculture projects to reinforce selected political elites through donor-funded clientelism.

4. The Syrian Crisis: Stabilization Priorities and the Missed Development Link

The sidelining of the MoA from the coordination and effective oversight of donor-funded projects became a defining feature of the 2011-2019 period. During this time, the Syrian refugee crisis and the political distancing of donors from Amal-Hezbollah affiliated ministries and institutions shaped donor interventions along two main lines.

The first line of donor intervention tackled economic development through improved access to export markets. Despite the economic challenges triggered by the Syrian crisis, donors continued to assume that export remained the primary route for agricultural development. A key operational advantage of this approach was the ability to rely on private sector actors or third-party local NGOs that created parallel for-profit private businesses to manage exports, especially for *mouneh*.

This approach spared donors and implementing partners the “hassle” of tackling dysfunctional and unfair food systems, leaving unaddressed critical issues such as wholesale market governance, fragmented production, the land-tenure system, oligopolistic control over postharvest infrastructure, and the need for policy and institutional reforms. In practice, this approach channeled support to a limited number of producers through pilot actions that did not alter overall food system dynamics. It demonstrated that pilot interventions, even if successful, cannot create a broader impact if they are not linked to policy and institutional changes. Operating with minimal coordination with the MoA, these projects perceived the absence of coordination as the more effective operational choice.

The second line of intervention was embedded within the successive Lebanon Crisis Response Plans (2015-2022) (LCRP), which integrated the donors’ and the government’s response to the crisis created by the Syrian war. The LCRP recognized agriculture’s potential for stabilization and peacebuilding through employment and income generation for both Syrian refugees and host communities. In fact, as of 2013, local endogenous dynamics, independent of donor projects, propelled agricultural growth in rural areas that witnessed a significant influx of Syrian refugees. These local responses were triggered by increased food demand, the presence of low-wage labor, and credit lines from local traders and input suppliers. For instance, satellite imagery revealed considerable growth in irrigated agriculture in northern Beqaa and a boom in greenhouse production in Akkar. These dynamics have had a tangible positive effect on local livelihoods and social stability.⁸

Interventions within the LCRP have prioritized food security by providing food and in-kind cash transfers to refugee households; they supported projects promoting home-based and subsistence agriculture production, support for home gardening, small-scale home-based poultry and dairy units, and had particular emphasis on women’s engagement. The LCRP program also prioritizes cash-for-work, employment-intensive investments in local infrastructure, including the rehabilitation of local irrigation networks and reforestation initiatives. Nonetheless, the LCRP projects, especially prior to the 2019 crisis, overlooked the opportunity to implement the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus⁹ and integrate development as a central

8 Kanj Hamade, “Agriculture as a Key to the Resilience of Lebanon Rural Areas to the Effect of the Syrian Crisis”, in *Crises et Conflits en Méditerranée: l’Agriculture comme Résilience*, Cosimo Lacirignola, ed., La Bibliothèque de l’iReMMO, L’Harmattan, 2018.

9 The Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus is an internationally endorsed framework formally adopted at the 2016 Istanbul World Humanitarian Summit that called for coherent and simultaneous action across humanitarian relief, longer term development, and peacebuilding, and for moving away from sequential or siloed responses. In the Lebanese context – where Syrian displacement has evolved into a protracted, multilayered crisis compounded by economic collapse and state fragility – the nexus is particularly critical. It provides a framework for addressing acute needs, investing in systems and livelihoods that serve both refugee and host communities, and managing the social tensions that prolonged displacement generates. Operationalizing the nexus in Lebanon requires aligning short-term assistance with structural and policy changes at the sectoral level and conflict-sensitive programming.

element of interventions.¹⁰

One exception was the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)'s support to the Green Plan General Directorate (2016 and 2024), which was implemented through successive projects funded by the Netherlands, Denmark, and the EU MADAD trust fund. This plan was successful in leveraging farmer grant schemes to support farm-level investment such as land reclamation, land rehabilitation, orchard establishment, irrigation networks, and farm water reservoirs.

