

Bolstering Inclusiveness and the Arts in Lebanon



A consultative review of challenges
and opportunities

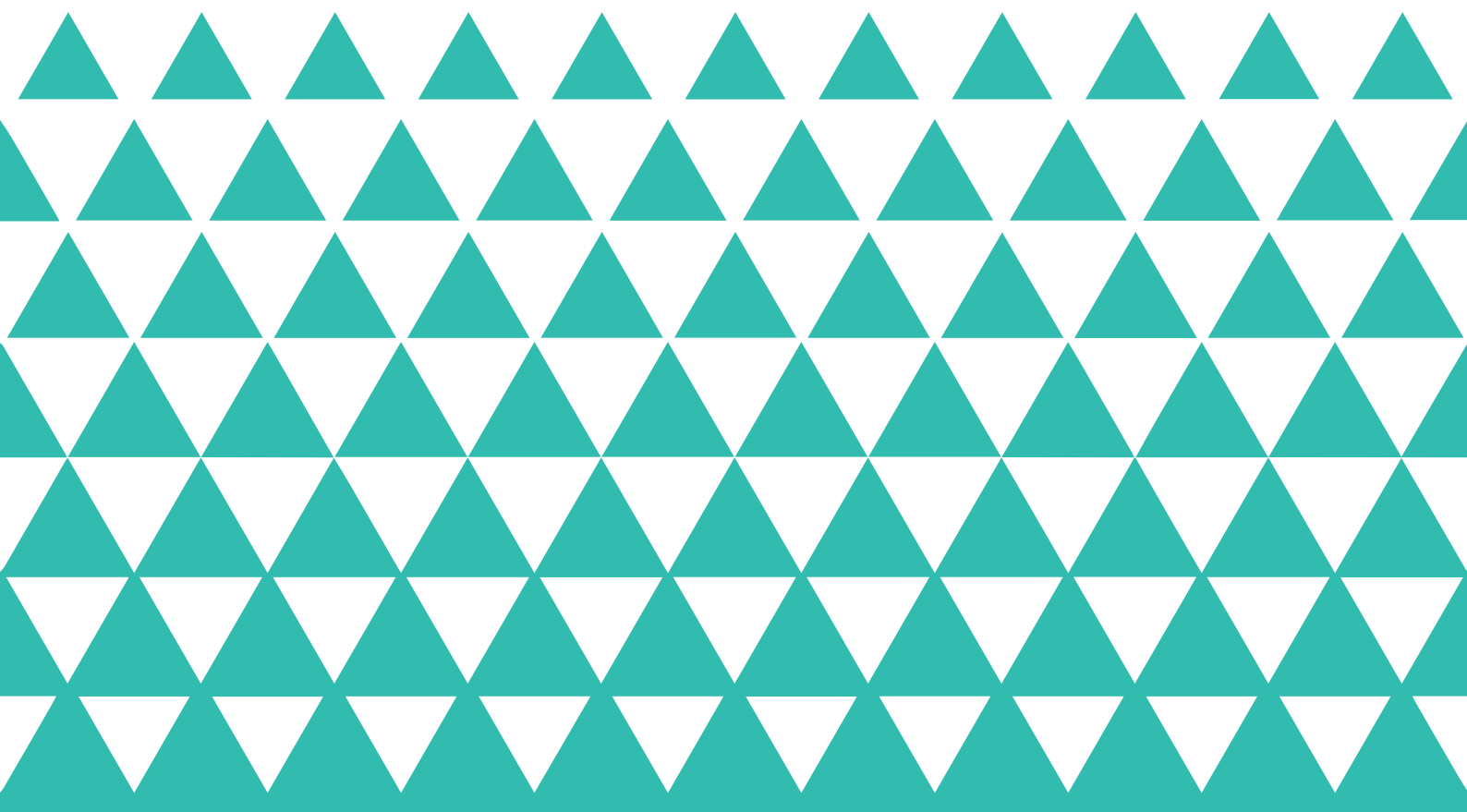
Written by Reem Maghribi

Produced by Sharq.Org
In partnership with
Firma Alexandra Sandels and
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This paper was produced within the context of a project instigated and implemented by Sharq.Org and Firma Alexandra Sandels and supported by the Swedish Institute in 2021.

