



# Youth Dreams Deferred

Lebanon's Biggest Population Has Few Options



## LEBANON'S YOUTH DEMAND CHANGE

Lebanon rang in 2020 with fireworks and the clanging of spoons on pots, the sounds of people protesting the Lebanese government over corruption and mismanagement. The mass protest movement is a youth revolution. They are the ones who started it and who have kept it going. They are demanding change. Youth do not feel represented and they want to hold the government accountable.

The spirit of the uprising has been diverse and inclusive, reaching across different groups. The protesters see themselves as Lebanese first. Prior to the protests, youth self-identified mostly along nationality, sectarian or political party lines, but the protests have had the effect of exposing common interests and stakes among each group and they are showing a great willingness to contribute to their country's future and society's overall well-being. Throughout the protests, young people have been engaging in clean-up campaigns and civic actions, helping their communities, and uniting around common demands.

Lebanon needs youth development programs now more than ever. They can be the difference between despair and hope. By pivoting programs towards community engagement and efforts to alleviate suffering, youth can use the skills they learn to improve their communities.

In the meantime, the situation for youth in Lebanon and their ability to secure a good education and fulfilling livelihoods is at a crisis level. They are the biggest demographic in the country but they have long been the most underserved, exploited and marginalized age group. This reality goes a long way to explaining why Lebanon is now experiencing such turmoil.

## THE CURRENT CONTEXT: A PLUMMETING LEBANESE ECONOMY

Since the initial protest on October 17, 2019, the economic situation in Lebanon has deteriorated and the country is on the verge of a humanitarian emergency.

The value of the Lebanese pound has plummeted and the World Bank estimates that half the population could soon be living under the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of companies have already closed and many more closures are expected. Those who still have jobs have seen their salaries slashed. Banks are imposing unprecedented controls on cash withdrawals. Because people can no longer withdraw dollars from ATMs, many spend hours in line at banks to take out money.

The financial situation, and public reaction to it, has its roots in Lebanon's extreme economic inequality and high public debt-to-gross product ratio. Lebanon's top one percent receives approximately a quarter of the total national income while the bottom 50 percent is left with 10 percent.<sup>2</sup> This has created a social structure where top income earners are able to enjoy a standard of living comparable to high-income countries while a majority of the population's standard is comparable to many developing countries.

### Poor Basic Services

Well before the latest downturn, economic dysfunction already affected daily life in Lebanon in innumerable ways. Municipal water supplies are often cut for hours each day, leaving household taps dry. Electricity cuts are a part of daily life, with blackouts sometimes lasting for 12 to 18 hours.<sup>3</sup>

Solid waste management at the municipal level is also poor and inadequate. Trash litters the streets. Untreated sewage runs into the sea and pollutes rivers that farmers rely upon to irrigate crops. There are many reports of people becoming sick or developing cancers as a result of the pollution of food and water sources.<sup>4</sup>

Low incomes, joblessness, and competition have affected the housing market, with the most vulnerable (Palestinian and Syrian refugees and poor Lebanese) having trouble finding adequate, safe housing. Food insecurity is also on the rise. An astonishing 93 percent of Syrians are food insecure.<sup>5</sup> And 49 percent of native Lebanese are living with food scarcity.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most worrying recent developments is the growing shortages of medicines throughout the country. The Lebanese Ministry of Health cannot afford to purchase medicines for state-run hospitals and dispensaries. Private hospitals and dispensaries are also facing shortages.

“You begin with a dream, a plan for your life. If it's taken away, what's left?”

— Samar El Yassir, Anera Lebanon Country Director



Elizabeth Fitt, photographer

*Protesters take to the streets in Beirut. Banging pots and pans until the noise is deafening, they are making it clear that they are not giving up until they are heard.*



## TEENAGE WASTELAND: LEBANON'S BROKEN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Most young people's dreams start in school, where a world of possibilities opens up to them. Unfortunately, getting a quality education in Lebanon is not feasible for many, even in the best of times. Public education in Lebanon is sub-standard, suffering from overcrowding, violence and a poor reputation, leading most Lebanese parents to send their children to private schools.<sup>7</sup> And while some of the better public institutions are theoretically accessible, they are often out of reach to families without substantial financial resources.

