Navigating an Ineffective Aid System

A Case Study of the International Aid System in Lebanon
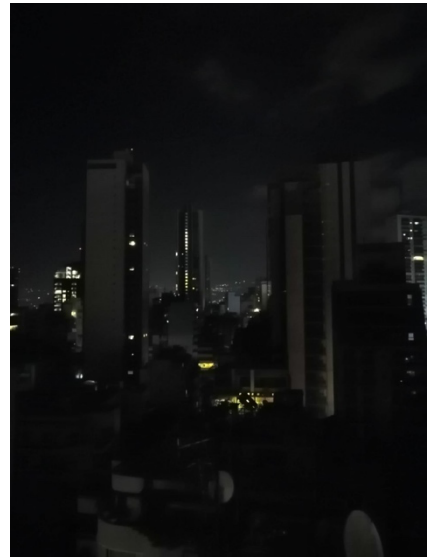
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Abstract

This thesis investigates how Lebanese NGOs perceive and interact with the international aid system in Lebanon in the context of the displacement of 1,5 million Syrian refugees and compounding crises - the economic and financial crisis, COVID-19, and the Beirut Port Explosion in 2020. As the international aid system in Lebanon is struggling with addressing the increasing needs of the population, the research at hand aims to contribute to the discussion on how the aid system can be improved by highlighting its insufficiencies. Therefore, this thesis examines, through the theoretical frameworks of critical humanitarianism and subversive humanitarianism, the consequences, and inconsistencies within the aid system, the crises' impact on the aid system, and what options local NGOs have to navigate, impact and interact with the system. By including local NGOs' perspectives, this thesis attempts to advance the understanding of the aid system and its challenges, and how it can be improved, from an often neglected, but important position. The research relies on a theory-guided case study of the aid system combined with a document analysis of relevant material. Expert interviews were conducted with eight Lebanese NGOs and one multi-national donor organization operating in Lebanon. The analysis argues that local NGOs, on one hand, have found ways to influence and navigate the aid system on their own terms, and in doing so, at times challenge the Northern-led agenda on aid. On the other hand, the current international aid system in Lebanon has become fragmented and overwhelming for humanitarian actors and is preventing local NGOs from working efficiently and developing themselves. These tendencies are exacerbated by the current crises and ultimately have consequences for; the overall provision of aid, which is lacking a coherent, strategic response and prospects for long-term sustainable solutions; and for the asymmetric power relations between international and local actors operating within the aid system.

Keywords: *Lebanon, critical humanitarianism, subversive humanitarianism, The Grand Bargain, localization, humanitarian aid, development aid, the international aid system, local actors.*

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List of Abbreviations

Emergency Response Plan (ERP)

French Agency for Development / Agence française de développement (AFD)

Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP)

Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF)

European Regional Development and Protection Program (RDPP)

Regional Refugee Resilience Plan (3RP)

Society for Inclusion and Development in Communities and care for all (SIDC)

United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

Introduction

At the time of writing, Lebanon is suffering the consequences of a spiraling compound of crises with no near end in sight. What started as an economic and financial crisis in 2019, was later exacerbated by the repercussions of COVID-19 and, lastly, the devastating explosion at the port of Beirut in August 2020, destroying large areas of the capital. The compounding crises have had severe consequences. According to the UN, 78% of the Lebanese population now live below the poverty line, while 9 out of 10 Syrian refugees living in the country are below the extreme poverty line (Chehayeb, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Subsequently, more people are in need of or relying on humanitarian aid, a total of 3.2 million among a population of 6.8 million people (3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan, 2021, p. 30). The staggering poverty is accompanied by roaring inflation, increasing social tensions and aid bias, unstable electricity, and shortages of gasoline, medicines, and basic necessities, making everyday life a struggle for both the population and institutions. A population and infrastructure that have already been heavily affected by the influx of 1.5 million Syrian refugees to the country since 2011. The mass displacement has prompted donors to primarily target aid toward Syrian refugees since 2011, but in recent years the aid has gradually included Lebanese host communities, partly to counter social tensions and the dissatisfaction with the distribution of aid among the population (Carpi, 2014, p. 7; Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon, 2021, p. 4; The Government of Lebanon & The United Nations, 2021, page 57).

At this point in time though, Lebanese institutions and the international aid system are not capable of coping with the growing needs, compelling donor governments, think tanks, and humanitarian actors to reconsider their aid programming, as well as assess and rethink the aid sector in Lebanon. This thesis aims to contribute to the discussions on the international aid system in Lebanon by critically analyzing the system in the context of compounding crises and mass displacement. The importance and originality of this thesis are that it explores the aid system at a critical juncture in time from the perspective of local Lebanese NGOs. This is due to different reasons. For one, bringing forth local perspectives on aid serves as a valuable contribution to the discussion on the aid system. Scholars have found that local actors often have proximity to and knowledge of affected communities, which their international counterparts lack. Despite this, local actors are seldomly invited to participate at the highest level of the humanitarian aid regime (Jayawickrama & Rehman, 2018). Secondly, efforts have already been made to include local humanitarian actors more in the international aid system. In 2016, the global aid community agreed

on the "Grand Bargain", an agreement meant to improve the architecture of the international aid structure and thereby assist more vulnerable people. One of the objectives of the agreement was to localize aid, which sought to include local humanitarian organizations in all phases of humanitarian action, from planning to execution. Thus, by focusing on local NGOs' perspectives, this thesis will hopefully provide an opportunity to advance the understanding of the aid system and its challenges, and how it can be improved, from an often neglected, but important position. Furthermore, by highlighting local perspectives, this thesis follows the international agenda on the future of aid, focusing on local NGOs' perspectives, challenges, and solutions for the aid sector.

Therefore, there are two primary aims of this thesis: 1) To examine the international aid system in Lebanon from the perspective of Lebanese NGOs. More specifically, this thesis will investigate what consequences and inconsistencies accompany the humanitarian aid system through the theoretical lens of critical humanitarianism, and 2) To investigate what options local NGOs have to impact and navigate the international aid system and compare this to the objectives of the Grand Bargain Agreement, by applying the theoretical concept of subversive humanitarianism. Therefore, the research question is as follows:

> *How do Lebanese NGOs perceive, impact, and interact with the international aid system in the context of widespread mass displacement from Syria and the compounding crises, and what consequences of the system do they identify?*

Furthermore, the following sub-questions have been included to sufficiently cover all aspects of the research questions:

- How is the international aid system affecting the increasing social tensions and aid bias in Lebanon?
- What consequences and inconsistencies accompany the humanitarian aid regime in Lebanon? How are these affecting the provision of aid?
- How are the crises affecting the aid system?
- What possibilities do local NGOs have to navigate and influence the aid system? How does this align with the objectives of the Grand Bargain Agreement and the localization agenda?
- How could the aid system be enhanced from the perspective of local NGOs?

The investigation of the research question takes the form of a theory-guided case study and the primary research data is based on expert interviews with nine humanitarian organizations operating in Lebanon. Hopefully, this research will provide an opportunity to identify the gaps, consequences, and challenges of the aid system in Lebanon, and advance an understanding of improvements to the system from an under-researched perspective.

Before proceeding with this thesis, the reader should be aware of what is meant by the terms *international aid system* and *local actors,* which are continuously used throughout the paper. The term *the international aid system in Lebanon* will be used in its broadest sense to refer to the whole aid sector in Lebanon, including, but not limited to, UN agencies, donors, INGOs, NGOs, grassroots, civil society, and governmental entities. Hence, all organizations working to provide humanitarian or development aid in Lebanon. As will be explained later, the aid sector is to a large degree led by UN agencies and bigger humanitarian agencies, wherefore *international* has been included in the term. It is furthermore necessary to clarify exactly what is meant by *local NGOs*. Here, the thesis draws inspiration from the Refugee Hosts project, led by scholar Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, who researches local actors' responses to displacement in the neighboring countries to Syria. While the project's definition of local actors typically refers to affected populations who provide aid, such as citizens, refugees, and camps, this thesis broadens the term *local* to also refer to Lebanese NGOs working on either a local or national scale. According to the Refugee Hosts project, local actors are characterized by often sharing the same reality as the people they are providing aid to, or at least having a nuanced understanding of it, and of the needs, cultural aspects, and power dynamics of local communities. In addition to this, they have a proximity to affected communities, which enhances their access to beneficiaries and entails that they are often the first providers of assistance when disaster strikes, and have another imperative to act upon a crisis (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018, January; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, n.d.; Carstensen, 2021). According to the Refugee-Host Project, the abovementioned characteristics distinguish local actors from international ones.

The remaining part of the thesis proceeds as follows: the first chapter provides a literature review describing previous research conducted on humanitarianism in Lebanon. The second chapter gives an overview of some necessary background information about the nature of Lebanon's crises, the current state of social tensions and aid bias, the architecture of the international aid system in

Lebanon, and lastly, a description of the Grand Bargain and the localization agenda. The third chapter explains the thesis' methodology and methods, followed by the fourth chapter which explains the theoretical framework. Chapter five analyzes the aid system in Lebanon from the perspective of local NGOs. This chapter is divided into three sections: 1) aid bias and social tensions, 2) local NGOs' navigation of the system, and 3) the consequences of the aid system and the crises' impact on the aid sector. The last part of the thesis is concerned with a discussion of what possible improvements to the aid sector could look like, which is followed by a conclusion.

Literature Review

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the issue of humanitarian action in Lebanon during the last decade. These studies can be split into three major streams of thought: 1) the externalization of borders, 2) the Lebanese government's outsourcing of obligations to humanitarian agencies, and 3) Southern-led aid responses and responses led by non-traditional humanitarian actors. The following paragraphs will briefly describe the three different streams of literature and how this thesis will contribute to the existing research.

Research conducted in the last couple of years has argued that Western states have externalized European borders to nations hosting the majority of Syrian refugees, such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey (Facon, 2020; Fakhoury & Stel, 2022, p. 17; Jagarnathsingh, 2019, p. 26). The research argues that European powers provide humanitarian and development aid to refugee-hosting states, meant to support the states in catering to the refugees' needs and building up capacities to cope with the large influx of refugees. The aid is thereby creating better conditions for the refugees to remain in the host states, and preventing them from seeking further North (Udenrigsministeriet / Danida, 2021, p. 19). On the other hand, scholars such as Tamirace Fakhoury, argue that the refugee-hosting states have used the cooperation and the EU's concern over the possible influx of refugees "as a tool for settling political scores and deriving geopolitical pay-offs" (Fakhoury, 2021b, p. 263) having gained funds and visibility for their efforts (Fakhoury, 2021a, p. 265). Humanitarian and development aid to Lebanon and the region, thus, seems to be highly politicized and used as a political tool by both ends, but arguably with limited effects in improving the lives of the refugees due to short-term solutions, earmarked funding, and a lack of protection (Fakhoury, 2021b, p. 263).

Another significant subject of research on humanitarian action in Lebanon is the Lebanese government's outsourcing of services, normally undertaken by the state, to humanitarian agencies. Scholars have argued that supranational organizations such as UN agencies as well as other humanitarian actors have set up "quasi-permanent" (Fakhoury, 2021b, p. 263) relief infrastructures in Lebanon to meet the humanitarian and development needs of the population. The humanitarian actors are thereby "filling the vacuum left by political unwillingness to thoroughly address the issue," (Bruschini-Chaumet et. al., 2019, p. 8) which may ultimately result in the expansion of relief agencies at the expense of the government's influence (Alhaj & Naar, 2021; Fawaz & Harb, 2020). Lastly, a growing body of literature recognizes and examines "alternative" forms of humanitarianism focusing on the aid responses of Southern states and non-traditional humanitarian actors, such as Southern-based NGOs, refugees, host communities, faith communities, grassroots, and civil society organizations (Refugee Hosts, n.d.; Southern Responses to Displacement, n.d.). The research suggests that these actors often have been excluded from the institutionalized international aid system, despite their continued presence and provision of assistance, because their form of humanitarianism may not fit into the Western "formalized understandings of what constitutes 'humanitarian' responses" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Pacitto, 2013, p. 8). The projects Refugee Hosts and Southern Responses to Displacement, both co-led by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, have contributed greatly to this strand of research concerned with the neighboring countries of Syria. Such projects examine the nature and incentives of Southern humanitarian actors "in support of individuals, communities and people across the Global South," (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015, p. 11) and advocate for such actors to be considered as "key providers of aid" in the international response mechanisms (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018 April). It is this strand of research that this thesis takes as its point of departure, by bringing forth considerations of local NGOs on the international aid system in Lebanon in the context of mass displacement and compounding crises.

Background Chapters

The following chapters will provide a brief overview of the current compounding crises in Lebanon, the state of social tensions and aid bias, an outline of the architecture and tendencies of the current aid system, and lastly, a description of the Grand Bargain and the localization agenda.

Lebanon's Crises and its Consequences

To examine how Lebanese NGOs navigate the international aid system in the context of the compounding crises and Syrian displacement, it is necessary to understand the nature of the crises and their implications for Lebanon. Therefore, the following chapter will outline the three pillars constituting the compounding crises; the economic and financial crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut Port Explosion of 2020, as well as the crises' consequences for Lebanon and its people.