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1 ► Purpose & Process

Art is a process of creative innovation. Art enables the timid, the voiceless, and the invisible to express themselves. Art facilitates the presentation of complex ideas in simple forms. Seen in this light, art is undeniably of value to all, and particularly invaluable to those living in lack... be it a lack of access, freedom, or education. Despite its long-standing reputation as one of the more progressive countries in SWANA¹, most people in Lebanon have long been denied the knowledge and liberty afforded to those with the means to seek out, through the private sector, what governments are expected the world over to provide universally through the public sector.

Recent events in Lebanon - including an uprising by the people against corruption, a freezing of assets by banks, a worldwide pandemic, a deadly explosion, and most recently a severe economic crisis and renewed clashes - have brought to the fore this lack, which now affects every individual, poor or rich, educated or not. A lack of water, electricity, fuel, internet, work, and money may leave some wondering where a conversation about art fits in, for art is seen by many as a luxury for those with time and peace of mind. Through its power as a vehicle for creative individual and collective expression however, art may in fact be at the core of a concrete durable solution to the current crisis. It offers people a pathway to express their pain, communicate collaboratively, and make demands of the government and institutions that are the only mechanism through which basic needs can be delivered equitably across a nation. Community initiatives, private sector businesses and NGOs may work effectively to promote community cohesion and provide humanitarian relief, but the long-term provision of basic structures and services are the domain of the state even in the most capitalist countries.

It is through this appreciation of art and what it can do to effect change that this paper has been prepared. It presents an assessment of the way Lebanon's creative sector has been affected by economic, social, political, and technological changes, summarises the state-of-play, and lists opportunities and recommendations within four broad pillars. The paper is informed by consultations and conversations with professionals engaged in Lebanon's once vibrant arts scene across diverse artistic disciplines, including theatre, music, film, literature, and fine art.

An online survey invited employed and self-employed producers, promoters and supporters of the arts across Lebanon to reflect on the impact of four major events on the arts sector. They are: (i) the uprising of October 2019; (ii) the financial crisis of 2020, which saw banks restrict people's access to their money and the rate of the Lebanese Pound plummet against the dollar to which it was once pegged; (iii) the COVID-19 pandemic, which crippled an already weak health system; and (iv) the massive explosion at the port of Beirut in August 2020, which should have been predicted by state officials but was completely unpredictable to a people still healing from bloody civil wars both at home and in neighbouring Syria. Of the 37 survey respondents, ten² were invited to expand on their experiences during either a group workshop or one-on-one interviews. Women were prioritised in the selection process to ensure those with historically less representation could benefit from and be of benefit to the initiative. For that same reason, in a bid to present inclusivity as the norm, the core group of participants also included migrant and queer artists.

The paper is also informed by a review of other studies and articles that explore and describe challenges, concepts, and creativity in the region and in Europe³. While some struggles and circumstances are unique to Lebanon, parallels can be drawn with the experiences of other nations that have also undergone disruption and transformation. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to highlight the value art brings to society and to present recommendations to ensure its survival both as a mode of essential expression and communication for the citizens of today and as a resource for future historians who will revert to creative and cultural outputs to familiarise themselves with and understand the people who inhabit Lebanon in the early 21st century.

¹ Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) is a geographically more accurate definition of the region than the historically used and politicized description afforded by the term MENA

² Introduced in Annex One

³ Listed in Annex 2: Bibliography



2 ▶ The Arts and their Impact

Lebanon has historically been less restricted by censorship policies relative to other SWANA countries. As such, the country's media and arts scenes have thrived in comparison, bolstered by private businesses and non-profit organisations. Opportunity has however mostly favoured those with means – education, access, language – and activity has been primarily concentrated in the capital, Beirut. More recently, the presence of refugees in districts outside the capital drove more funding to the north and south, as too did some wealthy individuals and businesses with ties to cities and villages beyond Beirut.

The protests that swept across the country in 2019 also suggested that a camaraderie built on a common mistrust of the government might flourish nationwide and threaten the dominant sectarian political narrative that has for decades divided the small population. Arrests and censorship followed, so too did financial hardship, choking the life out of a movement that may have yet mobilised more, inspired by graffiti and writings and artworks depicting passion, unity and a rallying cry for freedom and dignity.

Every social movement ignites the production of art that itself spurs on movement, within the individual if not in the open. It is at least as much in its emotional power as its aesthetic beauty that art is impactful. A poem, piece of music, painting or dance can excite and inspire joy and anger and communicate concepts that provoke thought and ultimately action.