In the absence of agricultural credit schemes and effective extension services, the program allowed vulnerable farmers to make sustainable, long-term investments in productive assets while also creating both short- and long-term jobs for Lebanese and Syrian workers. It promoted the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus by linking immediate employment opportunities with long-term agricultural investment. The FAO's collaboration with the Green Plan was one of the few programs that put farmers at the center of the intervention while also advocating for key policy changes in targeting and management procedures. The scheme revitalized the Green Plan by strengthening its staff capacity, introducing an electronic database of beneficiaries, and embedding more transparent and socially responsive selection criteria. Overall, the FAO's decision to work with, rather than sideline, public institutions induced initial institutional and policy reforms in the Green Plan's strategic vision and operations.

10 For example, an evaluation of the EU's Agricultural and Livelihood Strategy in Lebanon (2008-2023) found that "using 'development' interventions to address a humanitarian crisis and a 'humanitarian' approach to achieve development outcomes resulted in less-than-optimal development results". The report concluded with the need to integrate "a development approach to address agriculture, TVET, employment and entrepreneurship". See: Rima Azar and Kanj Hamade, "Thematic Evaluation of the EU's Agricultural & Livelihood Strategy in Lebanon", EU Reference: Ares (2024) 999358, 2024.

5. The 2019 Crisis: Shifting from Stabilization to Development

The 2019 economic crisis shocked Lebanon's agriculture sector, simultaneously exposing its vulnerabilities while also revealing pathways for resilience. The collapse of the banking system abruptly disrupted the input supplier-led and credit-dependent production model. The sharp constraints on farmers' ability to access inputs forced negative adaptive responses – such as the reduction of planted areas or the use of lower-quality inputs – but also positive ones, such as more rational input use.

At the same time, the crisis elevated agriculture from a politically marginal economic activity to a central element of political discourse, as agriculture reentered the public debate framed as a pillar of national resilience and economic survival. The most emblematic expression of this shift was the call by Hezbollah's secretary-general for an "agricultural jihad"; across the political spectrum and within civil society, there emerged a broader narrative that glamorized farming and a return to the land, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown.¹¹

Post-2019 donor projects shifted the discourse, reframing agriculture as a vector of economic development rather than only an instrument for stabilization – a shift that induced renewed donor engagement with the MoA. In parallel, significant funds were allocated to food security and farmers' livelihood recovery programming that targeted Lebanese populations, as well as to agroecology interventions. The World Bank played a leading role in propelling donor reengagement with the government. The bank worked closely with the government to develop sectoral strategies, design postcrisis emergency, and draft the Green-Agri Food

11 Pascale Sawma, "Lebanon: Agricultural 'Religious Obligations'... Addressing the Economic Collapse with a Pot of Mint!", Daraj Media, 9 July 2020, available at <https://daraj.media/en/lebanon-agricultural-religious-obligations-addressing-the-economic-collapse-with-a-pot-of-mint/>

12 Donor-driven Agricultural Policies in Lebanon: Putting Farmers Last?

Transformation for Economic Recovery Project, a US\$200 million loan facility aimed at sectoral recovery. It also provided technical support and emergency loans to the government for the direct import of soft wheat.

Nevertheless, donor reengagement with the MoA remained limited to improved coordination and collaboration mechanisms and did not translate into direct financing. In fact, apart from the Green-Agri Food project above, no donor-funded projects are yet directly implemented by the MoA. Donors continue to favor collaboration with MoA-affiliated general directorates – such as the General Directorate of the Green Plan, the General Directorate for Cooperatives and Mutual Funds, and the Lebanese Agricultural Research Institute – instead of with the ministry’s core itself, the General Directorate for Agriculture.

For example, donor collaboration with the Lebanese Agricultural Research Institute exponentially increased after 2019. The financing of the institute’s implemented projects was linked to the postcrisis panic around food security and the availability of funding through the EU Food and Resilience Facility – an instrument established in 2022 as part of the EU’s plan to address risks to food supply and resilience caused by the war in Ukraine and associated market disruptions. Food security concerns rapidly moved to the top of the donor agenda, accompanied by a significant increase in funding dedicated to the wheat value chain. However, this rapid mobilization also revealed a high degree of fragmentation, reflected in weak coordination among projects and a duplication of interventions pursuing largely similar objectives, such as enhancing seed production, providing equipment, and upgrading the cereals and pulses value chains.¹²

Underlying these coordination challenges is a deeper policy issue in the way donors and the Lebanese government have approached food security issues: Framing the response in terms of food availability, or Lebanon’s capacity to import and produce soft

wheat, rather than in terms of food access, or the ability of vulnerable households to afford food. The resulting policy emphasis on domestic soft wheat production to address trade deficits and hedge against a hypothetical collapse in the international wheat supply overshadowed possible structurally sound, farmer-focused rural development strategies. These would prioritize hard wheat, local varieties, sustainable crop rotation cycles, and value-added approaches capable of engaging farmers in resilient and profitable production systems. In fact, many initiatives along these lines, including using local wheat varieties in bread and pasta production, have emerged endogenously from local communities rather than through donor-driven projects. Now that the acute food security panic mode has waned, the relevance and sustainability of a soft-wheat-centered strategy are questionable.