The first of the compounding crises hit Lebanon in mid-2019, when the country was plunged into a financial crisis, which, according to the World Bank was the result of "a sudden stop in capital inflows, which precipitated systematic failures across banking, debt and the exchange rate" (World Bank Group, 2020, p. XI). The World Bank has furthermore gone so far as to name the crisis *The Deliberate Depression* arguing that it has been orchestrated by the Lebanese political elite, who since the civil war has thrived on the state's economic rents and piled up debts (Blair, 2022; World Bank Group, 2021 fall, p. XI). The severity of the crisis cannot be underestimated as it currently ranks among "the top 10, possibly top three, most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century" (World Bank Group, 2021 spring, p. XI). The World Bank furthermore foresees that the deteriorating crisis has no near end on the horizon because of the Lebanese government's political inactivity (World Bank Group, 2021 spring, p. IX). In fact, it estimates that it will take approximately 12-19 years for Lebanon to get back on track after the end of the crisis (World Bank Group, 2021 spring, p. 21).

The crisis was further exacerbated with the arrival of COVID-19 in Lebanon. The lockdowns caused by the pandemic worsened the population's poverty as people were forced to shut down businesses, and the tourism sector, a pillar of the Lebanese economy, was severely affected.

Lastly, Lebanon was hit by the devastating Beirut Port Explosion on August 4, 2020, the result of "the detonation of tons of ammonium nitrate" (Fakih & Majzoub, 2021) an explosive material that had been stored in a warehouse at the port for six years, known to government officials (Fakih & Majzoub, 2021). The explosion was one of the World's biggest non-nuclear explosions ever and killed over 200 people, injured more than 6,500, left 300,000 without housing, and caused major destruction to the city (Aljazeera, 2021; Fakih & Majzoub, 2021). In addition to this, the explosion harmed 56% of private businesses in the capital and rendered "extensive damage to infrastructure, including transport, energy, water supply and sanitation […] [and] caused an estimated $3.8-4.6

billion in material damage" (Fakih & Majzoub, 2021). To this day, no high official has yet been held accountable for the explosion and the political elite continues to stall investigations into the port explosion (Azhari & Perry, 2021).

The compounding crises have had grave consequences for Lebanon, most visibly seen in the lack of electricity that leaves Beirut in darkness in the evenings, the spike in fuel prices, the shortage of medicine, and the big number of people who have fallen into poverty. Before the crisis, about 42% of the population was living below the poverty line (Harper & Todman, 2021). Two years into the crisis the UN estimates that 78% of Lebanon's population is living below the poverty line, of them 36% below the extreme poverty line, a percentage that exceeds almost 90% among the Syrian population (Sewell, 2020; United Nations, 2021). Consequently, more people are now in need of or relying on humanitarian aid, a total of 3,207,700, among a population of 6.8 million people (3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan, 2021, p. 30). The crises have severely affected the Lebanese currency, at the time of writing it has lost more than 90% of its value, and inflation ranked among the highest in the world in 2021 (Bassam & Blair, 2022; Goyeneche & Khraiche, 2021; World Bank Group, 2021 spring). These factors render it impossible for poorer households to access basic goods such as food, medicine, transportation, and shelter (Fakih & Majzoub, 2021). And are furthermore forcing people to cut down on meals, with food prices having increased by 557% since 2019, to take children out of school because they can no longer afford transportation fees or need the children to work to support their families, or to emigrate, causing a massive brain drain to the country (El Dahan & Perry, 2021; World Bank Group, 2021 fall, p. XI). Furthermore, the crises are disrupting private and public infrastructure and institutions such as schools, hospitals, and welfare. According to UNICEF, 1.2 million children "have had their education disrupted for more than a year" (United Nations 2021) and the continuous electricity cuts and lack of medicine have become a daily struggle for both hospitals, businesses, and private homes alike, with some households only receiving an hour of electricity on a daily basis (Bassam & Blair, 2022). Finally, the crises are, according to the World Bank, threatening the social stability and peace in Lebanon, and are leading to an increased risk of civil unrest, which brings us to the next topic (World Bank Group, 2021 spring, p. XIII).

Social Tensions and Aid Bias

One of the purposes of this thesis is to examine whether the international aid system has a relation to Lebanon's increasing social tensions and aid bias. In order to do so, this chapter will briefly outline the prominent sources of social tensions in Lebanon.

Lebanon is a land composed of numerous religious convictions, political affiliations, and population groups. The complex composition of Lebanon has, among other factors, resulted in tensions among the different groups with fatal outcomes, most notably the Lebanese Civil War from 1975-1990. In the past few years, it has primarily been social tensions between Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees, the biggest foreign population group in the country, which have taken a position in the public eye. The social tensions between the two population groups are, however, not a recent phenomenon. Syria's involvement in the Lebanese Civil War, and the subsequent occupation of Lebanon, which lasted until 2005, have greatly divided public opinion about Syria. The influx of 1.5 million Syrian refugees into Lebanon since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, has further exacerbated political and social tensions, as local capacities such as infrastructure and basic services quickly became overstretched, and the poorer segments of the Lebanese society suffered from the economic pressure and the perceived competition for low-skilled jobs, despite data suggesting that "actual competition for work is limited" (ARK Group DMCC & UNDP, 2019 August, p. V; Bruschini-Chaumet et. al., 2019, p. 8; COAR, 2022; The RCA Team, 2019, p. VII). These factors have, according to a study by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), resulted in social tensions and resentment towards Syrians from the Lebanese population (The RCA Team, 2019, p. 3). Furthermore, in the period surrounding the first years of the Syrian Crisis, the aid structure in Lebanon shifted to primarily focus on the needs of Syrian refugees rather than the Lebanese population, according to scholar Estella Carpi, supporting Syrian refugees was "the priority on the political agenda of their foreign donors" (Carpi, 2014, p. 7). A point that has fueled aid perception bias among the population (Harb, 2016, p. 129). Since the outbreak of the crises in Lebanon, social tensions have deteriorated to an all-time low, both intra-Lebanese relations and between Lebanese and other population groups. The ARK Group DMCC performs Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon on behalf of UNDP. A survey from 2021 observes the dramatic increase: "In 2018, just 4 percent of Lebanese cited negative relations between different [Lebanese] communities, rising to 31 percent in August 2021" (The Government of Lebanon & the United Nations, 2022, p. 11-12). Refugee-host relations have also deteriorated, with 36 percent

describing their inter-communal relationships as negative compared to 21 percent in 2018 (The Government of Lebanon & the United Nations, 2022, p. 148). In areas hosting large numbers of refugees, the numbers reach an astounding 87 percent (ARK Group DMCC & UNDP, 2021, p. I). Furthermore, "the percentage of Syrians describing relations with Lebanese as 'negative' or 'very negative' nearly doubled over the course of four months" (ARK Group DMCC & UNDP, 2021, p. I) from 15,8% in April to 31.0% in August 2021. The ARK group estimates that the strained relations will continue to deteriorate further and might ultimately result in violence (ARK Group DMCC & UNDP, 2021, p. V). The vital consequences of the increasing tensions make it particularly relevant to investigate whether the current international aid system in Lebanon is part of escalating aid bias and social tensions, in order to mitigate potential triggers for violence.

The Aid Structure in Lebanon

The research question of this thesis is concerned with how Lebanese NGOs perceive and navigate the international aid sector in Lebanon in the context of Syrian displacement and the compounding crises. In order to critically analyze such as system, an overview of the aid system is essential. The pages that follow will therefore outline the structure of the international aid system in Lebanon, the actors operating within it, and a brief account of how the aid system has evolved throughout the last decade.

The aid sector in Lebanon has long been characterized by a variety of both national and international actors, consisting of a wide range of religious organizations, organizations affiliated with political figures or parties, activists, NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies, governmental institutions, and syndicates. Among these, a variety of non-state actors have for several periods of time undertaken functions normally assigned to the state, such as social work, health, refugee protection, and education. This tendency has expanded in times of crisis. During the Lebanese Civil War, for instance, a growing number of humanitarian and development agencies were established to address "the paralysis of governmental institutions" (Haddad, 2017, p. 1750) in providing services to its citizens. The Lebanese state has thus, come to gradually rely on civil society and humanitarian actors to step in and fill the gap the government has been unable or unwilling to handle (Haddad, 2017, p. 1752). Rather than opposing this development, the Lebanese political elite has to a large extent given agency to non-state aid actors (Fakhoury, 2017, p. 690). In recent years, this has particularly been the case for refugee aid, protection, and rights, which have largely been

outsourced to supranational organizations, such as UN agencies (Fakhoury, 2021a, p. 265). According to scholars Mona Fawaz and Mona Harb, these institutions have together with INGOs "established the infrastructure of 'relief' across the country," (Fawaz & Harb, 2020) through which most of the Western states' aid to Lebanon goes through (Facon, 2021). The tendency of international aid to go through humanitarian agencies rather than the government has been exacerbated by the current crises. As the government is proving itself more and more unable to meet the needs of the population, studies have found that it is to a higher degree being sidelined by donors and civil society in providing aid, and in addition to this losing its legitimacy and accountability among the Lebanese population (Alhaj & Naar, 2021; Fakhoury, 2021a, p. 267; Fawaz & Harb, 2020). This has prompted donors to withhold promised aid to Lebanon. In 2018, French President, Emmanuel Macron, hosted the Conference for Economic Development and Reform through Enterprises (CEDRE) to support Lebanon to reestablish its stability and economy with the condition that the Lebanese government implements necessary reforms (Apim, 2020; Elias Moukheiber Institute for Lebanon, n.d.). At the conference, donors pledged $11.6 billion in loans and grants to Lebanon (Apim, 2020). In addition to this, another €250 was pledged to Lebanon by the UN, the EU, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund to assist Lebanon in its "recovery and reconstruction on condition of meaningful governance and economic reforms" (Braun & Van Dorpe, 2020). Due to the lack of inaction from the Lebanese government, donors are withholding most of the pledged aid and are instead opting for channeling humanitarian aid directly to non-governmental organizations (Braun & Van Dorpe, 2020).

The Lebanese government is still, however, playing a significant role in the different response frameworks established to address the various challenges Lebanon is facing today. UN agencies have in collaboration with the Lebanese government, INGOs, NGOs, and civil society organizations set up a number of frameworks to coordinate and bridge the gaps in the humanitarian and development responses in Lebanon – both in regard to the Syrian refugee crisis, the Beirut Port Explosion and to the current compounding crises. These frameworks include; the Regional Refugee Resilience Plan (3RP), which covers the international response to the refugee crisis from Syria and the countries hosting the majority of Syrian refugees; the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), the Lebanese complement to the 3RP; the Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) that was put in place to deal with the aftermath of the Beirut Port Explosion; and the Emergency Response Plan (ERP), created to provide immediate life-saving humanitarian relief to 1 million vulnerable Lebanese and migrants. The response plans are led by different UN

agencies; the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and UNDP co-lead the 3RP, UNHCR leads the response targeting Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees, while the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is responsible for the short-term response targeting migrants and vulnerable Lebanese (Harper & Todman, 2021). Thereby, there has been a, not at all times clear, division of the Lebanese population, some of whom are covered as host communities by UNHCR, and some of whom are covered as vulnerable by OCHA.

Another significant aspect of the international aid system in Lebanon is the changes in international donors' primary aid recipients during the past decade. For the first 2-3 years, Syrian refugees were displaced in Lebanon, international aid was almost solely targeting them (Atrache, 2021 March). In fact, many humanitarian organizations created new programs for Syrian refugees during that period, while other organizations abandoned previous development projects in areas less affected by the influx of Syrian refugees, to address humanitarian needs related to the Syrian crisis, who, according to Carpi, was "the priority on the political agenda of their foreign donors" (Carpi, 2014, p. 7; Amel Association International, 2013, p. 6). Hence, in the period surrounding the first years of the Syrian Crisis, the aid structure in Lebanon shifted to primarily focus on the needs of Syrian refugees. This, however, changed. As the war in Syria prolonged and it became evident that the Syrian refugees in Lebanon would likely remain for an extended period of time, the Lebanese government and local aid organizations repeatedly requested that foreign aid to Syrian refugees also be directed to Lebanese host communities (Fakhoury, 2022, p. 6-12). This happened in 2015 with the introduction of the LCRP, one of the UN response frameworks. With the LCRP, the aid structure in Lebanon shifted to 1) also support vulnerable host communities so as not to exacerbate social tensions further, and 2) move towards a development approach to displacement, to support Lebanon in handling the increased pressure on Lebanese infrastructure by strengthening capacities among overstretched Lebanese institutions, infrastructure, and communities (The Government of Lebanon & The United Nations, 2014, p. 3-14).

However, despite the changes to the aid system, the rapidly deteriorating situation in Lebanon and the growing needs among the population have resulted in renewed talks about the architecture of the system. The international aid system is criticized for not being "fit for purpose" (Harper & Todman, 2021) in the current context, and the aid community is contemplating how it can best support vulnerable people and avoid escalating tensions further. There are disagreements in the donor community about which approach is most suitable for the current situation. Scholars Will Todman and Caleb Harper explain that some donors still advocate for preserving the refugee-centric

approach, because of the different needs and rights of the different nationalities, others argue that the deteriorating crisis in Lebanon could result in a humanitarian crisis and that the refugee-centric approach is furthering social tensions (Harper & Todman, 2021). Furthermore, some local actors claim that the donor community is pushing its own agenda with the refugee-centric approach, and do not consider the needs on the ground (Facon, 2021). In addition to this, continuous discussions are concerned with how to deal with the Lebanese government which is increasingly retreating from providing aid. The fact that there are continuous discussions about the future of the architecture of the international aid system in Lebanon, makes the objective of this thesis all the more relevant.