“In the middle of crises and disasters in this country, art allows people to find a way to contemplate and enjoy moments of beauty,” says Lebanese writer and artist Saseen Kawzally¹, who despite identifying as an activist does not believe that art necessarily has the power to send people to protest and dismantle the system. He does nonetheless believe it has a significant social impact. “It creates conflict and questions in people's minds... It reminds us of the moments of humanity beyond the immediate survival needs that force us to think like animals.”

Writer and executive assistant at the Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon, Theresa Sahyoun agrees that “art provides a place to collectively heal,” noting that many traumas are transgenerational, accumulated over decades of occupation, colonization and war.

Indeed, culture and creativity have for centuries brought people together around moments of appreciation for beauty.

[1] Unless noted, all quotes by artists in this paper are from interviews or focus group discussions hosted by Sharq.Org in April 2021. Artist biographies are presented in Annex 1

This does not mean however that art is intrinsically democratic or egalitarian. As Natalia Skoczylas notes in a recent IETM report²: “The contribution of art to the struggles for democracy, equality and freedom has a chance of success only if the field of art itself is characterized by democracy, equality and freedom.” Such virtues are lacking in Lebanon’s art scene, say many of its artists, limiting its potential to instigate mass movement.

Nonetheless, art has provoked many conversations on individual and national identity both within the context of Lebanon’s sectarian political and legal systems and, more recently, its role as host to an approximate one million Syrian refugees. The arts – in its many guises – has been used as a mean by many non-profit organisations to support intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. In this way, art can reflect and even mould identities as they change and take shape.

Growing international interest in the social impact and positive role of the arts in humanitarian settings has been paralleled by interest in the potential of the cultural and creative industries to drive sustainable development and create inclusive job opportunities, particularly in countries with developing economies. An indication of this is the UNESCO handbook³ on measuring the economic contribution of the cultural industries.

A 2015 study⁴ into 11 cultural and creative industry (CCI) sectors - advertising, architecture, books, gaming, movies, music, newspapers/magazines, performing arts, radio, television and visual arts - assessed the contribution of CCI to economic growth worldwide, estimating that they generate US\$ 250 billion in revenue a year and create 29.5 million jobs worldwide.

The study, which categorised Africa & Middle East as one region, noted that CCI in that region accounts for 1.1% of regional GDP, significantly lower than the 3.3% of GDP it makes up in North America. State interference and inferior technical capacity may be among the reasons the region is lagging, but the economic potential of CCI and the rationale for investment in it is clear. Moreover, both globally and particularly in developing countries, CCI firms are small, predominantly fall within the informal economy, and mostly employ youths and people from all backgrounds. This is reflective of the current economic landscape in Lebanon, suggesting a suitable environment is already in place for a potentially impactful CCI, should the financial and logistical resources be in place.

[2] Art & Activism: Report from the IETM Rijeka Plenary Meeting, 24-27 October 2019, by Natalia Skoczylas

[3] Measuring the economic contribution of cultural industries: A review and assessment of current methodological approaches, UNESCO, 2012

[4] ‘Cultural Times: The First global map of cultural and creative industries’, CISAC, 2015



3 ▶ Key Challenges

Four major events have taken place in Lebanon over the past two years that have invariably had a great impact on Lebanon, its inhabitants, and its arts sector: The revolution of October 2019; the devaluation of the Lebanese currency and the wider economic downturn; the coronavirus pandemic; and the port explosion of August 2020. While all survey respondents agreed that each had a significant impact on the arts sector in Lebanon, there was no consensus regarding which had the greatest impact. Given how interconnected the events are and how close they were in timing, this is understandable.

The events are all economic and political in nature, and as such categorising the challenges according to the political, economic, or societal is essentially futile. The revolution was sparked by economic injustice and dismay at a corrupt dysfunctional system of governance that left all but the ruling elite economically and physically insecure. The collapse of the Lebanese lira and the denial of access to personal funds held in banks exacerbated long standing economic inequality. The pandemic both reflected the incompetence of the state health system and left people out of work, poorer and more restricted. The deadly explosion once again threw into the air the stench of corruption, incompetence, greed and censorship.

The arts sector in Lebanon has long lacked the practical and financial support afforded by more democratic European nations who value the role of arts in promoting social cohesion and public discourse. Though the political elite in Lebanon has not changed significantly over the past four decades, the political landscape has been too unstable to enable artists or activists to successfully demand the development of a comprehensive equitable state fund for the arts. The lack of government funding may however, in a country rife with sectarian driven quotas and corruption, feed its independence and ensure that what is created reflects the voice of the people and not puppeteers.