The official Lebanese school system is not open to Palestinians. They attend overcrowded, underfunded schools run by the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA). The most recent available UNRWA figures indicate that 39 percent of Palestinian teenagers from Lebanon and 64 percent of Palestinian refugees from Syria leave school before their education is complete.<sup>8</sup> A high percentage of male drop-outs historically have resorted to working in temporary jobs in construction and in agriculture.

Among Palestinians who stay in school, exam scores have continued to decline year after year, both because of deteriorating conditions in schools and a lack of motivation among students who see no path to careers and other opportunities. Palestinians in Lebanon have long been barred from working in white collar jobs – as many as 39 professions – or from owning real estate.<sup>9</sup>

Syrian refugee youths are legally entitled to attend Lebanon's public schools, but they face formidable barriers. The Lebanese school system teaches using a combination of Arabic, English and French. Syrian refugees come to Lebanon from an Arabic-speaking system. Syrian refugees are also poor and mostly live in rural areas, which makes it difficult and expensive to travel to cities to attend schools. And some children choose or are forced to forgo education because they need to find work to help support their families.

Overcrowding is also a serious problem. Schools have resorted to running on a shift system, with Lebanese students attending classes in the morning and Syrians in the afternoon.

The current economic crisis has worsened the situation. Recent job losses in the private sector have forced many Lebanese families to take their children out of private institutions and enroll them in Lebanon's free public schools, which were already overcrowded and lacking resources.

The educational system is also failing to provide graduates with many of the skills expected from employers. A Leaders Consortium survey found that 68 percent of businesses in North Lebanon report having challenges hiring skilled workers, especially in the areas of management, marketing, finance, and accounting. And 63 percent of firms within Bekaa report having challenges hiring competent employees, citing gaps in both hard and soft skills, especially communication.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, the government-approved vocational training curriculum is out of date and is not delivering the skills the job market requires. A greater investment in vocational education for in-demand fields is needed. The Leaders Consortium report found that employers and students agreed that there should be more practical training to prepare young people for work. Jobseekers complain that vocational programs often do not include sufficient practical application of course material. This deficiency deprives vocational students of crucial work experience that will make them more attractive to employers in interviews. Internships and on-the-job training components should therefore be seen as an important component of such programs.<sup>11</sup>

Six days after the revolution began, Anera surveyed youth across the country. There was great optimism in the air.  
**96% of Lebanese youth believed that their involvement in demonstrations had the power to affect change.**

“It feels good to be needed – to help others and especially people from our own community who face so many hardships.”

Raghda, 21, a Palestinian living in Burj El Burajneh camp, reflects on her on-the-job training in the camp after completing Anera's vocational nursing course