The Grand Bargain Agreement and the Localization Agenda

On a global scale, efforts have already been made to assist more vulnerable people by attempting to improve the architecture of the international aid structure. When considering the future of the Lebanese aid response, it is, therefore, relevant to consider the objectives of the Grand Bargain Agreement and the localization agenda, which was put in place to make global aid more efficient, cut down on spending, and position local actors at the core of aid responses. In the following chapter, the bargain and localization agenda will therefore be introduced. This is done in order to understand the international humanitarian objectives of local actors' position in the aid system, and later, to analyze how local Lebanese NGOs perceive and navigate within this system as well as what challenges they might face.

The Grand Bargain

In May 2016 the first ever World Humanitarian Summit was held in Istanbul by actors from all specters of the humanitarian aid sector – from the biggest donors to local NGOs providing aid directly to beneficiaries. The purpose of the summit was to effectively reform and improve all aspects of the exhausted international humanitarian aid industry in order to better address the needs of a growing number of people while cutting down on money spent on administration and overhead costs (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, n.d.). The summit was the result of "long-standing demands in the humanitarian landscape" (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, n.d.) these included demands for accountability for both donors and receivers of aid, to decolonize the international aid structure, and for efforts to bridge the large financing gap in the sector.

By the end of the summit, 63 major humanitarian actors had signed what was to be known as the Grand Bargain, among those were UN agencies, INGOs, NGOs, local partners, and Red Cross and Red Crescent movements, organizations that "represent around 84% of all donor humanitarian contributions donated in 2019 and 69% of aid received by agencies" (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, n.d.a), and thus embody a significant part of the aid industry. The bargain entailed a mutual agreement for all partners to make a change in their work within the sector – donors were to cut down on bureaucratic reporting requirements and improve funding by decreasing earmarked funding, while increasing multi-year funding, thereby making it more efficient, while aid providers agreed to improve transparency in their work (Alexander, 2021 June 10). Additionally, the agreement emphasized the objectives of supporting and developing local and national responders, and including affected communities in the development of programs (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, n.d.a). With the Grand Bargain, humanitarian aid actors thereby committed themselves to fundamentally "get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action" (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, n.d.a). The signees agreed to revisit the Grand Bargain after five years, and in the summer of 2021, the Grand Bargain 2.0 was launched. The new bargain put the following priorities at the center of the bargain 1) securing long-term and flexible quality funding, 2) greater participation of affected communities, and 3) providing better support for the localization initiative.

The Localization of Aid

The localization of aid agenda is one of the objectives included in the Grand Bargain Agreement. It is based on the idea that local responders can strengthen the international aid structure by providing a cheaper alternative and an improved response tailored to the needs of affected communities, as the European Commission describes:

> "Local and national NGOs are valuable partners in crisis-affected contexts: they are often the first to respond when a disaster strikes, they are a part of the local communities, and they are more perceptive of the local cultural and political dynamics in which they operate. Increasing financial support to local partners and developing their competencies for better preparedness, faster responses and resilience-building will improve the way we deliver humanitarian aid" (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, n.d.).

According to the Grand Bargain, national and local responders are to be included into all phases of humanitarian action - from planning to execution - and emphasizes that international actors should "reinforce rather than replace local and national capacities" (Inter-Agency Standing Committee n.d.b). In this way, the localization initiative supports an eventual local "take over" of the humanitarian response, rather than only being included as implementing partners. The Grand Bargain does, however, also acknowledge the vital role international organizations play in humanitarian conflicts and argues that humanitarian interventions should strive to be "as local as possible and as international as necessary" (Inter-Agency Standing Committee n.d.b).

Methodology and Methods

Methodology

This chapter aims to describe the methodological framework employed in this thesis to address the research question. The thesis is grounded in a critical exploratory methodological approach. Though humanitarianism in Lebanon has long been a study of interest, the scope of this thesis is relatively under-researched. Surprisingly, the impact of the crises on the Lebanese aid system has not yet been closely examined. Furthermore, the research to date has tended to focus on the international humanitarian actors in the Lebanese aid system rather than Lebanese NGOs. Therefore, this thesis employs a critical exploratory framework in an attempt "to generate some initial insights and understanding" (Brotherton, 2007, p. 12) on an under-researched problem, by investigating the international aid system in Lebanon through the lenses of critical and subversive humanitarianism. To appropriately address the research problem, this thesis has relied on qualitative data to enable the development of an in-depth understanding and analysis of the aid sector. The data used is a combination of primary and secondary data. While much relevant research already exists on the current humanitarian and development responses and the crises, I have found it necessary to collect original data among Lebanese NGOs to understand the crises' impact on the aid system, and local actors' options to navigate and influence the sector. In order to adequately gather, produce, and process such data, a combination of document analysis and a theory-guided case study has been conducted, which will be outlined in the following section.

Methods

A case study can be described as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence" (Noor, 2008, p. 1602). A case study becomes particularly relevant when a phenomenon, situation, or event needs to be examined in great depth, as it allows the researcher to have a holistic view of a particular problem or phenomenon (Noor, 2008, p. 1602-1603). This thesis is based on a theory-guided case study of the aid sector in Lebanon grounded in the theoretical frameworks of critical humanitarianism and subversive humanitarianism. Through the lens of critical humanitarianism, the method of a case study enables an in-depth analysis of the aid sector by focusing on humanitarianism, in the form of the international aid system, and following it "to its logical conclusion" (Fassin, 2007, p. 502) or, in other words, to how it is carried out in practice and which inconsistencies and consequences that might accompany this process. By including the theoretical concept of subversive humanitarianism, the case study facilitates an analysis of how humanitarian actors navigate and perceive the aid system in "alternative" ways that might differ from the international dominating agenda on aid, via expert interviews. The theory-guided case study has been found compatible with the scope of this thesis because the data generated through these interviews is hardly attainable from a desk study considering the recentness of the crises, the topic being under-researched, and the absence of public statements from local NGOs about the aid sector. Furthermore, the case study has enabled the generating of rich and detailed data otherwise unavailable in a short time.

In order to review a larger set of data, the method of document analysis has been found suitable to combine with the case study. Scholar Glenn A. Bowen describes document analysis as "a process of evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed" (Bowen, 2008, p. 34). It is an efficient method in qualitative research to review a big quantity of data in a limited amount of time. Using document analysis, the researcher systematically processes material in a way that "requires repeated review, examination, and interpretation of the data in order to gain meaning and empirical knowledge of the construct being studied" (Gross, 2018, p. 544). Furthermore, the method has the advantage that much material is readily available in the public domain. Like any other method, however, document analysis also has its limitations. Bowen argues that the researcher should be aware of the biased selectivity that may occur in the selection of documents, and that documents have been produced with a particular purpose unrelated to the current research and might be lacking essential details or information. In this thesis,

document analysis has been particularly useful to attain and review the background information necessary to appropriately answer the research question. Furthermore, the method has served as a way to analyze supplementary material to the interviews, such as data from the NGOs' websites and social media accounts, and a technique to verify and expand the data generated through the case study.

Data Collection

Primary Data

In order to get better insights into the international aid sector and Lebanese NGOs, the case study relies on expert interviews as the primary data-generating tool. Expert interviews can be described as qualitative interviews concentrating on an informant's knowledge in a certain area (Döringer, 2021, p. 265). Although there are discussions as to what makes up an expert within social science, scholar Stefanie Döringer concludes that an expert will typically be "identified by virtue of their specific knowledge, their community position, or their status" (Döringer, 2021, p. 265).

For the case study, a 10-day field visit to Lebanon took place to conduct interviews with nine organizations. Six of these were conducted during the field trip to Lebanon, while three took place on the videotelephony software program, Zoom, afterward. Most of the organizations were contacted prior to arriving in Lebanon. It proved more difficult than expected to secure appointments due to different reasons: some NGOs simply did not reply to the requests, others could not find the time for an interview, and some initially agreed to an interview, but backed out when the date of the appointment approached. Consequently, some organizations were referred to me by contacts in Lebanon or through other NGOs. The interviewed NGOs chose the person they perceived most suitable for the case after being presented with the research topic and the major themes. The point of departure for the interviews was an interview guide consisting of 17 questions. The questions were classified into three categories: 1) the compounding crises, 2) the aid system in Lebanon, and 3) aid bias and social tensions. The interview guide was semi-structured in nature, which allowed for flexibility to elaborate on the interviewees' statements, while still adequately covering the scope of the research. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to two hours and were all recorded.

Criteria for selecting the NGOs were as follows: 1) the NGOs ought to have been established in Lebanon, and 2) they had to have been operating prior to the onset of the current crises, and

preferably before the influx of Syrian refugees. These criteria ensure that the NGOs are local and that they have experienced and adjusted to the various changes and challenges in the aid system throughout the years. In addition to this, this thesis attempts to include NGOs who have publicly made statements about the aid system in Lebanon, and, furthermore, to include a broad spectrum of NGOs to ensure diversity and representation. Therefore, the interviewed NGOs differ widely in size, funding, geographical area, and partnerships; some of the NGOs operate locally, while others have headquarters abroad; some NGOs receive funding from private donors and refuse funds from donor governments, while others rely on funding from international donors; some NGOs are secular, others rooted in a sectarian foundation; some NGOs only provide services for Lebanese, and others do not distinguish between nationalities. Hopefully, the variety of the NGOs portrays a broad spectrum of NGOs in Lebanon. Most of the interviews were conducted at the NGOs' offices in three different locations in Lebanon: Tripoli, the capital of the North Governorate, Beirut, the capital, and Tyre in the South Governorate. The three areas are characterized by different demographic and contextual compositions wherefore the NGOs face different circumstances in their day-to-day operations. Several of the NGOs though, operate in many, if not all, areas of the country. Ultimately, eight interviews were conducted with the following Lebanese NGOs; Amel Association International, Ana Aqra International, Arcenciel, Bassma, Imam Sadr Foundation, Sawa Mninjah, Society for Inclusion and Development in Communities and care for all (SIDC), and one NGO that decided to remain anonymous. In addition to this, one interview was conducted with the European Regional Development and Protection Program (RDPP), a multi-donor initiative that aims to sustainably support Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities in Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan (Udenrigsministeriet, n.d.). RDPP has been included to incorporate insights from a donor perspective and because the program works to enhance the capacities of local partners, in alignment with the localization agenda. More information about the organizations can be found in Appendix 11.

Secondary Data

A wide set of secondary data has been included in this thesis to, on one hand, supplement the data generated through the interviews, and on the other, to provide background information and context understanding in order to analyze the Lebanese aid system in the current situation. This data includes material from international and Lebanese news media, press releases, context analyses from research institutions, material from the interviewed organizations' websites and social media

platforms, reports, and response frameworks from supranational organizations such as the World Bank and UN agencies. In addition to this, this thesis has relied on a broad range of scholarly articles on humanitarianism and the aid sector in Lebanon. The secondary data was selected on the basis of providing contextual information about the different actors and their efforts in the aid sector, the recent developments in Lebanon, and the challenges related to humanitarianism in Lebanon. Ultimately, the literature has highlighted several points for analysis and provided relevant background information.

Processing the data

In order to understand how a delimited group consisting of local NGOs perceives and navigates the international aid system in Lebanon, systematic processing of the data is required. To process the secondary material, this thesis has relied on document analysis to systematically and time-efficiently develop an empirical understanding of the topic at hand, by repeatedly assessing, reviewing, and interpreting the material (Gross, 2018, p. 544). To evaluate and analyze the primary data, a comprehensive process of coding has been undertaken. First, the interviews were transcribed, followed by a thematic analysis. Throughout the interviews, a string of critical, similar discourses about the international aid system was repeated. These discourses were, through the lens of critical and subversive humanitarianism, identified and divided into six analytical themes: what inconsistencies and consequences the aid system in Lebanon produces, how the crises have impacted and exacerbated such tendencies, how the NGOs attempt to navigate the system, how the aid system is related to the increasing aid bias and social tensions, the dynamics in relation to partners and funding, and lastly, improvements to the sector. From here, each theme got a color code, and the interviews were coded according to themes and sub-themes to better allow for a comparison of statements and perceptions between the different organizations. Subsequently, the analytical themes make up the cornerstone of the analysis and discussion of this thesis. In addition to this, it is necessary to mention that the statements from the interviewed organizations have been slightly adjusted for clarity. More specifically, repetitions and empty words such as "like" or "um" have been removed from the quotations.

Hopefully, the chosen methodology and methods are suitable for the objectives of this thesis, as they enable a time-efficient, critical in-depth examination of the international aid system in Lebanon, from an under-researched subject.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

In the following section, I will consider my positionality and ethical considerations in two ways: Firstly, in terms of being a researcher with a theoretical framework embedded within critical humanitarianism and subversive humanitarianism, and secondly, my position in the field and in relation to the informants.

Before conducting fieldwork in Lebanon, I studied humanitarianism and aid in Lebanon in the form of scholarly articles, news reports, and context analyses. While this is a necessary step in attaining background information, I also developed a pre-understanding of the context and challenges from a critical perspective. Additionally, after working as an intern at the Royal Danish Embassy in Lebanon, an actor part of the donor community, I had to be conscious of my pre-understanding of the aid system primarily stemming from a donor perspective. I tried to accommodate this research bias by, on the one hand, researching different aspects and actors of the aid system prior to my fieldwork. And on the other hand, by being conscious of my perceptions of the sector, and open to interpretations that differed from my own, for instance by creating an interview guide with semi-structured, open-ended questions, which allows the informant to associate more freely, and gave room for informants to elaborate on topics I understood different or had not previously considered (Sollund, 2008, p. 184).