The reality is however that Lebanon's arts sector has had to rely on private or foreign funding, which also often comes at a price. "The art scene, or at least part of it, is sometimes used as a tool for whitewashing politicians and is sponsored by banks," explains Kawzally. "The same banks that are denying

people their money are sponsoring music events... we [artists] must stop taking money from banks and big media. It's like selling our souls. We become merchants."

Of those surveyed, 92% agreed that a lack of access to funds from banks is a contributing factor to the decline in the arts sector. As banks denied people access to their money, the value of the Lebanese lira against the dollar plummeted, leaving those who earned in lira poorer, and those who received money in dollars richer. "I think the devaluation has had a double impact. For one, since many art projects are funded by foreign entities and consequentially in dollars, these projects may have become more financially beneficial to some artists. However, in the long run, I think this devaluation has made it harder for artists to survive from their art and the impact is going to be long lasting," says Sahyoun.

While some artists who have taken out bank loans to support their work may have found paying it back challenging, most artists consulted agreed that the arts, as opposed to the wider creative industries, was predominantly supported by grants and not investment. "Artists aren't trying to recoup the money from people because the art as a product is already paid for and we're not relying on people buying tickets," explains Kawzally. This affects the way young artists think of art. "We feel that the public is very absent from how we perceive art in the first place."

Moreover, as vocalist Peta Hawi explains: "The devaluation of the Lebanese lira and the economic crisis have changed the priorities for people who were before engaging and attending performances and now no longer see that as a priority.

As such, with income from banks and the public diminished, artists become ever more reliant on funding from donors and commercial assignments. Relevant data for Lebanon is hard to come by, however a report¹ from the US – where laws, policies and watchdogs work towards equity in all fields, the arts included – suggests that "race-, gender- and ability-based disparities that are pervasive in our society are equally prevalent in both the non-profit and commercial arts sectors. Despite the increasing cultural and ethnic diversity of the country and the broadening array of cultural traditions being practiced at expert levels, the arts ecosystem continues to privilege a relatively narrow band of aesthetic approaches."

[1] Creativity Connects: Trends And Conditions Affecting U.S. Artists, By Center For Cultural Innovation For National Endowment For The Arts, 2016

Equitable access to grants is also a concern in Lebanon. While the country's arts scene is populated by people from diverse backgrounds, certain groups of people are, through circumstance, less literate than others, particularly in relation to the language and linguistics required to fill out a grant-winning proposal. As a result, says visual artist Mohamed Al Mufti, "funding is often given to those who are already established and do not actually need it." He proposes a move away from a reliance on donors and a deconstruction of the "categories between the emerging and established artists" in favour of a thematic approach. This concept serves to break down the walls that separate the elite from the less privileged. Public spaces often facilitate this process in European cities. Lebanon however suffers from a death of public space, and what limited public spatial interaction there may have been has been restricted further during the pandemic.

"The pandemic definitely had a huge impact," affirms Sahyoun. "It has made it harder to share art with wider communities, as there have been no concerts, no exhibitions.... art classes, social events have all been cancelled."

The state's perception, or at least treatment, of the arts as a luxury is also at play, says Kawzally. "It keeps theatres closed, due to covid, but allows the filming of Ramadan dramas to continue without any health measures... while mosques and churches also remained open."

While the revolution of October 2019 may have "brought artists together, creating spaces for discussion and debate", the lockdowns fragmented the new energy, says Marie-Nour Hechaime, a contemporary art curator at Beirut's Sursock Museum. "The pandemic restrictions created an isolation within the scene.... with fewer opportunities for artists to meet and exchange."

In addition to restricting physical space, the pandemic, and more acutely the port explosion of August 2020, constricted individual mental space as people struggled to make sense of the catastrophe. "It's hard to say how exactly the explosion had an impact on art, but from personal observations, since the trauma is so debilitating, I think it is present in almost every artist, and I think it is causing many people to lose faith in their art and the purpose of art in our region," says Sahyoun. "It is also really hard to produce work around the explosion itself because it is a trigger."

