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Lyne Jabri



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Mobilizing Ordinary People for the Sake of the Environment: Challenges of Urban Activists within Clientelistic Conditions in Lebanon

Mobiliser les gens ordinaires pour l'environnement : les défis des militants urbains dans des conditions clientélistes au Liban

Lyne Jabri

Introduction

- ¹ This article is about the strategies that urban and environmental activists use to make change in places ruled by a market economy, clientelism and protracted crisis. The context of the article is Lebanon; a place that is currently witnessing a significant economic meltdown that has accelerated the disintegration of state institutions and functions. Meanwhile, as a result of the country's longstanding adoption of *laissez-faire* policies, natural expanses continue to be torn up and green spaces are paved over with increasing frequency. In this difficult context, many initiatives have sprouted over the past decade advocating for various environmental causes and for the right to the city.
- ² Lebanon has long been a hotbed of sectarian divisions and divisive politics. If one were to sketch a timeline of contentious politics in modern Lebanon, one would find a striking progression starting from communal, and often sectarian, social structures in the 19th century, through the formation of political parties and non-state groups during the second half of the 20th century, until the end of the Lebanese civil war in the 1990s.¹ The immediate post-civil war era saw the emergence (and re-emergence) of interest-based civil society organizations (CSOs)² that were meant to treat the “previously neglected fields of activism in Lebanon -- human rights, ecology, public freedoms, and democracy,” and therefore, often retained a national scope and were cross-sectarian.³

- 3 At the international level, the 1980s and 1990s gave rise to multiple discourses on environmental issues, from global warming to environmental justice, culminating in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (or the Earth Summit in Rio) in 1992, and the release of the Agenda 21 action plan, and in 1997, the adoption of the Kyoto Protocols.⁴
- 4 In parallel, the 1990s saw the “NGOization” of many anti-globalization movements across the world.⁵ NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) are said to have eclipsed the grassroots discourse and knowledge on environmental matters. Despite their financial capacities, NGOs have typically failed to point the finger at the real culprits of environmental destruction and have been accused of propagating power and global capitalism.⁶
- 5 A similar set of allegations have been leveled on CSOs (Civil Society Organizations) in Lebanon, which often end up being controlled, co-opted or intimidated by powerful interests, particularly by sectarian political parties.⁷ Moreover, being reliant on international funding for their subsistence, CSOs often end up abiding by donor’s agendas, and therefore become “less reactive to contextual needs and opportunities.”⁸
- 6 In Lebanon, the last decade saw a new form of activism emerge, which is non-partisan and critical of the sectarian clientelistic regime; and moreover, organizes outside the “rigid” structures of NGOs. Therefore, it is able to organize “freely” within “a comfortable space to debate and experiment creatively.”⁹ Another particularity of those new activist groups is that they are often constituted of professionals, intellectuals and artists who are contesting harmful projects and policies. Like many of their counterparts on the global scene, they are working on issues relating to public spaces and commons, the right to the city, and the environment.
- 7 One of such activists’ groups, Lil-Madina Initiative, was established in 2013 in the city of Saida, 30 km south of Beirut, by a group of professionals from the fields of architecture and urbanism, in response to changes that were threatening the city. They saw that, as a result of different urban tendencies and policies, the city was gradually losing its cultural and spatial heritage that was essential to its identity.¹⁰ Moreover, the city was on the brink of major urban developments that were threatening important ecological systems, such as its complex water systems (which includes rivers, streams, and an ancient irrigation network) and its historic orchards that still form green corridors in and around the city.¹¹
- 8 As a torrent of urban and development projects were put on the table by Saida’s public officials, Lil-Madina Initiative worked on different strategies to advocate for the preservation of the existing ecological systems of the city. They began by approaching government officials and attempting to negotiate on behalf of open spaces and existing natural environments. And, when public authorities were unresponsive, Lil-Madina Initiative organized campaigns to mobilize a broader public in the city in order to pressure authorities.
- 9 However, mobilizing people around ecological concerns, and engaging the public on its “right to the city” is not a simple matter.¹² The pioneering French sociologist, Henri Lefebvre, who first coined the concept of “right to the city,” stood bewildered in his concluding chapter of his 1970s book, *La Révolution urbaine* [*The Urban Revolution*], as he wondered about the “extraordinary passivity” of people affected by the large development and infrastructural projects.¹³ This article will try to dig into this matter,

not by asking what might lead to passivity amongst populations, but rather, by interrogating the mechanisms that might eventually make them act and form movements and collectivities.