Turning now to consider my positions in relation to the informants. As Professor of Criminology, Ragnhild Sollund, describes, there is a power imbalance between the interviewer and the informant because the interviewer leads the interview, while the informant takes on a more passive role. Such power relations may be further exacerbated by differences in ethnicity, geographical area, and life situation (Sollund, 2008, p. 184). Taking this into consideration, I attempted to be sensitive towards my surroundings and the fact that I am a white woman from a wealthy, well-functioning state, which might have an impact on how the informants perceive me or how it could affect their participation, but also on how I perceive and experience the situation in Lebanon. Despite having lived in Lebanon for six months during which the situation was deteriorating rapidly, and having a sense of familiarity with the context, my understanding of the crises – experienced mostly through some minor inconveniences such as frequent lack of water, electricity, and fuel - can in no way be compared to that of the majority of the population. This became evident in several of the interviews when informants felt the need to educate me on specific contexts and geo-political circumstances. I tried to bear our different experiences in mind during the interviews, and attempted to keep it at an

organizational level, so that the interviewee could stay in the role of an expert. In addition to this, I found that I had to be particularly aware of my former employment at the embassy, and what this entails for asymmetric power relations and perceptions. Denmark is a donor country to Lebanon. The embassy thereby represents part of the donor community that *supports* Lebanon, while the Lebanese NGOs are on the *receiving* end. My relation to the embassy may consequently have impacted the informants' perception of me and their objectives for participating - some NGOs, for instance, showed interest in gaining visibility from a potential donor. Being conscious of my positionality in this aspect, I offered the NGOs the chance to remain anonymous and clarified that my research is not conducted in collaboration with the Danish Embassy and that my views do not represent those of the Danish Foreign Ministry. Furthermore, I contacted a wide range of NGOs, some of which do not apply for funding from donor governments, and therefore might be in another position to share their perceptions of the aid system with me.

Limitations

The reader should bear in mind that certain limitations have impacted the outcome of this thesis. First, the thesis is small in scale due to time constraints, and it would suit the objectives of the research to be examined for a longer duration of time. Hopefully, the findings will encourage other researchers to pursue this relevant topic further. Second, this thesis does not embrace the broadest spectrum of Lebanese humanitarian agencies due to practical constraints. Politically affiliated NGOs, for instance, play a significant role in the Lebanese aid sector and could have provided relevant insights, particularly related to the role of the government. In addition to this, it would have been insightful to include some smaller, more local NGOs, community centers, and civil society organizations possibly working under different conditions than the bigger, more established NGOs. Despite these shortcomings, the spectrum of NGOs included in this thesis represents a broad array of the national NGO landscape in Lebanon. Therefore, it arguably serves as a good starting point for future research.

Theoretical Framework

The following chapter describes the theoretical framework of critical humanitarianism and subversive humanitarianism that will be employed to conduct a case study of the international aid sector in Lebanon. First, the theory and relevant concepts of critical humanitarianism will be described. It has been a deliberate choice to include several scholars of critical humanitarianism, some of whom have been influential in the development of the theory, including B.S. Chimni and Didier Fassin, and some who have applied the theory more specifically to Lebanon, among these Estella Carpi, Tamirace Fakhoury, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Clothilde Facon, to get a theoretical framework suitable for the case study at hand. Hopefully, the theory will enable an examination of the international aid sector and its influence on the people living in Lebanon from the perspective of Lebanese NGOs. Second, Gert Verschraegen and Robin Vandewoordt's theoretical concept of subversive humanitarianism will be outlined. The concept will provide an opportunity to examine how Lebanese NGOs navigate the international aid sector, as well as investigate the agency of humanitarian actors, who do not exactly act in accordance with the prevalent agenda of aid to Lebanon. Hopefully, the two theories combined will provide important insights into the international aid sector in Lebanon, and allow me to adequately address the scope of this thesis.

Critical Humanitarianism

In the Oxford Learners' Dictionaries, humanitarianism is defined as "the beliefs and practices of people who try to help people who are suffering and improve the conditions they are living in" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, n.d.). Scholars of critical humanitarianism challenge the idea of humanitarian action solely coming from "a force of good", as the definition of humanitarianism would imply. Instead, they believe that humanitarian action, like other practices on the global scene, is part of, rather than disengaged from, politics, international relations, and social movements. The theory has evolved since the 1980s when a growing body of literature started to examine the role of humanitarianism within the global system and the consequences of humanitarian interventions and discourses. The importance of humanitarianism should not, however, be dismissed, as the Humanitarian Aid Worker, Antonio Donini, argues in the following

quote, but one should be conscious of the inconsistencies that tend to accompany humanitarian practices:

> "Saving and protecting the lives of people affected by conflict and crises is a fundamentally necessary and worthwhile activity. Humanitarian action is a safety net for the most vulnerable in times of disaster, whether man-made or not. As such, it deserves to be protected and nurtured despite its obvious limitations and imperfections. At the same time, before one gets carried away by unrealistic expectations, it is useful to start unscrambling the multiple realities that hide behind the benevolent façade of humanitarianism" (Brun, 2016, p. 395).

It is exactly the multitude of realities in the international aid system in Lebanon that this thesis aims to investigate. One of the "hidden realities" of humanitarianism is, according to Chimni that when an actor, such as a political entity, a state, or a donor, expresses commitment to humanitarianism, these are often accompanied by a set of practices that actually violates the objectives of humanitarianism (Chimni, 2000, p. 243). In the words of Patricia Daley, there has, for example, been a tendency for Northern states to align their geopolitical interests with humanitarian aid since the age of decolonization. Such geopolitical interests can have consequences on the ground. Facon, for instance, argues that the EU has used its humanitarian and development aid to externalize its borders to Lebanon, which has been part of a broader strategy of containing refugees and migrants in the region, thus preventing them from seeking further North (Facon, 2020 august). Several studies have shown that such practices endanger lives rather than alleviate suffering (E.g., Fassin, 2007; Carpi, 2019). But, as Chimni argues, these negative repercussions of humanitarianism often remain hidden or are justified in humanitarian discourses or languages of rights (Chimni, 2000, p. 251). That is, by framing an intervention as "humanitarian", actors can get away with dubious practices because of the symbolic power of humanitarianism, as Fassin argues:

> "The force of humanitarianism resides in the simple but potent message it carries. Its fundamental and ultimate justification is saving lives. Its secondary and subsidiary justification is alleviating suffering […] The moral profit of the qualification "humanitarian" is such that it may be used extensively – and sometimes cynically – to

legitimize any sort of action […] Who would be against the noble goal of saving lives?" (Fassin, 2013, p. 40).

Another tendency hidden behind the façade of humanitarianism is, according to Chimni that humanitarianism is a system set in place to maintain Western relations of domination in the world, and argues that humanitarianism is "*the* ideology of hegemonic states in the era of globalization marked by the end of the Cold War and a growing North-South divide" (Chimni, 2000. P. 243-244). Aligning with Chimni's critique of humanitarianism, several scholars argue that humanitarianism contributes to sustaining the power imbalance between the Global North and the global South (E.g., Daley, 2021; Facon, 2022; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015). Here, they point to what they describe as the Global North's domination of the international aid sector; both in terms of how humanitarian interventions are part of creating economic and political dependencies between states; the way the North is determining the aid agenda; the tendency for local partners to carry the primary workload; and how there exists a "hierarchy of knowledge" where the knowledge of local communities and aid staff is silenced, as humanitarian interventions tend to be based on knowledge and practices developed in the Global North, a notion that, according to Daley, is based on European moral superiority (Daley, 2021, p. 354; Facon, 2021). In the same vein, Carpi has developed the concept of Nordic humanitarianism, to describe how the Nordic version of humanitarianism, often is perceived as the *right* way of performing humanitarianism. Carpi explains that:

> "professional authority is primarily granted to aid workers with standardizable technical experience gained in diverse emergency contexts, although they are rarely equipped with in-depth contextual knowledge" (Carpi, 2021, p. 5).

She argues that this type of technical expertise is esteemed as more valuable than the more context-specific expertise, competencies, and knowledge of local workers (Carpi, 2021, p. 5). The result is that organizations established after Northern humanitarian customs tend to be perceived as more legitimate and with more authority, thus delegitimizing Southern-led aid responses and knowledge. Carpi furthermore writes that local aid responders are not invited to "define and transform the rules of the humanitarian game" (Carpi, 2021, p. 6) compared to their international counterparts, who develop the "conceptualization, design, and evaluation of projects" (Daley, 2021, p. 360-361). Findings from the Refugee Hosts project confirm the notion of Northern humanitarianism

dominating the aid sector, and local responses being bypassed on the higher levels of humanitarian planning (Rutledge, 2018). Findings from the project indicate that local organizations still face negative assumptions perceiving them as being overburdened, unable to meet donor demands, influenced by either politics or ideology, and as "passive", or at times even "passive victims" in need of expertise and help from foreign interventions because they originate from the local communities that aid organizations are supporting (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, n.d.). Such negative narratives continue to influence the type of partnerships that international and local actors engage in and furthermore prevent local organizations from being included in the planning of humanitarian responses on a higher level (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018 January; Rutledge, 2018).

As explained above, critical humanitarianism questions the imperatives of humanitarianism and examines the consequences, inconsistencies, and underlying motives that might accompany it. In order to analyze a topic from the lenses of critical humanitarianism, Fassin suggests investigating the "ontological inequalities [humanitarianism] created or reinforced" (Fassin, 2011, p. 485). While the theory is arguably very suitable for discourse analysis, this thesis instead aims to employ it to examine the international aid sector and its influence and consequences on the communities and agencies in Lebanon from the perspective of Lebanese NGOs. This will be done by following Fassin's suggestion to "enter, as it were, into the heart of humanitarian activity, to analyze the consequences of choices made and practices implemented – in short, to follow humanitarianism to its logical conclusion" (Fassin, 2007, p. 502).

Subversive Humanitarianism

Subversive humanitarianism is a theoretical concept developed by Gert Verschraegen and Robin Vandewoordt to describe enactments of solidarity that encompass what they define as:

> "a morally motivated set of actions, which acquires a political character not through the form in which these actions manifest themselves, but through their implicit opposition to the ruling socio-political climate" (Vandevoordt & Verschragen, 2019, p. 105).

The concept was developed to examine the civil acts of Belgian citizens aiding newly arrived Syrian refugees in Brussels in 2015, who, in the eyes of the citizens, were not receiving the

appropriate support from national institutions because of "governmental policies designed to discourage and prevent their arrival" (Vandevoordt & Verschragen, 2019, p. 102).

The concept of subversive humanitarianism is particularly relevant to examine how actors 1) operate outside of or in parallel to official response mechanisms. As Verschraegen and Vandewoordt describe, the concept enables researchers to investigate actors "who lack regular access to institutions, act in the name of new or unaccepted claims and behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others" (Vandevoordt & Verschragen, 2019, p. 101). And 2) how actors oppose the dominant agenda on aid. The two scholars note that actors who perform subversive humanitarianism challenge the "dominant systems of authority" (Vandevoordt & Verschragen, 2019, p. 102) by enacting an alternative version of humanitarianism that opposes the dominating political climate (Vandevoordt & Verschragen, 2019, p. 103-104). Subversive humanitarianism is thereby related to researching the initiatives of actors that amount to a "concerted, counter-hegemonic social and political action" (Vandevoordt & Verschragen, 2019, p. 102).

In Verschraegen and Vandevoordt's definition of subversive humanitarianism, subversive actors operate outside of institutionalized humanitarianism. This thesis will broaden the concept to also encompass local humanitarian actors such as NGOs. Despite such actors being institutionalized in the international aid sector in Lebanon, and therefore not operating on a grassroots level as Verschraegen and Vandevoordt's definition suggests, local actors have yet to be fully included in all levels of the aid system, as explained in the background chapters, and thus to some extent operate from a different point of departure than INGOs and UN agencies, and, as will be argued later on, in opposition to the dominating agenda on aid in Lebanon.

This thesis will employ the concept of subversive humanitarianism to analyze how local NGOs navigate the international aid sector, how they operate within, outside, or in parallel to the official response mechanism, and lastly how their version of humanitarianism corresponds to the dominant political agenda on aid in Lebanon.

Analysis

"It is not the Aid System; it is the Crisis"

Aid Bias and Social Tensions

This chapter addresses the thesis' first sub-question concerned with whether the international aid system in Lebanon is affecting the increasing social tensions and aid bias. This study did not find a significant connection between the aid regime and the exacerbated social tensions and aid bias among the population in the current crisis. This outcome is contrary to that of scholars such as Carpi and Facon, who argue that vulnerable Lebanese and Palestinians have been excluded from international aid and that status-based aid exacerbates tensions in local communities. However, just two out of the nine interviewed organizations, believed that the current aid system is aggravating social tensions and aid bias and that this might ultimately lead to a clash. The remaining organizations attributed the increasing tensions to a variety of causes, including utterances by the media and politicians, inadequate communication by aid agencies, false rumors, and historical grievances. Several NGOs acknowledge, in alignment with earlier studies that the aid system has previously caused social tensions, but as Amel Association explains, it is not considered the main cause today:

> "It's not the aid system; it is the crisis, which has an impact, let's be honest. Most probably the aid system has exacerbated certain tensions […] but I think the first thing is the crisis, it's not the aid system in itself" (Amel, 00:53:30).