Despite the challenges, Dima Mabsout, an arts and education consultant, believes that the production of art is more essential now than ever, for "wellbeing, community building, and the development of purpose.... The October revolution drove me to network and meet a community of artists who were sharing values, visions and a sense of urgency that required communities to start working together to find alternative ways of being. Our work carried existential meaning to the changing

climate we were facing. We formed an artist collective and began presenting performances, parades, and workshops. The devaluation of the currency led us to think creatively of how we use our resources in our daily life and in our art. We explored communal living and creating. During the pandemic the country shut down and we lost our jobs, allowing us time to be together and create."

We approach the next chapter on opportunities with this positive energy and thirst for life and creativity, without discounting the failure of the state and other parties to meet their responsibilities in ensuring life and liberty for the people they govern.





4 ▶ Opportunities

The challenges are many. They have been outlined to add clarity and not to deter artists, activists, and supporters from doing what they can to enhance the arts sector in Lebanon, an essential tool in boosting civic and community engagement in the country at a time when they are sorely needed.

To that end, in a bid to support proactive action, this section presents a number of opportunities that can be seized by all those who share the belief that the arts is an important and valuable tool in identifying the needs of the residents of Lebanon – in all their diversity – and instigating action while calling for accountability.

Through dialogue and exploration, four key areas have been identified through which enhanced action can help strengthen the arts sector in Lebanon. They are: collaboration, digital spaces, financial innovation, and community cohesion.

Collaboration

Mabsout is not the only Beirut based artist to enthusiastically recall instances of camaraderie that blossomed between artists during the challenging months of 2020. Pianist and educator Seba Ali remembers fondly the many collaborations she was engaged in. “After the explosion, we initiated a fundraiser for artists who had already been struggling. We managed to run 58 big missions.... some provided relief, others served the production of music.” This sense of sharing is what humanity is all about, says Ali. “Art is knowing what your role in your community is.”

Filmmaker Rania Rafei found herself in need of a community during the months of isolation brought on by the pandemic, and so made an effort to engage others in her work. “Filmmaking is somehow an egocentric activity, so I had to come up with ways in which to create films differently... to include more people.” For Rafei, the process went beyond the practical to the philosophical. “We start questioning the purpose of creating art,” she says, pointing to Italian neorealism - a national film movement of the post WW2 era characterized by stories of the poor and working class that were filmed on location with non-professional actors - as an example of the impact of conflict on the arts. “After [the Arab revolutions of] 2011, students reached out to filmmakers, who in turn reached out to workers,” she adds, citing a need for a platform to facilitate such multi-party communication.

Comic artist Lena Merhej believes such a platform could take the form of, or be facilitated by, a syndicate. “This is an urgent feeling we highlighted during the crisis... we weren’t able to publish in recent years, so we turned into a hub, like a

syndicate, helping artists find residencies... but we are few, we are lonely, and we work in isolation.”

Community projects, says Hawi, mobilise people to offer their time and talent without financial compensation. “Teamwork is an organic effort, but we need a hub for these talents to meet on a larger scale, and Lebanon is broken, and we need to collaborate in order to collectively survive,” says the vocalist. The pandemic, she fears, has reinforced isolation, particularly in the field of music, for which meeting in person is important. “Venues have been closed and are now becoming more expensive, as is equipment, and the government doesn’t support, or even sees, us.” While Hawi likes the idea of a hub supported, perhaps, by a production house, she is wary that such entities may ultimately impose on the work and output of its artists.

Some funding organisations¹ have caught on to the need for cooperation and have been offering grants exclusively to teams of artists working collaboratively. Other informal groups of artists, residing both within and outside² of Lebanon, have similarly banded together to offer what they can – logistical support, information, residency space, small grants – to artists within Lebanon. While this is encouraging, Hechaimé believes they are too small in scale to make a big impact. “The collective action here is still basic, like borrowing equipment... we can learn much from the Arts Collaboratory, a self-organised and horizontal network of 25 organisations in South America. They exchange knowledge, supported by tools that facilitated collaboration,” says the curator.

Acknowledging that the ecosystem in which artists in Lebanon have thus far been operating is insufficient for the development and promotion of art that has a true impact on society is, perhaps, the first step in developing and adopting new practices that are effective.

Collaboration needs not remain within the borders of Lebanon. Much can be gained from transnational initiatives³ which facilitate knowledge exchange and the production and presentation of artistic outputs across borders. Such initiatives can also help ensure that the thousands of Lebanese artists who migrate away from Lebanon continue to collaborate with those

who remain and support the development of cohesive narratives that reflect a communal sense of identity and space. Similarly, partnerships that enhance the arts need not be confined with the sector itself. Exploring collaborations between the arts and tourism, for example, can be fruitful for both.