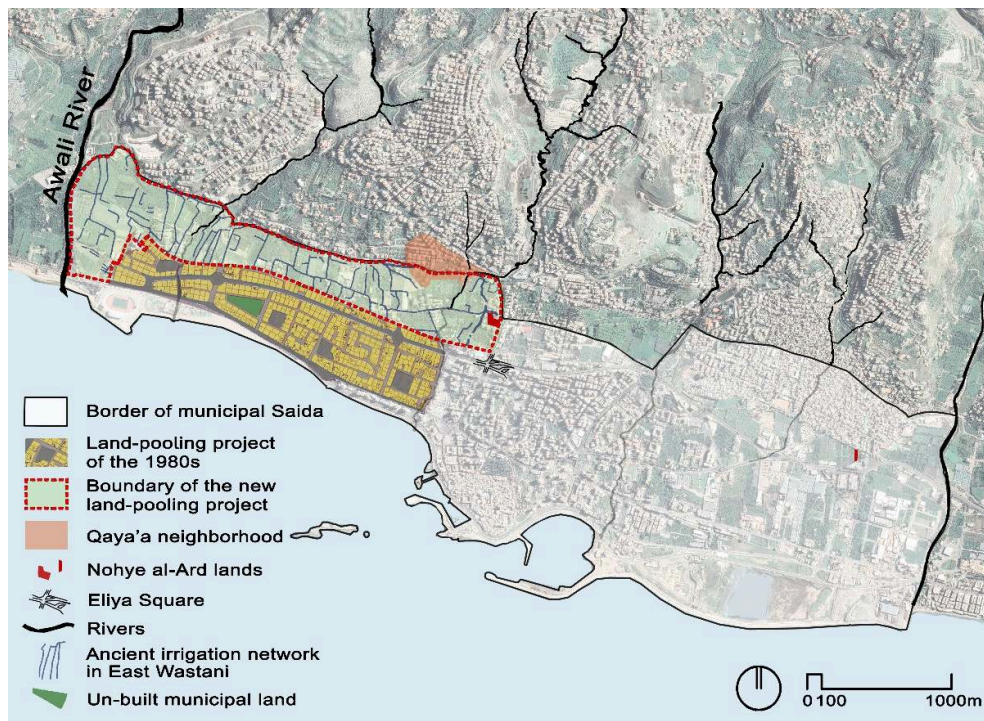
- 10 It is true, as Chris Pickvance has written, that “urban movements [are] not spontaneous responses to objective inequalities or deprivations but [form] more easily under certain social and political conditions than others.”¹⁴ Studying contexts where it is harder for movements to form is quite revealing. In the case of Lebanon, which is driven by clientelism coupled by harsh neoliberal policy, it could potentially unravel the cracks in the capitalistic system — interstices in which activists can start working. This paper is contributing on this front by reflecting on the experience of Lil-Madina Initiative, in the secondary city of Saida. It will explore the opportunities that environmental and urban activists can use to mobilize ordinary people to form a collective power for the sake of the environment and the right to the city in contexts dominated by clientelism and neoliberalism. When do environmental and urban activists mobilization strategies succeed and when do they fail? Who are the people who join environmental battles and under what conditions are they impelled to join?
- 11 It is true that the term “ordinary people” is a malleable term that can mean different things at different times.¹⁵ Nevertheless, using this term, and therefore looking at the Lebanese scene through a binary lens, placing subjects of will and power on one side and dominated elements of society on the other can help in clarifying political and social processes. The argument advanced in this essay follows the French scholar, Michel de Certeau, and the tradition he initiated of placing, on one side, those who produce and impose “strategies,” and on the other, those who are consuming those strategies and, through tactical practices in their daily lives, are able to resist and impact what is imposed.¹⁶ We are left with: where to place the professional activists? These activists are those who hold knowledge and make “it possible to redefine alternative forms of urban development, both by breaking down the technocratic rationale behind exploitative metropolitan growth and by providing legitimacy for a new city.”¹⁷ For Manuel Castells they are “operators” for urban social movements. In this article, however, they play a more leading and instigating role.
- 12 To understand their role, this article will mainly concentrate on the experience of Lil-Madina Initiative which opens up the possibility to gain an insider’s perspective on the issue at hand since the author of this article is one of its founders and a direct witness of its work. This article mainly draws on an action-research methodology, and more specifically on a methodology that has the researcher and author of this article as, to quote Anne Burns, an insider “interested in resolving, reformulating or refining dilemmas, predicaments or puzzles in their daily lives through systematic planning, data-gathering, reflection and further informed action.”¹⁸
- 13 When undertaking an action research methodology, and especially when it is a self-reflective action research, there are often questions of the validity of the research that come up. These are especially questions related to the potential “bias” of the researcher or the “transferability” of findings.¹⁹ This paper addresses this issue by backing the experience of Lil-Madina Initiative with other initiatives and experiences, mainly from Lebanon, but from other places as well. The author learns about these other experiences through written work that has been published, or in depth semi-structured interviews conducted with the key activists involved.