In fact, several of the NGOs agreed that it is natural for tensions to rise in conflict situations, especially when the funding cannot keep up with the needs. The discrepancy between this thesis' findings and previous studies on social tension in Lebanon may be caused by different factors. First, had a broader range of people been consulted, e.g., beneficiaries of aid, the results might have differed. And second, while the majority of the NGOs acknowledge that the aid system used to create tensions, they also acknowledge that it has changed considerably, particularly after the introduction of the LCRP that includes host communities in the response. Interestingly, several NGOs mention that they participated in the advocacy work that changed the focus of the aid

response from primarily targeting Syrian refugees, to including the host communities, as Imam Sadr Foundation explains:

> "Later on, now if you review the [?] of the UN agencies and international donors, etc. you will read the statement 'Syrian refugees and host communities'. This came later, after 3-4 years, and it was our pressure. We as Lebanese actors, civil actors, we were attending all conferences and all meetings, and we were putting these facts on the table, telling the people 'What are you doing? Pay attention please'" (Imam Sadr Foundation, 00:32:00).

One of the outcomes of the advocacy work, according to some of the NGOs, seems to be that social tensions related to the ethnicization of aid, e.g., aid being distributed based on nationality or ethnicity (Carpi, 2014, p. 11), are mitigated because of the inclusion of host communities in the aid response. Instead, the aid is primarily distributed according to a person's level of needs rather than ethnicity. And the differences in needs among the population groups in Lebanon are, according to Imam Sadr Foundation, less distinct today because so many have been affected by the crisis and are in need of aid. These findings, though preliminary, suggest that the international aid system thereby is not affecting social tensions and aid bias to the same extent as earlier.

If we apply the theory of critical humanitarianism to this case, it can be argued that the Lebanese NGOs have identified what Chimni calls a "hidden reality" of humanitarianism, namely that the international aid system, which from a humanitarian viewpoint is expected to alleviate suffering, actually was doing the opposite by negatively affecting social tensions and aid bias. By informing about the negative implications of the aid system, the local NGOs arguably influence the system because they manage to make their context-specific knowledge the basis of the international implementation of aid through advocacy work, rather than passively implementing the objectives of the international aid community. It can thus be argued that local actors are challenging what Carpi coins the Northern-led economy of knowledge, where humanitarian interventions are based on knowledge and practices developed in the Global North, and succeeds in doing so (Carpi, 2021, p. 4). Instead, the local NGOs make their version of humanitarianism valid and, in this specific case, might have overcome the problem with Southern responses being perceived as less legitimate than Northern ones since they participate in defining and transforming "the rules of the humanitarian game" (Carpi, 2021, p. 6). In this way, local NGOs take ownership of the international aid system

in Lebanon, highlight some of the "hidden realities" of the humanitarian system, and prevent some of the negative consequences of the international aid regime in Lebanon. In doing so, the local NGOs perform a type of subversive humanitarianism, which will be elaborated on in the following chapter.

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"You're Ensuring the System gets the Value"

Navigating the Aid System

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One of the initial objectives of this thesis was to identify how local NGOs navigate and influence the international aid system in Lebanon, and how this aligns with the objectives of the Grand Bargain and the localization agenda. This chapter examines the first aspect of this sub-question and argues that 1) Lebanese NGOs take ownership of and influence the international aid system in several ways and thereby counter the perception of local actors being "passive," and 2) Some NGOs perform a type of subversive humanitarianism as they bypass certain restrictions and implement aid that arguably is in opposition to the dominating political agenda.

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Taking Ownership of and Influencing the System

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Throughout the interviews, it became evident that Lebanese NGOs take responsibility and ownership of the international aid system in the country. They do so in several ways. As explained above, several NGOs resort to advocacy as the primary means of influencing the system. They do so through work in committees, global networks, conferences, etc. Here, they are enabled to influence policy development, programs, law reforms, and the aid system. The value of the advocacy work is, according to Amel that it promotes humanitarian solutions that are evidence-based and informed by local contexts, rather than coming from a top-down approach. But the NGO also points out that advocacy is hard work and that NGOs have to prioritize channeling some of their limited, unearmarked funding into advocacy if they wish to influence the system. Local NGOs with more limited resources, therefore, face challenges in getting to the advocacy level, according to Amel. The NGO has, however, found a way to provide smaller, local organizations with a possibility to pass-on opinions and suggestions, as Amel has taken on the role of co-leading the aid system's health sector response. The fact that it is a Lebanese NGO co-leading the response means that issues raised by local actors are addressed at a higher level, as Amel explains:

> "I have plenty of examples where basically local NGOs reach out to me and told me
> this is a health issue. It has to be addressed by the health sector, then because we're
> playing this role, it has been addressed" (Amel, 00:28:15).

According to Amel, the same issues would have been approached differently or might have taken a longer time to address, if it wasn't for a national actor co-leading the response.

Another way local actors have a possibility to influence the system is by identifying and filling out its gaps. Sawa Mninjah, for example, observed that most aid organizations in Tripoli only serve children and orphanages, while the elderly are largely left alone. As a result, the NGO started to implement projects that target the needs of the elderly. Such initiatives suggest that some local NGOs have analyzed the international aid response and found loopholes where they can be of the most significant assistance and thereby complement the overall response.

In addition to this, local NGOs also take ownership of and influencing the aid system by centering responses around a bottom-up, in-depth, context-specific approach based on what local NGOs and communities assess there is a need for, rather than what external actors deem necessary. But, to remain accountable to the local communities, the NGOs must be considerate about their practices. Amel, for instance, rejects funding from certain donors, such as the Government of the United States, and ally to Israel, to avoid jeopardizing their relationship with communities in the South of Lebanon. Furthermore, Amel avoids certain types of aid programs, such as cash assistance, so as not to fuel tensions or lose the trust of the communities they support, as this can have crucial consequences for their accountability:

> "If you break the trust relationship, your first and primary action is going to be
> jeopardized as well. I'm not saying we made the right decision. I'm just saying that we
> did this reality check of it's going to be very challenging for us, so let's not go into this"
> (Amel, 00:50:00).

Another significant method the NGOs use to navigate the international aid system is striving to become independent from external funding. Arcenciel, for example, has a social entrepreneurship model that promotes income-generating activities, making the NGO more self-sufficient. The less

dependent NGOs are on external funding, the bigger the possibility they have to implement aid projects unaffected by time constraints or conditionalities from donors.

The outlined findings suggest that the interviewed Lebanese NGOs are capable of navigating and taking ownership of the international aid system. The local NGOs have analyzed the international aid system and on one hand, assessed where their efforts will be of most value, and on the other, understood where they can make their influence count the most, how they can include the voice of local actors at the higher levels of the aid system, and evaluated how to walk the fine line of remaining accountable to both donors and beneficiaries. This implies that the local NGOs manage to remain relevant and influential within the international aid sector because their connection and access to local communities ultimately also function as their leverage in the system. Taken together, these findings challenge the negative assumptions of local NGOs as "passive actors" or even "passive victims," which, as previously described, still haunt many Southern actors in the global aid regime. The perception is challenged because they do not passively accept the conditions of the international aid regime or wait for external actors to engage. Instead, the findings suggest that Lebanese NGOs are navigating and influencing the aid sector on their own terms and based on their own knowledge and practices, thereby participating in the system on par with international actors.

Conditional Funding

Another way local NGOs are navigating the international aid system is by circumventing certain funding restrictions to implement their own vision, a point that surfaced during the interviews for the case study. A common donor condition is funding targeting certain groups rather than whole communities. As explained in the chapter on critical humanitarianism, scholars argue that there is a tendency for donors, and in particular states, to align humanitarian and development aid with geopolitical interests. In the words of Chimni, this type of humanitarianism with political agendas might ultimately end up violating the objectives of humanitarianism, because of the challenges it creates on the ground (Chimni, 2000, p. 243). Similar to Chimni, Ana Aqra acknowledges that international political agendas are not always considerate of the realities on the ground, and might ultimately do more harm than good. The NGO, therefore, has found a strategy to convert funding that might be influenced by political agendas, to benefit the whole community rather than create challenges. Ana Aqra, for example, explains that it still faces restrictions from donors who only wish to support Syrian refugees, despite Ana Aqra's objective of supporting everyone. While Ana Aqra is in an economic position to refuse such donations, the NGO considers its opportunities

before rejecting them. If the funding allows Ana Aqra to develop and improve its aid programs and to, ultimately, benefit all population groups, the organization will likely accept the funding even if it is accompanied by "harmful" conditions. But Ana Aqra points out that this is only applicable if the funding allows the NGO to stay loyal to its primary mission, which is to enhance the Lebanese public schools and make learning accessible to all children. As an example, Ana Aqra implemented a program that enhances the non-formal education many Syrian children attend. The NGO used the opportunity to improve the quality of education, an improvement the organization could, later on, apply to all the Lebanese public schools, thereby benefiting the whole school system with funding that was originally targeted to only one group. The result is, according to Ana Aqra:

> "We work out the solution that in the end, you're ensuring the system gets the value. So even if it starts with some kind of condition, we make sure that it actually answers the majority of children, regardless [of] whether they are Lebanese or Syrian or Palestinian" (Ana Aqra, 00:23:00a).

Arcenciel has likewise found a way to work around donor conditionalities when it comes to nationality and status:

> "The Ministry of Social Affairs only gives support to Lebanese cardholders of disabilities. When we have people non-Lebanese needing things, we go for donors. We set [up] a project to serve them. So, in our centers, we are serving everyone, but each group from a different, donor-based project" (Arcenciel, 00:16:00).

The organization thus remains loyal to its needs-based approach while accepting funding that in principle is status-based.

If we consider this through the lens of subversive humanitarianism, the local NGOs actually manage to implement an alternative humanitarian solution that is counter-hegemonic because it differs from the donors' political agendas on aid. But they do so while they operate within the institutionalized response mechanism rather than apart from it and thus remain in an essential position to influence the system. Thereby, local NGOs manage to "stay in business" by accepting conditional funding but modifying or manipulating it to fit their own visions. In doing so, the NGOs overcome challenges related to donor agendas not always being in touch with the actual needs on

the ground, and with funding supporting political agendas, such as the refugee-centric approach; which, as explained in the literature review, earlier has been connected to the agenda of externalizing European borders to Lebanon so as to prevent refugees from seeking further North (Facon, 2020 August). By providing a subversive humanitarian solution, local NGOs actually challenge or oppose these possible underlying interests of donors and avoid violating the objectives of humanitarianism.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the present chapter; local NGOs manage to take ownership of and navigate the international aid system in Lebanon by filling the need-gaps of the system, having a bottom-up approach, and undertaking advocacy work while remaining accountable to the communities they support. The NGOs consequently position themselves in an essential position in the aid system from where they can work for an evidence-based aid regime informed by local contexts. Furthermore, some local NGOs are bypassing or adjusting certain funding restrictions to fit their overall vision, and thereby manage to oppose the dominating political agenda on aid, thus performing subversive humanitarianism.

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"A lot of Coordination, no Outcome"

The Hidden Realities of the Aid System in Lebanon and the Crises' Impact on the Sector

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From a humanitarian viewpoint, the international aid system in Lebanon is set in place to alleviate the suffering of people and improve the conditions they are living in. But humanitarian practices tend to be accompanied by inconsistencies that have negative consequences on the ground. This chapter sets out to critically analyze the international aid sector in Lebanon from the perception of Lebanese NGOs, as Fassin recommends doing, by entering "into the heart of humanitarian activity, to analyze the consequences of choices made and practices implemented – in short, to follow humanitarianism to its logical conclusion" (Fassin, 2007, p. 502). A number of inconsistencies and consequences were identified, primarily related to the inefficiency of the system, the asymmetric relationships between national and international responders, and the implementation of the Grand Bargain and the localization agenda. In the following chapter, the different topics will be outlined and analyzed. Furthermore, this chapter will research how the crises are affecting the aid sector and the consequent provision of aid.

An Inefficient System

A variety of perspectives were expressed about challenges and consequences related to the architecture of the international aid system by the interviewed organizations. The following section will outline the challenges NGOs face with regard to the bureaucracy of the aid system, the different UN response frameworks, and the Lebanese Government.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was discontent with the bureaucratic procedures of the aid system, which hinders the NGOs in using their time efficiently. Despite the Grand Bargain's objectives of cutting down on bureaucratic procedures, harmonizing reporting mechanisms, and improving funding, most of the interviewed NGOs report still facing daily challenges dealing with the bureaucracy of the international aid community. One of the challenges is that there are more procedures to comply with than necessary. For example, Arcenciel argues:

> "We're losing time and efforts just to comply with the procedures that people, bureaucrats, somewhere in the UN have said, and they do not grasp the realities of the terrain" (Arcenciel, 00:29:30).

Imam Sadr Foundation likewise notes that the time spent behind the desk complying with procedures could be used more efficiently on the ground, attending to the needs of the beneficiaries. Local NGOs do not only face challenges with bureaucratic procedures in the international aid system, but they also explain that the introduction of the different UN frameworks is hampering their work. This is particularly due to the implementation of three new response frameworks since the beginning of the crises; the COVID-19 pillar; the 3RF; and the ERP. The frameworks have, according to the NGOs resulted in duplication of services, miscommunication, lack of coordination, and fragmentation. In the words of Amel, it complicates the lives of NGOs in terms of reporting procedures because of the additional organizing mechanisms they have to coordinate with. As SIDC observes, the many meetings affect the NGOs deeply:

> "At certain times all these platforms [are] very much overwhelming. There are a lot of meetings. You are putting a lot of effort to attend meetings, workshops, etc. And in the end, you are not implementing because all the time is in attending meetings, doing this and that. It is very overwhelming. They take up lots of time, all your day, and at the end, you are doing what you were supposed to do in your organization [in the] late

> hours. So, this is also very frustrating in the long run, like if you're living in
> emergency all the time" (SIDC, 00:28:00a).