Serene Dardari, photographer



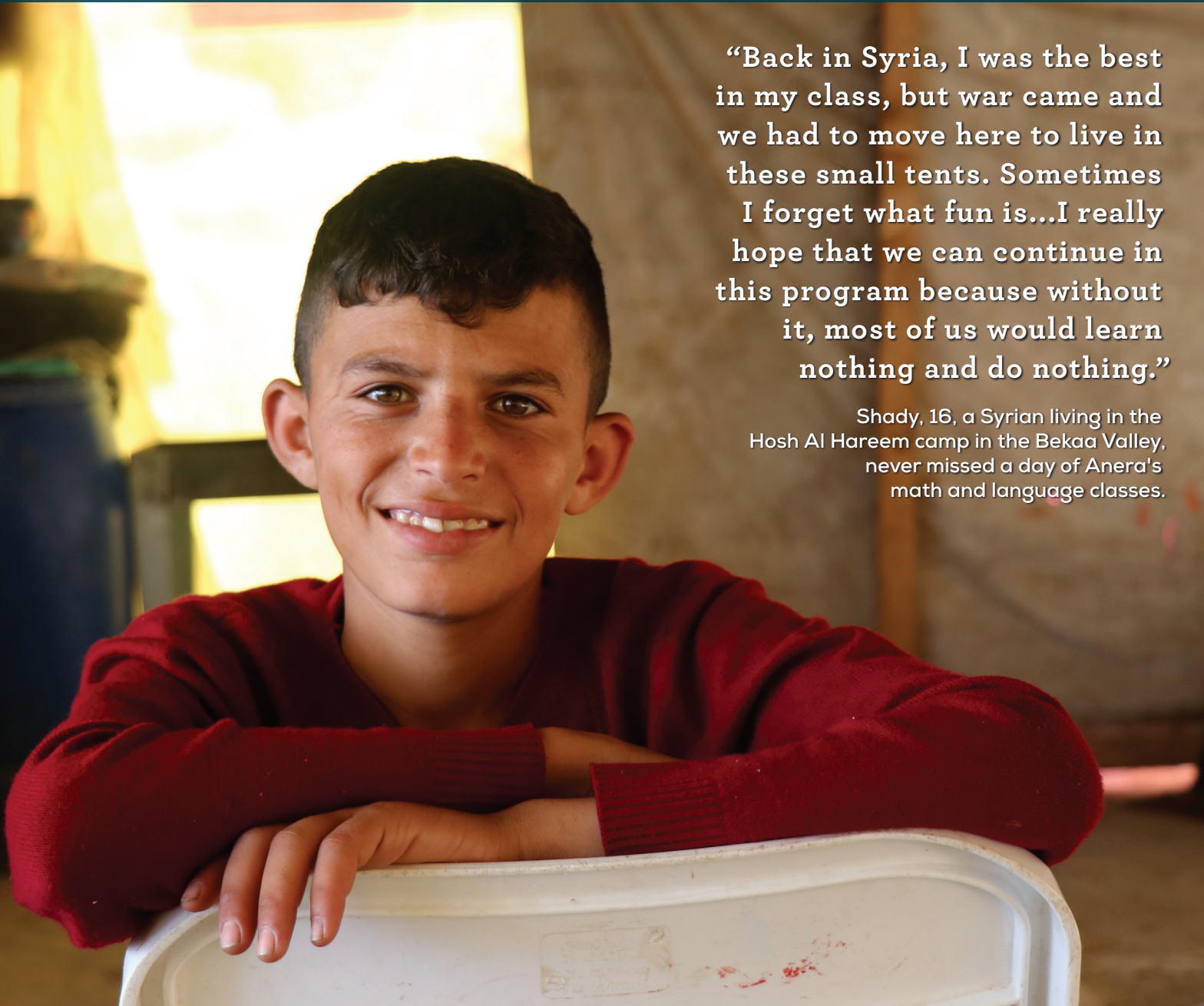


## THE STRAIN OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

The challenges facing Lebanon are compounded by the Syrian refugee crisis, which has been on-going since the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011. Lebanon hosts more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees, but there are no formal refugee camps.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Syrian refugees live in informal tent settlements, abandoned buildings, or cramped spaces in the country's decades-old Palestinian camps. This situation has put a strain on the country's already unstable economy, infrastructure and social systems — and made addressing challenges even more complicated for non-governmental organizations on the ground.

In addition to the 1.5 million Syrian refugees, there is a pre-existing population of 280,000 Palestinian refugees who have lived in Lebanon for 70 years, are not citizens, and have few civil rights in the country.<sup>13</sup> A whopping 25+ percent of the population of Lebanon consists of refugees from the Palestinian and Syrian crises.<sup>14</sup>

Anas Shehab, photographer



“Back in Syria, I was the best in my class, but war came and we had to move here to live in these small tents. Sometimes I forget what fun is...I really hope that we can continue in this program because without it, most of us would learn nothing and do nothing.”

Shady, 16, a Syrian living in the Hosh Al Hareem camp in the Bekaa Valley, never missed a day of Anera's math and language classes.

## NO JOBS, NO FUTURE

The labor market in Lebanon has been notably weak in recent years. According to estimates made before the October revolution, Lebanon would have needed to increase its jobs six-fold just to accommodate all the new people entering the job market and that number did not account for those already unemployed.<sup>15</sup>

Across the board, employment opportunities for youth are extremely limited in Lebanon. The unemployment rate for Lebanese youth hovers around 18 percent<sup>16</sup> while unemployment is estimated at over 50% for both Palestinian and Syrian youth.<sup>17</sup>

Young people cannot find work or earn the money needed to start their lives as independent adults. Most are unable to reach their potential. Those who have an education have few ways to use it and often have no choice but to move abroad for work, causing a major brain drain in the country.