Support for farmer recovery through input provision was also a major component of postcrisis donor-funded emergency interventions. Input distribution through vouchers or an in-kind scheme was included in most projects, driven by concerns over a potential collapse in agricultural production following the contraction of input credit lines, and strongly advocated by input suppliers. While it may have enabled select farmers to cope with the immediate effects of the crisis, the overall impact of input distributions on farming households has not been systematically documented. In fact, field practitioners report that the amounts provided were modest relative to actual needs, and that many farmers used the vouchers to cover other basic household expenses. In addition, implementation delays significantly reduced the relevance and effectiveness of interventions that were originally designed as emergency measures. The sharp increase in agricultural input prices following the war in Ukraine and post-COVID inflation likely diluted the purchasing power of the vouchers.¹³ More importantly, the approach resulted in a substantial transfer of public funds to input suppliers, further reinforcing their dominant position within agricultural value chains.

12 The Lebanese Agricultural Research Institute has, in a short period, received support from at least four different donors: The FAO’s EU Food and Resilience Facility, funded by the EU (US\$12.1 million); the UN Development Programme’s Food Security Project, funded by Germany, (US\$6.5 million); the CIHEAM Bari SEED Lebanon project, funded by Italy (US\$1.1 million), and the FAO’s Enhancing National Food Security and Supporting Sustainable Food Systems, funded by Japan (US\$0.75 million).

13 Initial input-support projects were implemented in 2020; however, the provision of input supplier vouchers and or in-kind support remained a core activity across several projects up to the 2025 agricultural season.

6. The Growing Interest in Agroecology

Another major shift following Lebanon's economic and financial crisis has been the growing interest in agroecology.¹⁴ Donors' agroecology interests and Lebanon's endogenous agroecological movement have emerged from distinct dynamics and continue to function in different spheres, with only a few actors overlapping. While the agroecological movement arose from political mobilization, donor funding for agroecology was guided by the European Green Agenda and the EU Farm to Fork Strategy.¹⁵

6.1. The Rise of Lebanon's Movement: Agroecology and Farmers' Rights

The economic crisis catalyzed the emergence of a sociopolitical movement focused on Agroecology and farmers' rights that grew out of the 2019 uprising (thawra). The 2019 uprising did not emerge in isolation; rather, it was rooted in decades of accumulated civil society engagement and political activism, much of which had already been shaped by environmental struggles. As documented by Julia Choucair,¹⁶ environmental grievances – particularly

those linked to waste management, infrastructure failure, and natural resource mismanagement – have been central to Lebanon's alternative social and political movements. They became clearly visible during both the 2015 "You Stink" protests and the 2019 uprising as vehicles for broad demands for political accountability and systemic reform. The key shift between 2015 and 2019 lays in the growing capacity and willingness of a predominantly urban middle-class movement to reach toward rural areas and farmers, or at least to explicitly seek such alliances, thereby laying the foundations for a more inclusive and socially grounded agenda.

The grassroots movement in Lebanon, currently represented by two bodies, the Agroecology Coalition in Lebanon and the Agricultural Movement in Lebanon, is emerging as a dynamic, eclectic, and increasingly politicized field, evolving from primarily environmental initiatives into a broader project of social justice, farmer empowerment, and systemic transformation. This realization marked a strategic shift: As of November 2025, the movement expanded into a broader advocacy-oriented alliance capable of influencing public discourse and policy. The 2024 Israeli war on Lebanon further deepened the movement's political awareness, pushing it toward a shared language and collective practice that linked ecological sustainability with socioeconomic and, at least for some component of the movement, political and systemic change. For many core actors, environmental protection was never the sole objective; rather, the movement became explicitly grounded in struggles for peasant autonomy and social justice.