Furthermore, the work burden local NGOs are dealing with increases if they are working multi-sectoral, as they have to participate in even more committees and meetings. RDPP likewise argues that the introduction of more response plans creates another layer of coordination challenges, which would not have been necessary if the existing response plan had been increased. Furthermore, the additional plans blur the line of who is supposed to cover which beneficiaries. In the ERP, vulnerable Lebanese are covered by OCHA, for instance, while UNHCR is responsible for the Lebanese host communities in another plan. According to RDPP, this makes it "extremely difficult to figure out if you are actually hitting the target correct" (RDPP, 00:28:00) and ensure that people's needs are covered, but not duplicated. However, Amel also notes that it is a positive change that local NGOs are enabled to co-lead some of the responses, which have changed the power dynamics for the better as it allows local NGOs to influence the system. Furthermore, the frameworks provide a united platform for donors, Lebanese governmental bodies, and humanitarian actors to engage, which means that everyone is following the same strategy. But, as Amel notes, the frameworks are lacking the simplicity and efficiency that enables local actors to easily navigate it.

Lastly, a common agreement among the interviewed organizations, is that the Lebanese government is complicating the work of the international aid sector. Several of the NGOs report having to deal with corruption from governmental bodies, which protracts their efforts. Furthermore, the government's inability or unwillingness to provide public services entails that humanitarian actors are increasingly undertaking functions normally assigned to the state. This adds an additional burden to humanitarian actors, who are then held accountable for delivering services the government should be providing. One NGO explains that a consequence of this is that the NGOs now experience higher demands and expectations from the beneficiaries, who, ultimately, are not able to "play the role of the government" (Anonymous, 00:50:30). The government's passivity and corruption are furthermore driving donors to increasingly sideline the government in the provision of aid and instead hand donations directly to humanitarian partners, "as if the state didn't exist" as Imam Sadr Foundation describes (00:24:00). The NGO goes on to argue that this has damaging implications for the Lebanese state itself:

"This, in my opinion, has a very negative on a society like Lebanon. Because we know Lebanon is composed of several confessions […] Now, this type of direct relationship with local NGOs without reserving the governing role of the government, the regulating role of the government, is having a negative impact on the population itself. Because if now, let us say, Saudi Arabia is helping this village, Iran in that one, France a third one, and Italy. So, the people, their gratitude is going towards the state which is offering their needs, which means that the concept of the Lebanese state, it is degrading. And instead of feeling Lebanese in general, this patriotic feeling is disposed to the states and to the organizations who are providing help" (Imam Sadr Foundation, 00:24:00).

RDPP suggests that the government is deliberately complicating the humanitarian efforts in order to avoid handling the crises:

"The problem with Lebanon compared to Jordan and Iraq when it comes to the aid sector has always been that Lebanese politicians are always extremely good at making small fires […] Like every six months they managed to sort of create a narrative that made the donor community run in that direction […] every six months the narrative changes. So, you light a fire to divert attention away from the inability of the government or the unwillingness of the government to actually do anything" (RDPP, 00:33:30).

Taken together, the outlined findings could have damaging consequences for the actual provision of aid for Lebanon's future development. First, the humanitarian aid system, which in its essence, is put in place to save lives and alleviate suffering, is, according to the interviewed organizations, hampering the humanitarian actors from doing so. It can be argued that the magnitude of bureaucratic procedures, decided by officials with an, at times, limited understanding of the realities on the ground, are hindering local NGOs from using their time efficiently and from working the way they deem most fit for the situation. This, together with the growing number of response frameworks that are supposed to facilitate a unified response for all actors in the system and avoid duplication, fragmentation, and miscommunication, creates a situation where the funding and coordination mechanisms have become all the more complicated and overwhelming for local

NGOs. This could imply that the architecture of the aid system is somewhat inefficient and is actually doing the opposite of its objective, as local NGOs lack the time to address the proper implementation of projects. Or, as one NGO describes it, the aid system is "a lot of coordination, but no outcome" (Ana Aqra, 00:02:30b). Tendencies that are exacerbated if they work multi-sectoral. Furthermore, when local NGOs are prevented from working in close connection to the communities they support, a possible outcome could be that they in time lose the relationships with their beneficiaries, which, ultimately, could affect their essential position and leverage in the aid system.

Second, the inefficiency and fragmentation of the aid system could furthermore be exacerbated by the retreating role of the Lebanese government. The problem with this direction is, according to one of the NGOs that in the lack of a governmental holistic strategy to guide aid and services, the actors in the aid system base their efforts on what they themselves perceive there is a need for. In a worst-case scenario, such a development might result in Lebanon becoming another "Republic of NGOs" (Alhaj & Naar, 2021), meaning a state that is run and kept afloat by humanitarian actors rather than by the government of the country. A scenario that Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur, has already stressed might be the result of Lebanon's transgression into complete collapse. Without the umbrella level a state typically provides, a holistic strategy to help people out of crises can hardly be achieved, and challenges with duplications, accountability, patriotism, and fragmentation might prevail. Reaching an umbrella level to help address the needs and find sustainable solutions furthermore seems challenged by the Lebanese government's manipulation of the aid sector, as the beforementioned quote from RDPP suggests. Thus, if donors and humanitarian actors are focused on addressing the short-sighted solutions that the government is manipulating them towards, it arguably becomes harder to direct channels towards the root causes of the crises and a long-term strategy to get Lebanon back on track. A point, Lebanon has already reached according to RDPP:

> "It's providing the fish and not teaching them how to fish. That's my personal opinion from the sector. And this crisis increased this more. No one is having the direction to focus really on what the country needs to recover" (RDPP, 00:31:30).

The consequences of the aforementioned developments are, according to the interviewed organizations that people will be kept alive, but an actual change in the country will be suppressed

as the aid sector is focused on solving temporary solutions in patches rather than addressing the actual disease.

Asymmetric Power Relations

As explained in the chapter on critical humanitarianism, there has been a tendency for the global aid sector to be dominated by the Global North, a tendency that often is accompanied by; asymmetric power relations between humanitarian actors as Northern states determine the aid agenda; and for aid interventions to be based on knowledge developed in the global North. While several of the interviewed organizations for the case study proclaimed that it is somewhat inevitable that there is power asymmetry between humanitarian actors when money goes from one hand to another, for instance in donor-NGO relations, findings from the thesis also indicate that there is a growing power asymmetry between national and international NGOs. The following section will therefore address the sub-question of how the crises are affecting the aid system, by arguing that the current compounding crises in Lebanon are worsening the asymmetric power relations between national and international humanitarian actors.

One reported imbalance in the international aid system is that of structural inequalities between local NGOs and their international counterparts. These views surfaced mainly in relation to the type of funding they receive from donors. Several NGOs mention they seldom receive funding covering the costs of headquarters or administration, in contrast to the funding INGOs or UN agencies obtain. Furthermore, and against the objectives of the Grand Bargain, local NGOs continue to receive short-term funding, which poses another challenge for the NGOs who spend time and resources to train staff who in the end, might only be employed for a single project, which SIDC elaborates on:

> "Every time you want to assign a new person on a position, they will take like six months to understand the work. A project is for six months, sometimes the donor does not understand this. They would tell you, 'When your project is done, you can tell the person to quit the job.' But it's not good because you are losing people that you put lots of effort [into] training them […] They don't understand that NGOs do not get money for the running costs or for the management costs […]. Although, when you see an INGO or UN agency, they put a lot for management and they have stable people in the management. They don't have a turnover" (SIDC, 00:11:30b).

The short-term humanitarian funding furthermore has implications for the local NGOs, who proclaim that it prevents them from planning long-term initiatives and it hinders their development and capacity-building, as SIDC argues:

> "This is not sustainable and it is not helping us move forward. You put a lot of effort in the type of funding that does not allow you to put administrative costs and to cover your team and your coordinator […] and when you calculate the effort done, you see that you are underpaid and under-covered" (SIDC, 00:00:30b).

As previously explained, the funding local NGOs receive, often come comes with certain conditionalities. A possible explanation for this could, according to SIDC, be that the people in decision-making are lacking a context-specific understanding of the communities because they are not present "in the field" the same way local NGOs are. The funding can be restricted in such a way that NGOs find themselves unable to cover the needs they observe among the population. This might ultimately create tensions between the local communities and the organizations implementing aid because the beneficiaries' voices of needs are left unaddressed, as one NGO argues. SIDC likewise comments on the challenge of being hampered from providing aid where it is most needed:

> "The money will stay there and they will go back to the donor. And there were people who were in front of you, who needed something that is not offered anywhere else and you cannot serve them because they restricted the fund in a way that is theoretically very nice, but in practice that is different" (SIDC, 00:19:15b).

The frustration becomes more apparent considering the way UN agencies and INGOs spend some of their funding. Several NGOs pointed to international humanitarian actors using funding on car rentals and high salaries to ex-pats, which is out of touch with the prices in the country, as one NGO observes:

> "I can't see UN agencies driving land cruisers to go to impoverished camps. When this one land cruiser would feed this whole camp for a whole year. This is not effective, not efficient when a driver gets paid more than a coordinator […] What

> percentage of it is going towards really giving aid? And what is going towards more
> of the monthly expenses?" (Anonymous, 00:57:30).

In addition to these statements, a variety of perspectives were expressed on the crises' negative impact on the NGOs' working conditions, which consequently also affects their position within the aid system. SIDC points out that the staff at the NGO are becoming increasingly stressed due to working in a constant emergency setting. One of the possible explanations for this could be the growing number of beneficiaries and needs the NGOs are compelled to attend to. The deterioration of the socio-economic conditions among the population is causing many new people to register as beneficiaries. According to Imam Sadr Foundation, their database went from having 5,000 families prior to the crisis to 10,000 at the time of the interview. Several of the interviewed NGOs express that the amount of funding they receive cannot keep up with the increased needs and the additional number of beneficiaries, or at times even with the fixed expenses of the organizations. Some NGOs have, for instance, already been forced to lay off staff or scale down activities because of decreased funding, as Sawa Mninjah explains:

> "Usually, I cook in Ramadan especially. I cook starting with 2000 meals a day, and I
> reached to 5000. This year, I could not exceed 600 meals because of the funding"
> (Sawa Mninjah, 00:21:30).

To cope with this, several of the NGOs have extended their donor portfolio to secure more funding, Imam Sadr Foundation, for instance, went from 7-10 partners to 20. But, as the NGO argues, their challenging situation has consequences for the type of partnerships they engage in, saying: "nowadays, we don't have the luxury to be selective" (Imam Sadr Foundation, 00:19:30), indicating that they partner with donors or accept conditions they might have rejected in other circumstances. In addition to this, the work burden local NGOs are dealing with as a result of the crises and the UN response frameworks, leaves limited time for advocacy work, as Imam Sadr Foundations comments on:

> "I was the one person who was in charge of coordinating with international NGOs and
> funders. I used to spend at least one or two days per week following this issue,
> coordination, advocating, etc. It continued like this until 2019, but believe me now,

> maybe I get a couple of hours per month, or even less. Because I have no time, and let me be frank with you, I have no faith. I don't believe in this. I think it's a waste of time […] Deep inside, I strongly believe in it's the only way, really to advocate, to highlight the issues, to have a vision […] of development, of human dignity, of prosperity, etc. But I am overwhelmed. I am taken by the situation" (Imam Sadr Foundation, 00:38:00).

As the previous chapter argued that advocacy functions as one of the primary tools for local actors to influence the international aid system. During the interviews for the case study, concerns were expressed about the current state of the advocacy space in Lebanon, which, according to RDPP, basically has disappeared.

Another reported concern related to the local NGOs' working conditions, is that an additional number of NGOs have been established since the onset of the crisis. The increased number of associations aggravates the already existing competition between aid organizations and may result in a duplication of services and a more fragmented response, according to several of the NGOs. However, the local NGOs do not only face competition with other national NGOs but are increasingly competing for staff with international organizations because of the crises. Several NGOs report that local staff leave NGOs for higher-paid jobs at INGOs or to work abroad. Arcenciel conducts exit interviews with employees once they quit, 90% of them quit because they've found higher-paid jobs at INGOs:

> "They prefer to go on a project-based, riskier environment, because the pay is maybe sometimes 6, 7, 10 times more. So, they will take the risk for a year. They're saying this year they can make money compared to 7-8 years elsewhere. So that's the problem. Usually, we have people that we recruit based on the profile, and we train, we get the expertise and the know-how, and after a year or so, you lose it […] So you invest a lot and you have little return. Long-term in positions [that] are crucial, like in fundraising or finance or these positions that are crucial to run activities" (Arcenciel, 00:21:30).

The competition and asymmetry between national and international NGOs are aggravated by the crises in another way. An interesting observation was made by one of the Lebanese NGOs related to

INGOs. Prior to the crisis, some INGOs were preparing to reduce their international staff or leave the country. They would let local NGOs take over operations, in line with the localization objective of expanding the role of local NGOs. But as the repercussions of the crises hit the country, the INGOs remained. The interviewed NGO argues that this is because they found a renewed opportunity for funding:

> "You cannot just suddenly […] you want to reduce your size, and then you get more money and you decide 'No, it's better if you stay and increase your'. I mean, it doesn't work like that. But in the end, this is human nature. They're going to prioritize their better jobs because those people get them jobs in the end" (Anonymous, 00:50:00).