- 14 The article starts with the experience of producing knowledge, an exercise that is believed to hold power,²⁰ but that is unfortunately, in itself, not powerful enough to convince the political patron nor to mobilize people. The second experience is that of mobilizing those who are directly affected by a certain controversial project, which can only happen if there is direct material loss on the part of the affected people. The third experience is that of taking advantage of an extra-ordinary moment in time. In this experience, the article will discuss how the urban and environmental activists rode the wave of the 17th of October general uprising in Lebanon. By holding the right knowledge, they could make claims resonant with the demands of demonstrators, and therefore mobilize a critical mass to stop a big World Bank funded dam project in the Bisri valley. The final experience is that of the creation of a community garden in Saida. It is perhaps the most revealing of all. While the experience of stopping the Bisri dam utilized an extra-ordinary moment to mobilize people, the community garden was mobilizing people through their everyday life.

Producing Unpowerful Knowledge

- 15 In the 1990s, Lebanon saw the establishment of the Ministry of Environment and subsequently the creation of major biosphere reserves.²¹ As noted by political scientist Paul Kingston, this development was not the outcome of a sudden environmental awakening on the part of the political elites of Lebanon. It was rather a repercussion of the creation of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) during the United Nations Conference for the Environment and Development in 1992, which was “a fund designed to provide seed capital for the creation of biosphere reserves.”²² Simultaneously, there were different environmental voices on the side of civil society and environmental experts who had prepared the ground for the protection of the different biospheres.²³ The knowledge and the advocacy of these environmentalists, coupled with new attention from international donors, convinced several political patrons to embark on the creation of major nature reserves in their respective regions of influence.²⁴
- 16 The creation of those biosphere reserves show that positive developments can and do arise. But, the experience of Lil-Madina Initiative revealed that, in a neoliberal clientelistic system, these kinds of opportunities are very rare. This is especially true when the activists are calling for matters that do not bring material gain for political patrons and their entourage.
- 17 In 2013, in the couple of months that followed the formation of Lil-Madina Initiative, the municipality of Saida announced that it was going to start a land readjustment project in the Wastani area in the northern part of the city (Fig. 1). This meant that a big portion of what remained of the city’s ancient orchards -- some 20% of the total areas of municipal Saida that has resisted urbanization -- were going to be pooled as one lot and re-subdivided according to a redevelopment plan that included roads and public spaces.