The movement is gradually becoming explicitly political. In an unprecedented move within donor-funded contexts, the movement is openly questioning and contesting the policies and strategies of the MoA-donor sector governance framework, including a strong outspoken critic of the seed law draft and the MoA's upcoming agricultural strategy. While researchers and practitioners currently dominate its leadership, the movement is actively developing mechanisms to integrate farmers into its strategic core, ensuring they are not merely beneficiaries but central political actors.

The need for the movement to make an early strategic choice was triggered by its forced entry into the political arena following the MoA's proposed seed law, which movement actors perceived as not only a direct threat to farmers, but also to the practices

14 See, e.g., the TA'AMUNA sustainable and inclusive food system project funded by Italy (US\$7.7 million) and the Aradina project funded by the Agence Française de Développement and implemented by CIHEAM Montpellier, Fair Trade Lebanon, and Acción contra el Hambre – Spain (US\$7.7 million).

15 The EU Green Agenda is anchored in the European Green Deal adopted in December 2019, which sets the objective of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. It provides the overarching policy framework for sectoral strategies on agriculture, biodiversity, circular economy, energy, and food systems. Within this architecture, the Farm to Fork Strategy (May 2020) defines the EU's comprehensive approach to transforming food and agricultural systems toward sustainability, resilience, and environmental performance across the entire food chain.

16 Julia Choucair, "Lebanon's Environmentalists and the Fight for Nature: Reflecting on Successes and Failures of Recent Mobilizations", Arab Reform Initiative, 4 January 2024, available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/lebanons-environmentalists-and-the-fight-for-nature-reflecting-on-successes-and-failures-of-recent-mobilizations/>

of several member organizations. As a result, the movement rapidly shifted from a small circle of pioneers into a dynamic political actor capable of generating forms of political militancy through alliances with influential civil society organizations. It makes full use of its deep connections to the 2015 and 2019 political movement. Confrontation with the donor-MoA policy framework spiraled with the expansion of donor-MoA policy programming agenda and the multiplying arenas of direct conflict. The movement's early politicization and confrontational positioning are thus partly explained by its accelerated involvement in policymaking processes and its rapid insertion into institutional dynamics, forcing strategic choices that many social movements face only at much later stages of their development.

6.2. Donor Interest in Agroecology

In continuity with the precrisis projects that supported good agriculture and climate-smart practices, donor-funded agroecology projects focus on technical knowledge transfer to farmers and the development of alternative short value chains. Although some projects include advocacy components, it remains unclear how these will be operationalized given the limited capacity of implementing partners to leverage EU agroecology funding for meaningful farmer political empowerment. The EU Green Agenda emphasizes ecological transitions in production systems, such as changes in farming practices aimed at achieving environmental targets, rather than transitions toward strengthening farmers' social agency or political empowerment. Even if the EU were open to supporting such a sociopolitical transition, a second constraint relates to the need for implementing partners (namely international and local NGOs) to maintain alignment with the MoA and sector coordination mechanisms, as more confrontational or politically oriented advocacy risks creating tensions, positioning organizations as troublemakers, and potentially jeopardizing future funding opportunities. Ultimately, these alignment imperatives structurally discipline NGOs' advocacy strategies.

As a result, donor-funded agroecology advocacy is likely to remain confined to technically acceptable, nonconfrontational domains such as awareness-raising, stakeholder dialogue, and light institutional

processes, rather than structural challenges to existing power relations within the agricultural sector. Advocacy is framed as consultative participation rather than transformative action, prizing institutional compatibility over contestation. This configuration effectively pushes NGOs into managerial and technical roles, limiting their capacity to act as vectors of social or political transformation. It may also partly explain the current disconnection of donor-funded agroecology projects from the broader efforts to build a politically engaged agroecological movement. This continues despite the overlap of several NGOs across both spheres that are founding members of the agroecology movement and implementing partners in donor-funded agroecology projects.