The observation could indicate that the international aid system in Lebanon somehow reflects a market-like setting, a concept Economist Gilles Carbonnier has elaborated on in the book *Humanitarian Economics: War, Disaster, and the Global Aid Market* (2016). In order to survive, INGOs have to remain operative in areas where funding and visibility are available. In doing so, the presence of the INGOs might come at the expense of increased competition for work and funding with local NGOs.

Taken together, all of these findings might possibly entail a bigger power asymmetry between local and international NGOs and are severely affecting local NGOs' possibilities to navigate and influence the aid system. The NGOs' position in the system becomes limited because of the structural inequalities they are exposed to compared to their international counterparts. This is particularly related to the earmarked, conditional funding, which prevents the NGOs from financing their own capacity building, improving programs, and focusing on providing long-term solutions. One of the issues that could emerge from this is the possibility that local NGOs, as well as the rest of the international aid sector, end up in the trap of "extinguishing small fires", hence only working on short-sighted solutions as previously discussed, rather than having the means and energy to work on solutions that could benefit Lebanon in the long run. Furthermore, to keep operating, they are increasingly compelled to engage in partnerships that might have harmful conditions on the ground. This, together with the overwhelming work burden could possibly have consequences for the local NGOs' ability to navigate the international aid sector based on their own terms, simply because they cannot find the time, resources, or energy to engage with it. It could ultimately affect their

leverage with the local communities they serve and create accountability challenges because the aid is not properly based on what the community needs, but might be spent inefficiently or sent back to the donor. Combining this with the NGOs' limited time to engage in the diminishing advocacy space, they possibly have a smaller chance of properly influencing the system with a context-specific approach. This could subsequently affect the essential position local NGOs have within the aid system - their close connection to the affected communities and their ability to contribute with bottom-up solutions - and thereby what the international aid system determines as their indispensable contribution to the system. Hence, it could conceivably be hypothesized that the crises could have profound implications for the position of local NGOs in the international aid system, as the findings suggest that the NGOs are experiencing a "setback" compared to the rest of the international aid system. This then, affects their sustainability and competitiveness, a challenge that is further exacerbated by the tendency of local employees to migrate toward international organizations. Simultaneously, some international organizations are expanding their operations and staff size in Lebanon. The local NGOs' setback and the INGOs' comeback could conceivably entail that the asymmetric power relations between different actors in the humanitarian sector become even more warped due to local NGOs being unable to remain competitive. If we furthermore consider scholars of critical humanitarianism's claim that the current international humanitarian architecture is rooted in the power imbalance between the global North and South, then it can be hypothesized that such uneven power relations may unintentionally be exacerbated between Northern and Southern humanitarian actors in Lebanon because of the current crises. Ultimately, the factors that may allow international organizations to grow and develop and prevent local organizations from having the resources to do so, could cause Northern humanitarianism to play an increasingly bigger role in the international aid system in Lebanon.

The Implementation of the Grand Bargain and the Localization Agenda

Lastly, it is relevant to briefly evaluate the implementation of the Grand Bargain Agreement and the localization agenda in Lebanon in the context of the current situation, to understand how such global commitments might be affected by complicated crisis situations. The analyzed findings of this thesis could suggest that several objectives of the Grand Bargain and the localization agenda are not being fulfilled in the current setting. The challenges the local NGOs report related to bureaucratic procedures and increasingly short-term funding arguably do not comply with the Grand Bargain's objectives of cutting down on bureaucratic procedures, harmonizing reporting

mechanisms, and making funding more efficient. Furthermore, the local NGOs' setback and the INGOs' comeback have seemingly worsened structural inequalities and asymmetric power relations. When international humanitarian actors decide to remain in Lebanon because of the market-like system, instead of letting local actors take over certain operations where INGOs might not technically be needed, is in stark contrast to the objectives of the localization agenda, which aims for international actors to "reinforce rather than replace local and national capacities," (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, n.d.b). Therefore, it can be argued that the paradox of the humanitarian system operating in a market-like setting ultimately provides an integrated challenge for the localization agenda to be carried out. The developments in the aid sector caused by the current crisis situation could thus indicate that chances of a successful implementation of the localization agenda and the Grand Bargain are jeopardized in times of crisis. This might be worth considering when contemplating how the global aid community can remain committed to the objectives of the Grand Bargain and the localization agenda in times of crisis, to still secure that the aid reaches the furthest in the most efficient way.

This chapter has critically analyzed the international aid sector in Lebanon, as Fassin recommends doing by entering "into the heart of humanitarian activity, to analyze the consequences of choices made and practices implemented – in short, to follow humanitarianism to its logical conclusion" (Fassin, 2007, p. 502). The research has identified some of the consequences of the aid system in Lebanon and has argued that; 1) the aid system that is put in place to alleviate suffering and provide a coherent response framework is to some extent insufficient as it is becoming increasingly fragmented and overwhelming and thereby prevents local NGOs from working efficiently, spend their times improving aid programs, and maintaining their close relationships to the affected communities they serve; 2) humanitarian organizations and donors are manipulated to address short-term solutions rather than finding the means to work on a long-term strategy to get Lebanon out of its crises; 3) local NGOs' capacity to navigate and influence the international aid system on their own terms is diminished because of the current crises and might consequently affect their relevant position within the aid system as well as the chances of the aid system to be guided by a context-specific bottom-up approach to aid; 4) the crises are exacerbating the asymmetric power relations between national and international humanitarian agencies, furthering the tendency for Northern humanitarianism to dominate the international aid system, and; 5) a successful

implementation of the Grand Bargain Agreement and the localization agenda is hampered by the current crisis situation.

In an attempt to provide some ideas for the enhancement of the downward trajectory of the international aid system in Lebanon, the following chapter will discuss some of the suggestions local NGOs have to improve the current state of the aid system.

Discussion - What do the Solutions Look Like?

So far, this thesis has focused on examining the international aid system in Lebanon and its consequences from the lens of critical and subversive humanitarianism. The following section will discuss what the solutions could look like from the perception of Lebanese NGOs, for the aid system to be guided by a bottom-up approach. Therefore, the following chapter will discuss and highlight suggestions for enhancements by Lebanese NGOs, divided into three categories: complementary efforts, what a good partnership entails, and improvements to the international aid system.

Complimentary Efforts

A common view among the Lebanese NGOs was that the efforts of INGOs and local NGOs should strive to complement each other rather than compete. Here, some of the interviewed NGOs suggested that NGOs and INGOs, with their different expertise, knowledge, and approaches, should fill out different roles in the aid system. And that the qualities of INGOs could be more efficiently utilized by taking a step back from implementing on "the ground". Imam Sadr Foundation, for example, thinks local NGOs are better equipped to handle the humanitarian interventions in Lebanon, while the development sector could benefit from the support and guidance from INGOs and donors:

> "I would say it's better to leave humanitarian issues, humanitarian aid, etc. in the hands of the Lebanese NGOs. They will manage, they will arrange for the food, for the drugs, etc. And [for internationals to] go help the public sector to reform itself to

supply power for the entire community, to maintain the roads and these things. Like

this, there'll be no social tensions because of your intervention, because you are

dealing with the state, with the Lebanese government, which is for all Lebanese"

(Imam Sadr Foundation, 00:41:00).

Another NGO suggests that INGOs should work remotely, by linking up with- and supporting local NGOs. This could be in the form of capacity building or as consultants and inspiration for best practices. Lastly, one NGO advocates for a more business-like approach INGOs and donors could take in Lebanon, by utilizing their networks, for instance in Europe, and linking it directly with industries in Lebanon. In this way, Lebanon would benefit from a much-needed re-vamping of Lebanese industries, more jobs, and a more secure income from abroad.

One challenge that could hinder the accomplishment of humanitarian actors' efforts complementing each other, is the market-like system humanitarian agencies work within. This thesis' findings suggest that humanitarian agencies are depending on funding to thrive and survive, which compels them to remain active in areas where funding and visibility are available. As a result, INGOs might remain active where they might not technically be needed and more agencies are competing for the same funding. This could ultimately prevent the implementation of the most suitable efforts. To overcome this dilemma, the global humanitarian community must genuinely (re)consider how to sustainably support local and international humanitarian organizations to work where they are of most value.

What Does a Good Partnership Look Like? – RDPP as a Role Model

The theme of partnerships recurred when the Lebanese NGOs were asked about improvements to the international aid sector. In alignment with the objectives of the Grand Bargain, the Lebanese NGOs wish for long-term partnerships that provide flexible, multi-year, predictable, and unearmarked funding. In short, they want partnerships that enable them to continue working in a sustainable and balanced way, rather than partnerships that force them to spend all their time fundraising. While many NGOs have had unsatisfactory collaborations with international partners, some did, however, also highlight some international organizations as role models for good partnerships. Among others the French Agency for Development (AFD) and RDPP, which, according to Amel, have made actual contributions to the localization agenda in Lebanon. So, what

does an ideal partnership actually look like? RDPP and one of their partner-NGOs highlight three elements that distinguish them from typical partners or donors: First, RDPP attempts to have a partnership approach rather than donor-receiver relations with the NGOs it supports. The organization acknowledges that there will always be a power imbalance when money is going from one hand to another, but they try to make the collaborations as equal as possible and ensure that everyone involved benefits from the partnership. A partner NGO to RDPP recognizes this approach:

> "I've never felt with the RDPP the donor forcing something on you, like 'do this, you have money to do this'. No, with RDPP it's more of a partnership rather than of a donor power struggle with the organization" (Anonymous, 00:16:45).

Second, another notable feature of RDPP is its capacity-building approach. In alignment with the localization agenda, RDPP supports the capacity-building of local NGOs, but based on what the NGOs themselves wish to enhance, as RDPP describes:

> "What we are doing is, we are having this organization capacity development, where they ask from the beginning of the project for us to work on anything they need. So, we support, and prioritizing, planning, what they do, everything. They own the capacity development. […] We focus on more strategies and institutional strengthening, empowering staff, engaging with other internal capacity development. I see this as something unique […] It's a customized thing. You can see the difference between the capacity of each organization, their size, their outreach, specialties" (RDPP, 00:48:45).

According to a local NGO, RDPP's capacity-building happens in a way that respects the nature of the NGOs. RDPP's approach may arguably have overcome one of the points of criticism of the localization agenda. The agenda has been criticized for institutionalizing local NGOs into the Northern-led international aid system. RDPP's approach seems to bypass this dilemma by adhering to the localization agenda on the terms of the NGOs it supports.

Third, the structure of RDPP as an organization has a positive impact on its capacity. RDPP is a program consisting of seven employees, many of whom are Lebanese, with different

specializations, e.g., communication, capacity building, operations, etc. The team is based in Lebanon, which according to a partner NGO, means that RDPP comprehends the reality Lebanese NGOs operate within:

> "[They] totally understand the contexts, and they totally understand the challenges that we're working with, and their approach is, let's find a solution together, rather than 'No, we gave you money, you figure it out and come to us with a solution'" (Anonymous, 01:23:00).

RDPP's holistic composition and context-specific knowledge mean that it can support Lebanese NGOs in a bigger variety of areas. Furthermore, RDPP's composition has a big impact on the type and number of partnerships it can engage in. The fact that RDPP is a program with seven employees, entails that it has the capacity to handle more contracts than a typical state donor such as Danida, the Danish International Development Agency. RDPP explains that it, as a program with several employees, has the opportunity to fund NGOs with smaller contract amounts than Danida for instance can because the management would be too high. RDPP has around 26 partners at the moment of writing, whereas a development program like the 3SN in the regulation by the Danish Foreign Ministry is only allowed to have 5-8 partnerships for the amount of 600 million DKK. Thus, donors like RDPP seem to have overcome the hurdle of supporting smaller NGOs that lack the capacity to accept huge donation amounts. Thereby RDPP has arguably found a way to provide more direct and flexible funding to local NGOs.

There might, however, be some challenges related to expanding such a program. When asked about the possibility of scaling up a program such as RDPP, one NGO states: "I think the bigger it becomes, it will lose a bit of a magic touch, because they wouldn't have the same time" (Anonymous, 01:24:00). Furthermore, RDPP argues that there is a risk to having this kind of funding, because the safeguard 'middleman', such as a UN agency, who is the one that would lose the money if complications happen, is removed from the process. This points to some of the risks international donors face when dealing with direct funding, and might possibly explain why some choose to take "the safe way" and fund bigger INGOs or UN agencies. Despite these challenges, organizations such as RDPP and AFD, still serve as examples of donors attributing to the localization agenda in a way that Lebanese NGOs approve of, and thus as possible role models for future collaborations.

Changes to the International Aid System in Lebanon

When it comes to the international aid system in Lebanon, the local NGOs have several recommendations for improvement. The first recommendation is related to the nature of the aid response. Many of the Lebanese NGOs have previously focused on development, but have on one hand felt obliged to redirect their funding to more humanitarian programs to meet the needs of the population, and on the other, have received more short-term humanitarian-oriented funding from donors. According to Imam Sadr Foundation, it poses a dilemma, since NGOs do not wish to disregard humanitarian needs, but at its core, humanitarian interventions do not tackle the root problems. Therefore, Arcenciel argues the time has come to channel funding in a more developmental direction again:

> "With the complexity of today's problems facing Lebanon, I think the most important is to go for developmental projects. I mean, the refugee crisis is here to stay, we've seen it with the Palestinians […] 70 years. And I don't think the Syrians will ever go out. But today we have to go through development projects to increase the independence of the Lebanese and get more foreign investment to sustain the currency etc." (Arcenciel, 00:35:30).