### Refugee Labor: Legal Limitations and Discrimination

Palestinian refugees, who have been living in Lebanon for seven decades as well as those who have come from Syria, face discrimination in the Lebanon labor market. The Lebanese government restricts Palestinian refugees to working in menial jobs in the construction, electrical, sanitation, agricultural and textile fields. Palestinians may also find employment as servants, cooks or nannies. Others work within the confines of refugee camps, serving their own populations.

Due to having no legal status in Lebanon, Syrian refugees face exploitation by employers and are confined to low skill, low paying jobs. In Lebanon, Syrian refugees are required to have a sponsor in order to legally work, which many times is the employer. This arrangement makes exploitation of Syrian refugees an unfortunate, but common occurrence.

Both Palestinian and Syrian refugees struggle to find even the most meager income sources. Prolonged unemployment for these families brings ruinous consequences. There is very little in the way of a social safety net in general — and none at all for refugees.

### Gender Inequality

Gender inequality in Lebanon is stark. Women face a number of barriers to participation in work. Socio-cultural barriers include traditional gender roles that emphasize the role of men as breadwinners and women as responsible for the household and childcare. Akkar and Bekaa are particularly socially conservative areas where protecting a woman's “honor” often translates into limited public movement.

**In the 2017 Gender Gap Index, Lebanon ranks 133 out of 144 and ranks third to last in the MENA region.**





Mohammad Zock, photographer

“I'm very happy to participate in this humanitarian project that helps many families. Poor people are everywhere and they need food, winter clothes and many other things, especially during the hard times that our country is passing through.

My future plan is to open a five-star restaurant. That would be a dream come true!”

Fatima, 18, a Lebanese graduate of Anera's cooking course in Tripoli, reflects on her on-the-job experience of preparing meals for struggling families



Mayssa Qassem, photographer

Anera's plumbing graduates get on-the-job training by establishing a water network for the Syrian refugee camp in Rihanye, Lebanon.

According to a 2019 Anera survey, women in Lebanon are often discouraged from working both due to sexual harassment concerns and due to beliefs that it might affect the woman's chances in getting married, especially in conservative communities such as Akkar.<sup>18</sup>

### Low pay, Abuse and Exploitation

Those Syrian refugees who are able to find work usually must accept substantial pay discrimination based on their refugee status. Statistics indicate that 80 percent of Syrian refugees earn less than their host country peers<sup>19</sup> and there is a widely held belief among employers that refugees should be paid less than their Lebanese counterparts.<sup>20</sup>

Palestinian refugees have long endured discrimination in the labor market. Most Palestinians work in low-status, low-pay jobs, usually without a written contract or benefits. The last available figures indicate Palestinian wages are 20 percent lower than Lebanese incomes on average.<sup>21</sup> A shift in July, 2019 by the Ministry of Labor in its enforcement of labor laws sparked weeks of protest in the Palestinian refugee camps across the country. The demonstrations sought guarantees of Palestinian labor rights.<sup>22</sup>

Although not often reported, child labor grew in the last decade, with upwards of 100,000 children engaged in some form of work.<sup>23</sup> Families may resort to it as a means of survival in light of prolonged displacement and exhaustion of their financial sources. Some 60 percent of child labor is in agriculture.<sup>24</sup> A 2016 UNICEF survey found that nearly 7 percent of Syrian children in Lebanon were working. The percentage of working Lebanese children is nearly as high, standing at 6 percent — triple what it was in 2009.<sup>25</sup>

The labor market situation, already bad before the protests, has sharply declined in recent months. The protest movement and worsening financial crisis have led in the short term to greater hardships and the threat of a humanitarian emergency.

Hundreds of businesses have closed since October due to the currency crisis and thousands more are at risk of shutting down in the months ahead. Those that are still open have slowed their operations, suspending hiring and apprenticeship opportunities. Simultaneously, day labor opportunities have dried up, which greatly affects refugee households.