While donor funding remains central to the functioning of some organizations within the agroecology and farmers' rights movement, traditional donors have not shown interest in financing the movement per se, and the movement, particularly its more politically radical segments, has not yet actively pursued such funding.¹⁷ Despite the current separation between conventional donors and the movement, it is likely that these actors will converge in the near future. Funding entails political recognition, that is, recognition by both donors (and the MoA) that the movement has a role to play. However, early political recognition often carries a considerable risk of institutionalization, or integration into donor-MoA governance frameworks and instrumentalization of the movement, especially its less radical members, to advance mainstream policy agendas. This risk highlights a strategic tension between early institutional recognition and policy integration, and a movement-building strategy that prioritizes autonomy through the construction of a strong, representative, democratic, and independent farmers and activists' movement, structurally decoupled from its initial NGO base. Such a shift would remove the movement from the temptation of NGO-mediated advocacy toward a model of direct political action in which farmers themselves, individually and collectively, become the primary political subjects and organizational backbone of not only agroecology but also a broader agricultural

17 The Agroecology Coalition and the agricultural movement have actively sought funding from alternative donors, which are perceived as more flexible and, more importantly, primarily interested in the movement's political action.

movement.

Ultimately, agroecology is not merely a set of technical practices, but a political engagement grounded in social justice and right-to-food principles. Stripping the political out of agroecology reduces it to yet another donor-driven label that does not tackle the systematic unfairness farmers face. A transition toward a broader farmer-led movement is therefore necessary, even if it entails internal fragmentation where some actors disengage due to discomfort with a confrontational political stance, preferring technical training and service delivery over direct political struggle.

7. Shaping the Cooperative Sector

Despite specific success stories, donor interventions have failed to use cooperatives as a pathway for farmer empowerment and food system transformation. Interest in supporting cooperatives started after the liberation of South Lebanon in 2000 and significantly intensified after the 2006 war. Cooperatives were seen as key to the development of liberated areas and as a tool for postwar recovery. Both donors and the MoA saw opportunities and showed interest in supporting cooperatives for development and clientelism objectives. In fact, and in one of the rare instances of direct public financing, the MoA introduced a dedicated budget line from 2006 to 2011 for financial grants to cooperatives.

The availability of both donor and MoA grants sparked a rapid increase in the number of cooperatives. A clear distinction emerged between active cooperatives and “ghost cooperatives” that were established solely to capture funding without any real intention to engage with their communities. The proliferation of ghost cooperatives pushed donors to concentrate resources on a limited number of active ones that were repeatedly selected for support.¹⁸ As a result, support was unequally distributed and perpetuated with a narrow focus on a few “success stories” rather than strengthening the sector.

The cooperative sector was further shaped by the emphasis on export-oriented and high-value products: Olive oil, honey, and fruit for export. This development paradigm defined cooperative viability through export potential and access to premium domestic markets. In parallel, strategies for women’s cooperatives reinforced an exclusivity track that steered many rural women toward establishing mouneh cooperatives or producer groups, typically supported with minimal initial capital investment, which in turn limits their capacity to generate substantial income.

Furthermore, through this approach, donor projects contributed to the empowerment of third-party intermediaries, particularly local NGOs and private companies, which provided product development and technical support to cooperatives but often retained control over commercialization channels, especially in the case of women’s cooperatives. At no point did donor-funded programs or local NGOs actively promote cooperative expansion, mergers, or support cooperatives in directly managing export sales. In addition, limited effort was made to engage farming communities, support membership expansion, or advocate for fundamental policy changes. In practice, the approach entrenched dependency on external actors and aid and created barriers to cooperative empowerment.

Overall, current dynamics within the cooperative sector have prompted distrust among farmers and growing criticism among practitioners, highlighting the limitations of a cooperative support model built on proliferation (large number of cooperatives), typological replication (same type of cooperatives), and low-capital assistance (all given a limited financial support). Yet examples of alternative interventions suggest that a fundamentally different development pathway is possible.

For example, the Fondazione Giovanni Paolo II (FGPII), through projects funded by the EU and Italy (2021-2025), is adopting an implementation strategy that combines farmer engagement and cooperative empowerment with policy advocacy.¹⁹ By shifting from low investment to capital-intensive and long-term engagement, the FGPII’s approach represents a clear departure from low-impact intervention

18 International Labour Organization, “The Cooperative Sector in Lebanon: What Role? What Future?”, International Labour Organization Regional Office for Arab States, Beirut, 2018, available at <https://www.ilo.org/publications/cooperative-sector-lebanon-what-role-what-future>

19 The “Promoting the Local Economy in North-East Bekaa” project, funded by the EU (US\$11 million, 2021-2025), implemented by a consortium of NGOs including the FGPII; the “Roots of Dignity in Lebanon: From the Land a Fair, Resilient and Inclusive Rural Economy” project, funded by Italy (US\$2 million 2022-2025), implemented by the FGPII.