The second recommendation is related to the UN response frameworks. Here, the NGOs request an aid system with fewer meetings and bureaucracy, which would enable them to spend the necessary time on implementation. In addition to this, they recommend implementing a more simplified system. A possible solution could be having fewer response plans, which would allow for a more unified aid response.

This brings us to the third recommendation, and possibly the most challenging to implement. The primary change many of the NGOs request, is for the Lebanese government to take responsibility for the international aid system. According to one of the NGOs, a unified and strategic aid response is impossible without a well-organized state leading the response. Imam Sadr Foundation likewise points to the importance of the Lebanese government taking charge of the aid sector:

> "I think what should be done to move from this vicious circle is: First, you should have a good government or at least a reasonably good government in Lebanon. Then

this government should take in charge the possibility of gathering all those actors together around a table to coordinate their efforts and to agree on the final purpose of the state, and to put a time table. We have to help people survive, but we have to build the capacity to be independent and to produce their own needs. This doesn't come like this [snaps fingers], it needs leadership needs […] [the] international community and from international NGOs to have this vision that put an exit strategy. Okay, within four or five or 10 years, we should leave this country. And we should really adhere to the concept of localization, how to help those civil society actors, but also the public institutions to take the things in hand and to be responsible for the dignity and for the capacity building of the people" (Imam Sadr Foundation, 00:26:00).

While this could possibly solve the challenges related to the lack of a coherent aid response, the implementation of the localization agenda, and humanitarian actors implementing projects based on what they themselves deem necessary, the future prospects for such a development arguably seem slight. Corruption, clientelism, and nepotism are, according to RDPP, so deeply rooted in the Lebanese political system and society that the idea of the government taking responsibility seems almost unimaginable. Furthermore, the current political system and its grip on the progression of the Lebanese state, have caught international donors in a pickle; donor states and international institutions such as the World Bank, have used development aid and loans as leverage to push for far-reaching reforms in the Lebanese government, including economic reforms and a reformation and investigation of the banking sector (Solomou, 2022). Current investigations, however, deem it "unlikely that the country's sectarian political system will agree to make the necessary reforms as its main concern is the preservation of the privileges of the country's elite" (Solomou, 2022). Thus, international donors are caught in a pickle of either continuing to support what Refugees International terms "short-term cycles of immediate assistance," (Atrache, 2021 December) and thereby attempting to cover the humanitarian needs, but also unintentionally keeping the Lebanese political power from transforming. Or on the other hand, pushing for reforms and holding back aid, which has implications for the people in Lebanon and ultimately could result in a new migration stream to Europe (Vohra, 2020). In conclusion, changes to the international aid system in Lebanon remain a complicated issue. Further research is necessary to determine how to best aid Lebanon in the right direction, how to ensure a responsible governing system, and prevent the evolution of a "republic of NGOs".

Conclusion

By the means of a theory-guided case study, this thesis set out to investigate how Lebanese NGOs perceive and interact with the international aid system in the context of widespread mass displacement and compounding crises. The objectives of the thesis have been to, on one hand, follow humanitarianism to its logical conclusion, by applying critical humanitarianism to investigate the consequences and inconsistencies within the Lebanese humanitarian system, and to what extent such implications are affected by the current crises and mass displacement. On the other hand, the thesis has, by applying subversive humanitarianism, examined what options local NGOs have to navigate and interact with the system, and compared these to the objectives of the Grand Bargain and localization agenda. By focusing on local NGOs' perspectives, this thesis has attempted to advance the understanding of the aid system and its challenges, and how it can be improved, from an often neglected, but important position. Such under-researched perspectives are all the more relevant considering the recent developments in Lebanon.

The investigation has identified several critical implications of the aid system. Interestingly, one finding contradicts earlier research conducted on humanitarianism in Lebanon. One of the sub-questions of the thesis was to examine what connection the international aid system, in the context of mass displacement, has to social tensions and aid bias in Lebanon. This was based on the hypothesis that the formerly refugee-targeted international aid was causing increasing social tensions between the different population groups in Lebanon. This thesis did not, however, find a significant link between the aid regime and the exacerbated social tensions and aid bias. The reason may be found in the fact that Lebanese humanitarian actors earlier have advocated for international aid to target host communities as well as refugees, and have succeeded with this in the implementation of the LCRP. Furthermore, Lebanese NGOs have influenced the aid system and managed to navigate it on their own terms. They do so by filling aid gaps, advocating for change, bypassing or manipulating certain funding restrictions, and implementing programs based on a bottom-up approach. Thereby, local NGOs position themselves in a relevant position within the aid system from where they can exert influence, and thus counteract the narrative of local actors being passive. In doing so, the NGOs perform an "alternative" or subversive form of humanitarianism that to some degree challenges the Northern-led political agenda on aid by participating in the transformation of the aid system, making their context-specific knowledge the basis of the

international implementation of aid, and ultimately preventing conceivable consequences of the international aid system in Lebanon, such as exacerbated social tensions.

Some of the more significant findings to emerge from this thesis is the specific consequences that accompany the international aid system in Lebanon, and how they affect local NGOs. First, the role the Lebanese government is playing within the aid system is manipulating humanitarian actors to address short-sighted solutions to the aid challenges, instead of working on a long-term, coherent strategy to get the country back on track. In addition to this, the thesis argues that the structure of the aid system is preventing Lebanese NGOs from working efficiently and from developing themselves and their aid programs due to the multitude of bureaucratic procedures, fundraising, and meetings they have to spend time on. This could indicate that the system put in place to facilitate coordination and avoid inefficiency, is doing the opposite of its objectives. In addition to this, the findings imply that the crises further exacerbate these challenges within the aid system. The crises affect both the prospects for implementing a coherent, strategic response and long-term sustainable solutions due to the retreating role of the government and the response frameworks that need to coordinate. On the other hand, the NGOs' elbow room to challenge, influence, and navigate the aid system is diminished as a result of the current crises and ultimately threatens their sustainability and competitiveness compared to international organizations, who are expanding in times of crisis. Consequently, when local NGOs in the current context are prevented from developing themselves, the asymmetric power relations between international and local actors are unintentionally maintained or worsened, thus, underpinning a continuation of Northern-led humanitarianism, and diminishing the prospects for a successful implementation of the Grand Bargain and localization agenda. Ultimately, the international aid response risks becoming less influenced by context-specific knowledge, more fragmented, and shortsighted.

The second aim of this thesis was to highlight some suggestions for improvements to the aid sector, proposed by Lebanese NGOs. To counter some of the consequences of the aid system, the NGOs recommend: that the aid sector strives to position national and international actors where they can be of the most advantage; that partnerships aim to provide flexible, multi-year, predictable, and unearmarked funding; and that donors strive to engage in partnerships, become knowledgeable about specific contexts, and work holistically to enhance the capacities of the NGOs. In addition to this, the Lebanese NGOs highlighted the necessity to channel development aid to Lebanon in order to improve the situation in the long run, and the necessity for a unified and strategic aid response in Lebanon, preferably led by a well-organized and accountable state.

Taken together, the thesis' findings contribute in several ways to our understanding of the international aid system in Lebanon, its consequences on the ground and in the context of the current crises and mass displacement, what possibilities local humanitarian actors have to navigate and influence it, and which improvements local NGOs deem necessary to enhance the system. More broadly, the findings highlight the importance of rethinking the aid system in the current challenging circumstances, and how local NGOs can remain influential and supported in alignment with the Grand Bargain objectives.

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Appendixes

Appendix 11: Description of NGOs

All nine interviews were based on an interview guide with 17 questions. The questions were classified into three categories: 1) The compounding crises, 2) The aid system in Lebanon, and 3) Aid bias and social tensions

Anonymous

The interview with the anonymous NGO was conducted during the fieldwork in Lebanon in April 2022. The interview took place at one of the NGO's offices outside of Beirut. The interview lasted one hour and 45 minutes. Two persons participated in the interview.

Amel Association International

The interview with Amel Association was conducted during the fieldwork in Lebanon in April 2022. The interview took place at a café in the neighborhood of Badaro, Beirut, and lasted an hour. Amel was established in 1975 during the Lebanese Civil War. "Amel is an independent nonprofit, non-confessional Lebanese organization dedicated to saving lives and generating a democratic and prosperous Lebanon. Amel offers quality services in the health, psychosocial, human rights, child protection, rural development and vocational training fields" (Amel, n.d.). Amel operates in all of

Lebanon and provides services to everyone regardless of political orientation, ethnicity, or religious affiliation.

<div align="center">Ana Aqra Association</div>

The interview with Ana Aqra was conducted on a Zoom connection after the field work in Lebanon in April 2022. The interview lasted one hour and 20 minutes. Ana Aqra was established in 1994. The NGO is non-sectarian and non-political. "Ana Aqra Association targets the educational, cultural and psychosocial needs of underprivileged children of Lebanese public schools and their communities. Ana Aqra Association builds the capacity of school teachers and administrators to improve teaching and learning. Ana Aqra Association also provides education in emergencies aligned with both the national education strategy […] The main focus of Ana Aqra Association is to advance literacy and promote independent learning" (Ana Aqra, n.d.). Ana Aqra operates in all of Lebanon and provides services to everyone regardless of political orientation, ethnicity, or religious affiliation.

<div align="center">Arcenciel</div>

The interview with Arcenciel was conducted on a Zoom connection after the fieldwork in Lebanon in April 2022. The interview lasted 47 minutes. Arcenciel was established in 1985 during the Lebanese Civil War. The NGO provides services to the "most underprivileged and marginalized communities, regardless of religion, political affiliation or nationality […] Arcenciel's mission in Lebanon has been to promote diversity, integration and development through 5 core programs. Agriculture & Environment, Mobility & Health, Responsible Tourism, Youth Empowerment, and Social Support" (Arcenciel, n.d.). Arcenciel operates in all of Lebanon.

<div align="center">Bassma</div>

The interview with Bassma was conducted at the NGO's headquarters in Badaro, Beirut, during the field work in April 2022. The interview lasted 45 minutes. Bassma was established in 2002. The NGO works to "empower deprived families to reach self-sufficiency" (Bassma, n.d.) through the means of social assistance, empowerment, protection, poverty awareness, and coordination with stakeholders. Bassma is non-political and non-religious. The organization provides services for Lebanese citizens and operates in all of Lebanon.

Imam Sadr Foundation

The interview with Imam Sadr Foundation was conducted during the fieldwork in Lebanon in April 2022. The interview took place at the NGO's headquarters in Tyre, the capital of the South Governorate. The interview lasted 46 minutes. Imam Sadr Foundation was established in 1963 by Imam Moussa As-Sadr, the former political leader and founder of Lebanon's Amal Movement. The NGO works to "bring about social justice, change and equity by working closely with the local communities in Lebanon on health, education and promoting a culture of dialogue and reconciliation [to] increase the number of healthy and educated communities, so that more people can feel empowered to plan and participate in making positive decisions concerning their lives and surroundings" (Imam Sadr Foundation, n.d.). The NGO provides services for everyone regardless of political affiliation, religious orientation, or ethnicity.

Sawa Mninjah

The interview with Sawa Mninjah was conducted during the fieldwork in Lebanon in April 2022. The interview took place at Sawa Mninjah's headquarters in Tripoli, the capital of the North Governorate. The interview lasted 30 minutes. Sawa Mninjah was established in 2011. The NGO "aims to fight poverty, by fighting hunger, strengthening education, providing healthcare services, and providing services for the elderly. Sawa Mninjah's objective is to break the cycle of poverty in the country of Lebanon by acting on all accords that will result in the beneficial outcome of all classes" (Sawa Mninjah, n.d.). Sawa Mninjah operates in Lebanon and provides services to Lebanese citizens.

Society for Inclusion and Development in Communities and Care for All (SIDC)

The interview with SIDC was conducted on a Zoom connection after the fieldwork in Lebanon in April 2022. The interview lasted one hour and 10 minutes. SIDC was established in 1987 during the Lebanese Civil War. The NGO "meaningfully engages vulnerable populations, to promote their health and wellbeing pertaining to HIV, Harm Reduction, SRHR [Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights], and mental health, to support them in enjoying their human and gender rights, and to work towards an inclusive society free of stigma and discrimination at the national and regional level" (SIDC, n.d.). SIDC operates in all of Lebanon and provides services for everyone regardless of political affiliation, ethnicity, or religious orientation.

The European Regional Development and Protection Program (RDPP)

The interview with RDPP was conducted during the fieldwork in Lebanon in April 2022. The interview took place at RDPP's headquarters at the Royal Danish Embassy in Lebanon, Beirut. The interview lasted one hour and 15 minutes. Two persons participated in the interview. RDPP was established in 2014. It is "a multi-donor European initiative supporting Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq to better understand, plan and mitigate the impact of the forced displacement of Syrian refugees on host communities […] Its strategic objective is to ensure that refugees and host populations living in displacement affected communities access their rights, are safe, self-reliant, and refugees are able to avail themselves of a durable solution (voluntary repatriation, resettlement to a third country, and local integration in country of asylum). The program focuses on three thematic ares: (A) livelihoods towards durable solutions, (B) upholding and expanding protection space, and (C) research and advocacy" (RDPP, n.d.). At the time of writing, RDPP has 26 local partners in Lebanon located in all of Lebanon's regions.