Figure 1. Satellite image of Saida showing different elements and projects that are mentioned in this article



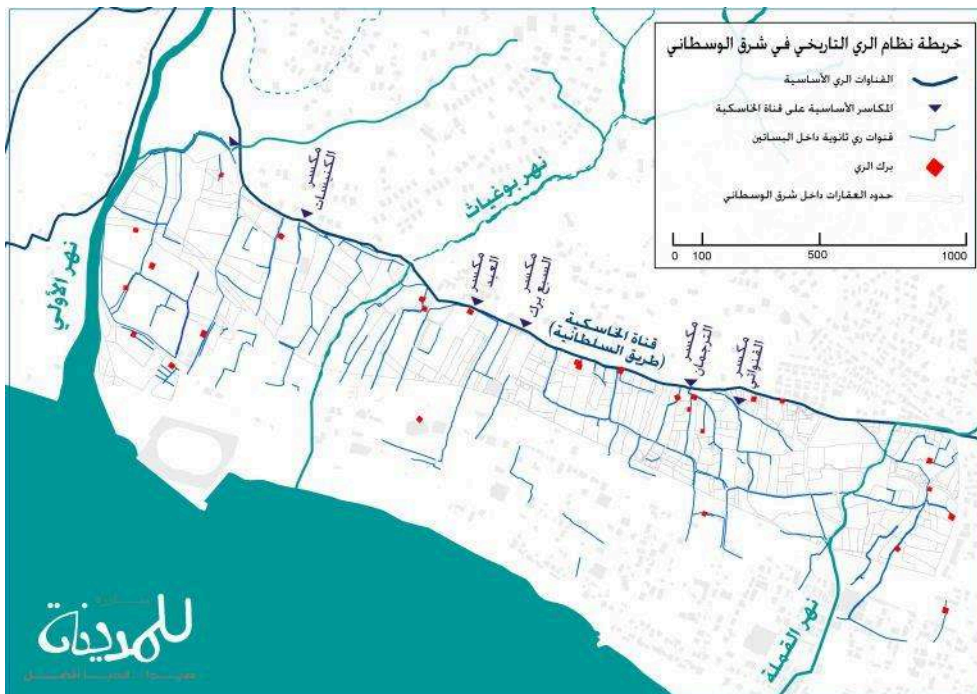
Lyne Jabri, 2023

- 18 Lil-Madina Initiative activists decided to focus on this issue. They wished to impact the project and ensure that the mistakes that were committed when a previous land-pooling and subdivision project was implemented on a nearby area in Saida in the 1980s would not be repeated. One of the tragedies of the 1980s project was that it treated the area of the project as a *'tabula rasa,'* erasing all of the preexisting natural and historic features. By forcibly overlaying a new extensive network of roads over the site, the 1980s land-pooling and subdivision project destroyed the ancient canal system and structures of the orchards, and buried streams and rivers into underground culverts. It therefore affected the biodiversity of what constituted a major section of municipal Saida, not to mention impacting the social cohesion in the area.
- 19 Lil-Madina Initiative activists initiated extensive surveys of the different layers and elements on the site. They met with people in the project area to understand their concerns and priorities. They were hoping to find allies and assemble a lobby amongst their ranks. However, there was almost no one opposed to the project in Wastani, not even farmers who otherwise felt a sense of pride for their piece of land. The majority of the people felt that the land-pooling and subdivision project was going to increase the worth of their land, since it would now be serviced by roads and rezoned to allow for urban development. Those who had concerns were too afraid to speak up, for fear that they would lose their ability to gain favors from the main patron of the city and felt that their ability to negotiate advantages for their land in the new project would be compromised.²⁵
- 20 In addition to looking for allies within the orchards, Lil-Madina Initiative activists tried to appeal to a more general public by disseminating the knowledge that was being amassed. It published articles, drawings, maps and photos of Wastani on its blog and

social media pages. Moreover, in cases when the information was historical, local media websites accepted to repost them; but that was only possible for the non-political articles that avoided direct or indirect criticisms of public officials.

- 21 Moreover, Lil-Madina Initiative tried to advocate with the Saida municipality and with Member of Parliament, Bahia al-Hariri. They presented to them an extensive study of Wastani, which included professional surveys of the social, archaeological, environmental and agricultural layers of the area. The study was supplemented by a counter-proposal that illustrated how urban development could coexist with existing agricultural and ecological systems on the site.
- 22 Amongst main recommendations by the Lil-Madina Initiative was the preservation of the rivers crossing the site, and of the 2,500 years old ancient Sidon Aqueduct with its associated water systems lying beneath a historic road on the eastern edge of the site (Fig. 2). The idea was to use these ecological features as structuring elements for the land-pooling and subdivision plan and to integrate these elements into a system of public spaces that would tie the project together.