Key Opportunities

1. Equipped spaces made available to all artists can promote equity and peacebuilding across communities and facilitate the development of collaborative arts that reflect the desires and demands of wider communities.
2. Residencies within Lebanon that bring together artists from different geographies, disciplines and socio-economic backgrounds may be a cost-efficient way of building artistic collectives that nurture both community cohesion and sustainable artistic production
3. The initiation of creative collectives can be further facilitated by donor processes that encourage exchange of ideas between applicants from across different disciplines, as part of a first phase process, and nurture them through concept development to production and presentation. Moreover, donor support to artists who are weak in proposal writing but strong in creative disciplines can enhance more equitable distribution of funds and resources.
4. Events, initiatives and spaces that encourage individuals and institutions in Lebanon and across SWANA in the cultural, academic, civil society and other complementary sectors to openly and creatively explore possible connections and collaborations can support the development and sustainability of artists and the arts.


Digital Spaces

Online platforms provided a lifeline to many artists during the lockdowns and isolations of 2020. Many have lauded the opportunities that digital technology afforded artists. Others were more wary, particularly of the potential long-term impact of digitisation on art.

[1] The grant programme Self Organizations by [Mophradat](#) is one example

[2] [Correspondances](#) is a peer to peer initiative supported by the French Ministry that is part of the UNESCO ‘Li Beirut’ initiative

[3] Positive examples of creative cross-border collaboration include the SWANA based Open Up! initiative established by the [DROSOS Foundation](#), and [Perform Europe](#), supported by the EU



Elena Polivtseva, head of policy and research at IETM, asks whether we should “use this crisis as an opportunity to improve our digital presence? Or should we resist this urge to create and present by any means, as we are in the middle of the crisis and should slow down?”⁴ She posits that artists are being pushed to rethink the core of their work “while other sectors, which are also unable to continue their normal way of functioning, are getting unconditional support.”

A distinction must be made between digital spaces, which facilitate networking - be it among artists or between them and consumers - and digitisation, which suggests the entire process of creative production and delivery take place online. Digitisation, fear many artists, risks making art free, consumable, valueless, and devoid of local identity.

“Online art is becoming commercial and lucrative.... it is easier for painters to sell online and to have an exhibition online... the gallery logistics are easier, and it surely gives the artist a wider audience... but it weakens the experience of art,” says Mufti.

While online galleries can facilitate the presentation of visual artworks to potential consumers, delivery of other arts is more challenging, particularly in Lebanon. “A lot of film platforms were created recently. They support visibility, but paid platforms can’t really work in Lebanon, especially after the collapse of the banking sector,” says Hechaime.

“It was very interesting to see people organically create platforms for debate that developed into small cinema clubs... there was a huge need for this, and it enabled people from all social classes to come together,” enthuses Rafei. “It is very important however to have physical spaces and places before going digital... we need spaces where people come together and create... we need to be physically together as a population.”

The internet also facilitated the development of new relationships between writers and editors, says Merhej. “Writers can no longer survive on 10 percent of sales revenues... There are opportunities online for self-publishing and establishing a network of self-publishing artists. This model works in Europe because they have the infrastructure for it, but it cannot work now in Lebanon as we don’t have an efficient postal system,” says the comic artist with some resignation. She goes on however to enthusiastically speak of the positive impact of online crowdfunding platforms.

Sarah, an Ethiopian migrant living in Beirut, used to attend writing workshops at a community centre before the pandemic. Attending online workshops wasn’t a viable option for her and her fellow writers. “They couldn’t have been conducted online as participants do not have access to the internet, and because

[4] Report: ‘Live Arts in the Virtualizing World’. See bibliography for details.

during the workshops people talk about their traumas, which is uncomfortable to do online, especially with the low quality of internet. We can't have video and audio, and so miss out on essential body language."

Kawzally concurs that the quality of the internet in Lebanon simply does not lend itself to the proliferation of quality digital spaces for the arts. "There's the question of infrastructure in Lebanon. An online shift requires investment in the infrastructure. But if you do that, you are creating bubbles again. Even if someone invests US\$ 200,000 in the best technology for a project, who is going to see it? Only people with a good connection. So, it won't be for people in Lebanon but rather those abroad."