With a lack of opportunities and a stymied future, young people in Lebanon often turn to negative coping mechanisms (begging, early marriage, and child labor) as their only option. Even worse, many simply remain idle. The likely result of this situation continuing is lifelong poverty and a lack of personal agency over their own lives.

"Enough, we want dignity"

A slogan appearing on balloons during the Palestinian refugee protests of July 2019



# RESTORING HOPE: WHAT’S NEXT?

When the protests began, there was a powerful sense of hope among young people. They believed that making their voices heard would affect change. Now, several months later, protesters are exhausted and frustrated. They showed unity through peaceful demonstrations but no real reforms have materialized. The hope that started everything is ebbing.

Yet youth can play a pivotal role in helping during these difficult times, by assisting others in need. Organizations serving youth must build on the momentum for social engagement and positive change that has sprung out of the protest movement. Nonprofits can help empower young people to support their own communities by delivering programs that allow them to use their skills to help build community resiliency and restore hope.

Anera, for instance, has adapted its vocational programs to the new circumstances, providing temporary, cash-for-work employment for youths who have graduated from our vocational education programs to respond to the needs in their neighborhoods: caterers cook meals, plumbers install water networks in camps, seamstresses make blankets, etc. Anera’s programmatic refocus has already yielded positive results, including an increase in youth confidence in their acquired livelihood skills, team-building through group working environments, and a pride in their ability to improve their communities.

Skills gaps in the job market reveal opportunities for education and vocational training programs to prepare youth to enter the labor force with in-demand skills. With so many youth out of school and unemployed, many of them Syrian refugees, there is also considerable need for substantially scaled-up educational and vocational interventions that will prepare them for the workplace. Anera has partnered with the UN and local nonprofits to offer both informal education courses and vocational training programs, but there are considerable unmet needs in both areas.

The serious challenges confronting Lebanon can only be addressed by ensuring the active participation of youth in finding solutions. The country’s economy and educational system must be transformed to nurture the abilities of its youthful population and create jobs for them to utilize their talents. A vibrant Lebanon will establish the conditions for young people to thrive and realize their dreams within its borders.

Read the report online at [anera.org/YouthDreamsDeferred](https://anera.org/YouthDreamsDeferred).

Solutions include putting vocationally-trained youth to work on relief and development projects

Anera’s youth development programs offer young people hope for a better future. Through non-formal basic math and literacy education, job training and recreational activities coordinated with local organizations, Anera fills a gap for thousands of Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese youths. From 2017 to 2019, 18,718 young people across Lebanon learned language and math skills and another 18,299 gained marketable job skills. In 2020, we are enrolling another 8,324 in our programs.

**In response to the humanitarian crisis on the ground, Anera has pivoted our curricula and on-the-job training program to respond to the immediate needs in vulnerable communities.**

Our cooking and catering students will learn how to prepare large quantities of food to feed many hungry people at a time.

Our carpentry students will learn how to make and repair doors and windows, so they can improve conditions in drafty, makeshift dwellings.

Our electricity students (like those pictured below) will learn to clear electrical lines that hang low over crowded lanes in camps, threatening injury and even death.

These students as well as those graduating from our nursing, solar installation, plumbing, and sewing courses will put their new skills to work right away in on-the-job, cash-for-work opportunities that provide products and services to vulnerable communities. It's a win-win: Anera is addressing needs in communities while students get to use their new skills, earn some money, and have the satisfaction of doing something to help others.



*This group of Anera construction and electrical maintenance course graduates renovated a crumbling, dangerous staircase in the Burj El Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp, near Beirut.*

[anera.org/lebanon](https://anera.org/lebanon)

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COVER PHOTO: A Syrian refugee at a camp in Majdal Anjar, Bekaa Valley. Gonzalo Bell, photographer

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#### **ABOUT ANERA'S ON-THE-GROUND SERIES**

The Anera on-the-ground series is designed to add a humanitarian voice to the story of life in the Middle East. With data from Anera's professional staff, people who live and work in the communities they serve, and with over 50 years of experience in the region, Anera has a unique opportunity to build a fuller understanding of what life is like for families struggling to survive within an atmosphere of severe political strife and daily turmoil.