models that support many cooperatives while allocating a small budget to each. To function as effective economic entities, cooperatives require substantial upfront investment: “Investing US\$10,000 in a cooperative produces only cosmetic change and fails to alter its economic trajectory.”²⁰

To rationalize higher capital requirements and address donor concerns, the FGPII uses a per capita investment model that caps investment at US\$3,000 per farmer and anchors capital allocation to membership size. In fact, capital investment is not treated as a standalone input but linked to membership expansion and democratic management of the cooperative. The approach places community engagement and inclusion at the very entry point of cooperative development: “Rather than starting with existing cooperatives, many of which are inactive or functionally ‘dead’, interventions begin by engaging directly with farmers.”²¹ Through facilitated dialogue, farmers collectively identify and prioritize their shared challenges, forming the basis for renewed cooperative action. This farmer-first approach reinforces ownership and rebuilds trust in collective action: “Inclusion is not treated as a by-product but as a central objective.”²² Furthermore, the FGPII’s approach emphasizes intensive, hands-on coaching and technical support. Continuous proximity is necessary to mediate conflicts, build trust, institutionalize procedures, and support decision-making before internal tensions undermine collective efforts. This sustained engagement is particularly critical during the early stages of transformation, when governance systems are fragile and member confidence remains low.

The FGPII calls for a fundamental shift in how public institutions conceptualize cooperatives: “They must change their perspective, viewing cooperatives as vibrant, competitive entities, rather than small organizations doing small local business.”²³ This reframing has direct implications for policy design and investment priorities. The FGPII approach implicitly recognizes that advocacy and farmer mobilization should be an integral component of cooperative empowerment. It highlights the need

to strengthen not only cooperatives’ socioeconomic capacities but also their ability to organize, represent their interests, and challenge existing policy frameworks, thereby opening space for a potentially significant and unprecedented evolution within donor-funded programming.

8. The Current MoA: Symbolic Announcements and the Turn to the Private Sector

Following the 2025 appointment of a minister of agriculture with a strong background in rural sustainable development, agricultural development practitioners and donors perceived a window of opportunity for meaningful improvements in both agricultural policy and interventions. The new minister rapidly launched multiple initiatives and generated a strong momentum of action, signaling a clear intention to break with past practices. However, the current burgeoning of initiative has not yet translated into a coherent and well-articulated transparent policy orientation with strategic choices for the future of Lebanon’s agriculture. One year after the appointment, three key elements of MoA action can be identified.

First are the MoA’s willingness and proactive efforts to regain sovereignty over aid and to coordinate donor-funded projects. This was clearly demonstrated at the beginning of the minister’s tenure, notably through his personally chairing coordination meetings with donors and NGOs.

The second element is the multitude of announcements regarding the creation of new committees whose roles, mandates, and operational modalities remain often unclear. These include the National Strategic Committee for Agriculture, mostly composed of academics and representatives of the private sector; the Apple Committee; the Lebanon Advanced Rural Advisory Services; the Cannabis Cultivation Management Committee; and the Agriculture Investment Committee, to name a few. These types of announcements are typical of Lebanon’s “active ministers”. To a certain

20 Interview with field practitioners and cooperative development experts (Interviews).

21 Interviews.

22 Interviews.

23 Interviews.

extent, these committees are seen as a platform for reinforcing stakeholders' engagement. However, their proliferation raises concerns regarding the creation of parallel structures and lobbying groups that can take over the role of the ministry itself, fragmenting its authority and accountability and undermining policy coherence.

The third characteristic of MoA action, or underlying vision, is the significant role accorded to capital and the private sector as a key driver of agricultural development, as opposed to a farmer-centered sector and policy orientation. The professionalization of agriculture is not framed as a way to improve farmers' livelihoods or advance rural development, but rather as a means to encourage high levels of private sector investment, advanced technical innovation, and deeper integration of selected farmers with value chain actors: In other words, a shift toward high-capital agriculture.

This orientation is reflected across multiple committees. It is evident in the proposed model for medical cannabis production, which is likely to generate rents and value capture for large corporate actors, and in the promotion of export-oriented contract farming schemes. It is further institutionalized through the preparation of an agricultural investment strategy by a committee with strong private sector representation and reinforced by the prominent role of private "innovative" actors in drafting the seed law.