Key Opportunities

1. An online hub that makes best use of contemporary digital tools and through which artists can communicate and network at the national, and perhaps regional, level can facilitate meaningful communication, knowledge exchange and collaborative production. The design of such platforms should consider the limited internet bandwidth most people have.
2. Hybrid digital spaces that promote physical attendance at live events while also enabling those who cannot travel to attend online can perhaps offer artists the benefit of digital spaces without the fear of enforced digitisation.
3. The development of financial models for digital distribution that can be adopted in countries with low bandwidth and poor banking structures may help enhance digital delivery of the arts in Lebanon and other SWANA countries.
4. Collaborations between creatives and civil society activists can support the development and sustainability of lobbying efforts that petition for better infrastructure – be it internet, banking or postal systems.

Financial Innovation


Success, or at least sustainability, during trying times demands adaptability and innovation, says Rafei. "We need to make films shorter, work in collectives, develop new business models and produce more quickly."

The arts are predominantly financed in one of two ways: through commercial transactions and donor funding. The former demands that artists create according to the tastes of those willing to part with their money for an artistic experience of the object. The latter demands that they meet criteria set by organisations, normally foreign, with their own priorities and objectives. Each model has its challenges. Artists in many countries live off both commercial work and donor funds. They often produce commercial artwork for the income and seek donor funds to facilitate the production of works that enable them to express themselves unhindered, often within the context of civic activism.

Most, if not all, countries in Europe have national funds through which artists can apply for grants to support their work. Such funds often prioritise projects that support development of some sort within communities. "There is a bigger role for the ministry of culture to play, it should create funds and put in place policies and framework to support and protect artists. In our context we don't have them, thus they rely on the foreign funders," says Mufti.

It can seem futile to make recommendations to the state given the corruption and ineffectuality of the Lebanese government, and so priority is usually given to addressing foreign donors. The opportunities outlined in this paper can however be pursued by any party with an interest in bolstering the arts in Lebanon, be it the state, donors or artists.

The need to bolster artists in Lebanon is imperative, say many of them, to stem the migration of creatives away from Lebanon and towards countries, such as France, that are enthusiastically offering 'talent visas' to artists. "Projects that support freelancers should be a priority", says Kawzally. "Artists were surviving on a mix of commercial and artistic work, much of which has been lost due to lack of investment."



Hechaimé concurs. “There are fewer patrons and therefore fewer funds available for arts institutions. As a result, there are less opportunities for artists and cultural practitioners to make money and find time to create. This is pushing even more artists to migrate.”

Kawzally believes that the development and support of long-term initiatives, as opposed to single stand-alone projects, can help counter the loss in the long term. “Allocating funds for cooperatives that include hundreds of artists working on sustainable projects generates more revenue than investments in 100 ephemeral projects that are put on show and then they disappear. Money should be put into structural endeavours.”

Some donors are already adopting this model, supporting collaborative projects that focus on capacity as opposed to output. Others however seem to be reactive, offering funds only to those artists willing to tackle certain events or challenges directly in their work. Donors, says Sahyoun, should give artists “agency to decide how to react” to unfolding circumstances and not impose agendas developed thousands of miles away in bureaucratic chambers.

Several funds were created specifically to support artists in Lebanon following the various challenges of the past two years. While they have certainly been beneficial to some in the short term, many artists remain concerned with the long-term. “We should be able to self-build a movement without relying on external funders,” says Mufti.

Key Opportunities

1. An observatory through which challenges and successes of different financial models and artistic initiatives in Lebanon are documented and shared can support the development of impactful evidence-based models and the arts sector as a whole. The platform could act as a hub for information and research about the economic and social impact of the creative and cultural industries. Since art is about expression, and millions across the region express themselves in a common language, it may be beneficial for the platform to be regional rather than national.
2. A focus on collaboration and capacity building can enhance the impact and power of artists. Collectives are more likely to be able to influence donor agendas, as well as develop and implement projects with long-term impact and sustainability.
3. Crowdfunding may provide an alternative to the dominant financial models of commercial work and donor funding that each restrict artists in different ways. It is also likely to enhance the relationship between artists and the public, within Lebanon and the diaspora, enhancing both the art and the community.