Figure 2. Map produced by Lil-Madina Initiative showing the ancient water canals system in the area of the land-pooling and re-subdivision project in East Wastani. The map was presented to the Saida Municipality and disseminated on social media (the thicker dark blue line is the Sidon Aqueduct along which runs Sultanieh Road)



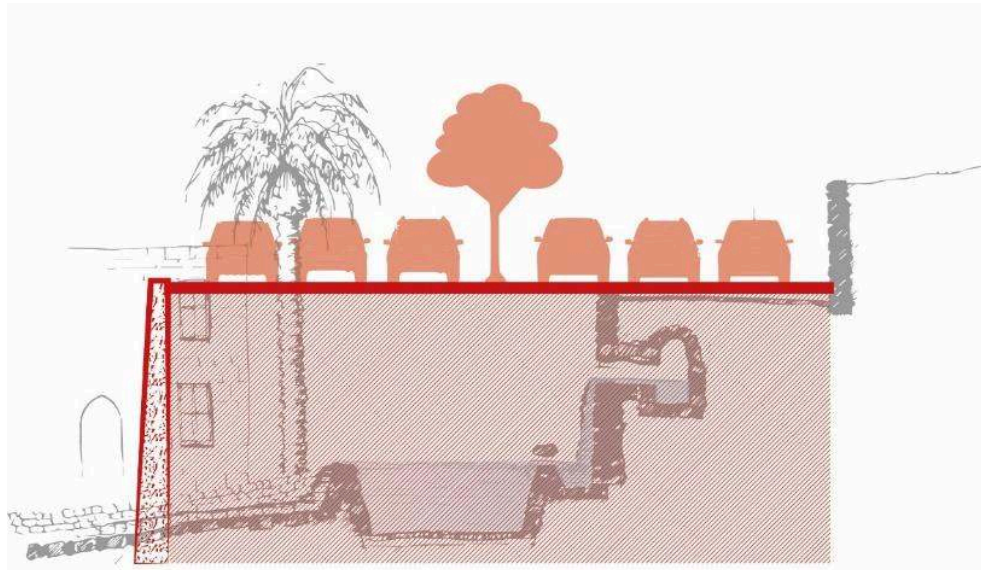
Lil-Madina Initiative, 2014 [online] [<https://lilmadinainitiative.wordpress.com/2015/12/23/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b3%d9%84%d8%b7%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%b1%d8%ad%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d9%8a%d9%88%d9%85%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%89-%d9%83%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b2-%d9%85%d9%86%d8%b3%d9%8a%d8%a9/>], accessed on 06-10-2022.

- 23 The mayor of Saida and Member of Parliament, Bahia Hariri, publicly advocated for environmental programs for the city.²⁶ They met and considered the proposals by the Lil-Madina Initiative, which were developed in conjunction with architects and urban planners. However, the municipality was simultaneously developing plans that portrayed a very different agenda. That latter plan was put into action when, in

June 2014, a contractor was commissioned to bury a segment of one of the rivers into a new culvert, and this despite the Member of Parliament's public commitment to preserving the city's natural water resources.²⁷ Later, it surfaced that the biggest land owner in Wastani had bought a big portion of lands just before the project of land pooling and re-subdivision and played an active leading role in the planning process.²⁸ He was guiding the process and exerting pressure in a way that served his own interests by raising the value of his lands in the new plans, even as environmental and public interests were compromised.²⁹

- 24 In addition to the land-pooling and re-subdivision project, a project was being formulated to widen the historical Sultanieh Road into a 25-meter highway, which ran along the path of the ancient Sidon aqueduct. This project would have destroyed the ancient aqueduct and the historical and natural edge that was formed around the road. Members of Lil-Madina Initiative became disillusioned with the notion that knowledge alone can guide actions on a more enlightened path.