This emerging policy direction is already visible in elements of the new agricultural strategy, which point toward the development of "license to grow" regimes and contract farming arrangements as preconditions for production, mirroring the regulatory models used in tobacco and proposed for cannabis, but now extended to food production systems. Such frameworks structurally advantage large farmers and agri-businesses, while excluding those unable to access or comply with these contractual and licensing arrangements. The underlying objective is securing value appropriation for private businesses by creating protective regulatory environments that enable price control and market dominance, while establishing technical barriers to entry through licensing regimes.

A similar model is emerging in the draft fishery law, which seeks to legally protect fishery investment by imposing the same obligations for artisanal and industrial fishing or imposing technical and

administrative requirements that small fishers cannot meet. This reproduces the regulatory logic of the proposed seeds law that imposes technical and administrative standards that act as de facto exclusion mechanisms for farmers, small businesses, and community groups willing to engage in seed and seedling production.

This policy orientation, combined with the anticipated transformation of Lebanese agriculture in the context of upcoming economic changes in Syria and the likely decline in reliance on Syrian labor, signals a clear shift toward a more capital-intensive and corporate-oriented agricultural model, rather than a cooperative and family-farming model. It goes beyond the current system in which agriculture is subordinate to capital and trade to a model where capital appropriates agriculture production itself.

9. Conclusion

Donor interventions in Lebanon's agricultural sector have been shaped by shifting political priorities, operational convenience, and an underlying preference for working through private or nonstate actors rather than strengthening public institutions. While donors have often justified their approaches in terms of humanitarian and social stability imperatives, efficiency, capacity gaps, or political constraints, the cumulative effect has been the reinforcement of a fragmented governance landscape characterized by parallel structures, projectized interventions, and a persistent marginalization of farmers in policy and program design.

Donor projects have repeatedly reproduced patterns that prioritize competitiveness, export markets, and private sector intermediation over domestic food systems and policy reform. In crisis moments, donors have reacted through emergency or input-driven modalities that stabilized production in the short term but entrenched existing power asymmetries in agricultural value chains. Even in the post-2019 turn toward agroecology, donor engagement has remained primarily technical and depoliticized. Nonetheless, several donor-funded projects, such as the FAO-supported Green Plan and the FGPII support for cooperatives, demonstrate that farmer-centered initiatives, when explicitly linked to policy reform, can serve as models for

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more meaningful and transformative interventions.

While the personal engagement of the current minister of agriculture with donors has signaled a desire for stronger state leadership, improved coordination of interventions, and greater openness to policy reform, the proliferation of initiatives and the absence of a transparent political strategy leave wide room for interpretation regarding the MoA's long-term direction.

Lebanon's agriculture hinges on a fundamental and increasingly visible choice between two competing models of development. On the one hand, there is a capital-driven, corporate-integrated model anchored in export markets, contract farming, and private investment. This trajectory prioritizes competitiveness, technological modernization, and integration into global value chains, but does so at the risk of further marginalizing small farmers, concentrating economic power in the hands of agribusiness actors, and deepening existing rural inequalities.

On the other hand, an alternative pathway remains possible: A farmer-centered, democratic, and agroecological model, grounded in principles of food sovereignty, strengthened public institutions,

cooperative development, and meaningful farmer participation in policymaking. This model envisions agriculture not merely as a sector for investment or export, but as a foundation for rural livelihoods, territorial development, and national food security and sovereignty. It implies a reorientation of both donor support and state policy toward rebuilding public extension systems, supporting autonomous farmer organizations, regulating private sector power in value chains, and ensuring that agricultural development serves the socioeconomic rights of food producers.

This alternative pathway is not an abstract ideal. It speaks directly to the reality of Lebanon's rural communities. For South Lebanon, it is a concrete political imperative. Restoring sustainable agricultural systems is a must for population return and reversing the effects of the Israeli ecocide. Far from romanticization, prioritizing support for small-scale farming recovery, restoring traditional mixed farming and agroforestry systems, and supporting farmers' collective action form the material foundations of community identity, attachment to the land, resistance, and the prospect for long-lasting peace. Donors and the state must recognize these priorities explicitly and fund them accordingly.

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.



contact@arab-reform.net
Paris - Beirut - Tunis