Community Cohesion

The arts have the potential to directly support community building, not least because they provide avenues for expression. "I think the October 17 revolution allowed many to use their art as a contribution to this revolution," says Sahyoun, who witnessed a surge in the exchange of artistic outputs that reflected the protests. Herein lies the strength and value of the arts, says Merhej: "Artists can give other perspectives, through stories... art can support the claims of the revolution and plays a role in clarifying messaging that can carry a revolution."

Art can also support inclusivity within communities by giving voice to those who are too often silenced. "Artists can help domestic workers speak up. No one really listens to what we have to say, but if our stories are told through art and by influential artists, more people would listen," believes Sarah. Rafei concurs and confidently compares the work of artists to that of doctors. "Art is a very serious discipline in my opinion. I have a responsibility to wake up every day and work on projects that mirror the community."

Developing a sense of unity, or at least camaraderie, is important for the common good. It can also support healing. "We have trans-generational traumas in Lebanon and have become resilient by force. But it's a façade. In reality we are not coping, we are crushed," says Hawi. "The responsibility for collective healing is with the state, but we are obliged to do it because we feel abandoned."

Such grief and ongoing challenges can lead to mental and physical isolation. Thinking beyond short term projects and prioritising collective creative action is therefore key. "We need platforms for artists and workers in the arts to initiate discussion, mechanisms and set priorities for the phase to come," says Mufti. "There is a lack of collaboration because we are in survival mode and our priorities are different and go beyond the collective.... hence the difficulty in collaborating... but there is a huge need for initiatives that start small and grow with time, initiatives that launch workshops, networking events and movements."

Focusing on community is fulfilling and prioritises process over product, says Mabsout. "Art is a way of being. It creates value, builds relationships and nurtures purpose. Art is about sharing an experience that is more important than its production."

Key Opportunities

1. Local artistic initiatives developed and implemented by artists in collaboration with local communities can enhance the relationship between both, much like crowdfunding, by developing bonds of mutual interest and investment. Such initiatives can involve the production of art in public spaces, for example.
2. Artists can provide impactful avenues for education. Many children received a significantly poorer education over the past two years. Initiatives that nurture partnerships between the arts and education can strengthen both education and the appreciation of the arts while also nurturing community cohesion.

Consultation Participants

Mohamed Al Mufti is an architect, visual artist and university professor, the work of Al Mufti is rooted in memory while the absurdity of war and violence.

https://www.instagram.com/mohamed_al_mufti_art_archi/

Seba Ali is an acclaimed Egyptian Pianist based in Beirut. She is known for her masterful piano technique and wide-ranging musical imagination. She enjoys a diverse career as a soloist, chamber musician, teaching artist, and entrepreneur.

<https://www.pianistseba.com/>

Petra Hawi is a vocalist with Beirut based Rust, her music combines traditional Arabic vocals with a palette of unique synthesized sounds, creating an altered, transcendental experience.

https://www.facebook.com/Rust_band17

Marie-Nour Hechaime is a contemporary art curator at the Sursock Museum in Beirut, she is a board member of Arts Collaboratory, a self-organized, horizontal ecosystem of 25 socially-engaged arts institutions.

<https://artsbeirut.wordpress.com/?s=marie+nour++>

Saseen Kawzally is a writer, actor and activist from Beirut and a contributor to The Public Source, a magazine reporting on socioeconomic and environmental crises afflicting Lebanon

<https://saseen.wordpress.com/>

Dima Mabsout is a multidisciplinary artist, who is interested in how the arts can bridge between experiences, disciplines and across social structures. She collaborated on projects with diverse international communities on socially engaged art interventions in Lebanon. <https://www.catalyticaction.org/our-team>

Lena Merhej is a visual storyteller and an expert in graphic narration. She is the founder and director of the Story Center which offers professional training in animation, illustration and comic books.

<https://grandpapier.org/lena-merh>

Rania Rafei is a Lebanese filmmaker who directed several documentaries covering social and political subjects. She also wrote and directed short fiction films, video essays, installations and the multiple award-winning, experimental-hybrid debut feature "74 The Reconstitution of a Struggle".

<https://dafilms.com/film>

Theresa Sahyoun is a creative writer, executive assistant at the Anti-Racism movement, and a creative writing workshop facilitator at the community center. Through her work, she supports migrant workers reclaiming their stories.

https://armlebanonhttps://linktr.ee/Theresa_Sahyoun

Sarah is a writer, activist and advocate for domestic workers' rights in Lebanon, Sarah is an Ethiopian writer based in Beirut.

<https://armlebanon.org/migrant-community-center-beirut>

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