Figure 3. Section of the Sultanieh Road. In black in the backgrounds as it currently is (with the Sidon Aqueduct underneath it) and in red the way it is projected to be if the highway is implemented.



Drawing produced by Mohamad Tohme and Rana Bachir, in Lil-Madina Initiative, *Protecting the Sidon Aqueduct; Finding New Roles for an Ancient System*, 2018³⁰

- 25 In a study on a major development project of the 1970s for the town of Aalborg, Danish planner and geographer Bent Flyvbjerg has shown that Francis Bacon's tenet that "Knowledge is power" is not reflected in the reality on the ground.³¹ Throughout Flyvbjerg book, *Rationality and Power*, he demonstrates that power has the ability to control, produce and dominate rational processes.³² He writes, "power procures the knowledge which supports its purpose, while it ignores or suppresses that knowledge which does not serve it."³³ From the experience in Saida, political patrons certainly ignored and suppressed the knowledge that was produced by the environmental and urban activists who did not have the power to make their opinions heard. And therefore, the question arises as to how one might form a voice powerful enough to bring a critical mass of people on board; especially when considering that producing

research, articles, public talks, books and exposing contradictions has been demonstrated not to be sufficient to mobilize people in a place like Lebanon.

The Extraordinary Passivity of People

- 26 Ever since its inception as a modern state, Lebanon has been driven by sectarian clientelism. As the political scientist, Bassel Salloukh, has bluntly explained, the “institutional weakness of the Lebanese state allows private organizations managed by members of the sectarian/political and religious elite to hijack its role as a social services provider.”³⁴ Clientelism and patron-client relations have been a historical cornerstone of society in Lebanon.³⁵ In fact, there is a pre-requirement for patronage to exist: the existence of a source of supply for the patrons which can increase their power and feed their clientele base.³⁶
- 27 This source of supply became easily available with the creation of the modern Lebanese State with its *laissez-faire* liberal economic system. Quickly, state institutions fell prey to different political and sectarian leaders who were able to exert control over public resources to increase their wealth, power and grip over their clientele base.³⁷ This situation has been amplified in the post-Civil War era; the Taif agreement, signed between the warring parties, has guaranteed the distribution of “the spoils of public office, privileges, and state resources” amongst the political leaders.³⁸

Figure 4. People collecting money in Beirut in front of the office of a political party the day after the 2016 municipal elections



Elnashra News, [online] [<http://www.elnashra.com/news/show/990489/%7B%7Burl%7D%7D>], accessed on 09-12-2021

- 28 In such conditions, ordinary people accessing jobs, welfare, and social assistance benefits often requires declaring loyalty to political patrons or parties. At times, this would even entail proactive political engagement such as participating in partisan demonstrations and riots.³⁹ Regretfully, even for those who are not aligned politically with a party or political leader, and may be disheartened by the corruption in the

political system, circumstances will undoubtedly arise during their lives that will compel them to use power networks and seek favors or even protection.⁴⁰

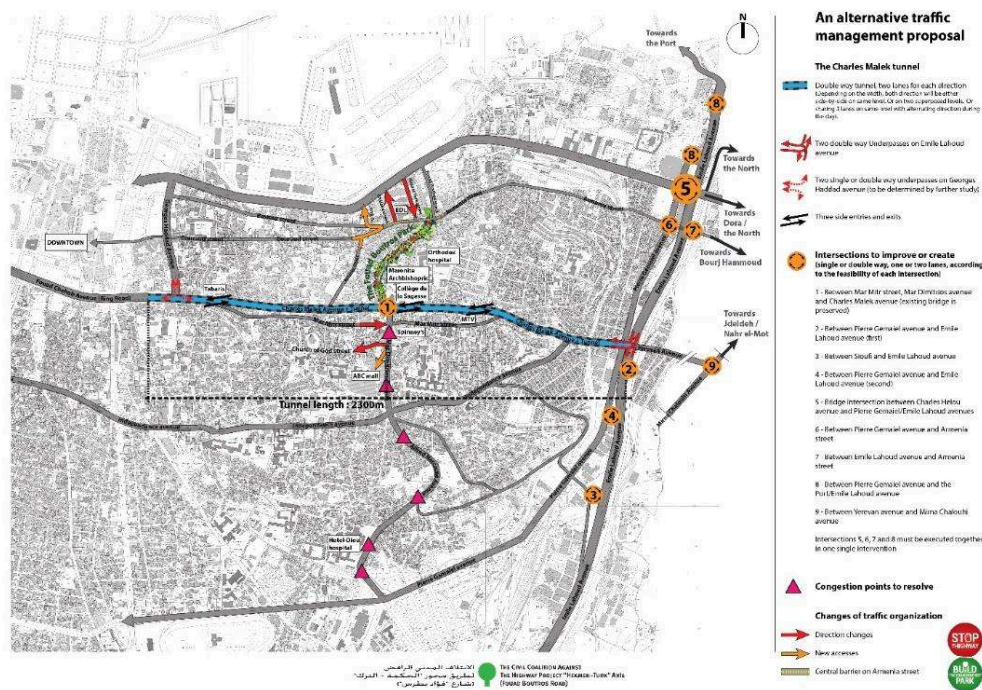
- 29 In general terms, ordinary people go on with their everyday lives,⁴¹ which are, in themselves, intertwined with the practices of citizenship.⁴² In Lebanon, everyday life means engaging with different clientelistic structures. Activists, through their work, are calling for antagonistic stances towards patronage, stances that are harder to take for most people. This is probably one of the main reasons why it is difficult for them to find allies amongst a more general public.
- 30 Moreover, the neoliberal system has commodified environmental resources, such as water and land, for so long that their values in relation to the common good have been outweighed or even forgotten by most people. This is very clear, for example, in the case of historical orchards or agricultural lands that remain within the perimeter of cities until today and which are not valued according to their social, historical, environmental or even productive worth — values that are often seen as “incommensurable” in relation to their real-estate value.⁴³ Matters of the environment are therefore not perceived as urgent by people who tend to only mobilize when their personal interests are affected.

Mobilizing Aggrieved People

- 31 In 2015, Lil-Madina Initiative, in collaboration with another activist group, Public Works, organized an Urban Activism workshop. The aim was to bring to the table different urban and environmental activist groups from various parts of Lebanon to share knowledge, learn from each other’s experience, and build solidarity amongst the groups.⁴⁴
- 32 The grievances and topics of activists who joined the workshop were very different. They ranged from fighting against the implementation of a highway in Beirut, to the preservation of a reserve in the south of Lebanon, to fighting for the preservation of a coastal area against privatization, to the protection of rivers and ancient water systems in Saida, and finally, to the protection of heritage buildings in Beirut. It was rather striking to hear most of the groups lament their inability to mobilize people around their respective causes. This was the case for all of the urban and environmental campaigns present at the workshop, with the exception of *The Stop the Highway, Build the Fouad Botros Park* campaign.
- 33 The campaign was launched in 2012 after the municipality of Beirut announced that it was going to build a highway planned since the 1950s that would cut through the Hekmeh neighborhood, one of Beirut’s historic neighborhoods. The Hekmeh-Turk axis was part of the master plan for the city of Beirut, put forth by the French architect, Michel Ecochard, and was conceived in the 1950s during an era of nation building for the nascent Lebanese state.⁴⁵ The project was halted in the 1970s with the start of the Lebanese Civil War.
- 34 Like many of the urban and environmental initiatives in the past decade, the *Stop the Highway, Build the Fouad Botros Park* campaign was started by several professionals. It brought on board traffic experts, engineers, urbanists, architects, and representatives from other disciplines. Professional and scientific studies were produced to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the highway in solving traffic problems,

highlighting the new problems the highway would create. Moreover, they asserted that the project would “destroy the continuity of the neighborhood, the architectural heritage of this historical quarter, and the environment and landscape.”⁴⁶ Alternative plans were proposed, including a traffic plan and a plan to transform the lands and buildings that were expropriated for the construction of the highway in the 1970s into a park that would cross the Hekmeh neighborhood and tie it together.⁴⁷

Figure 5. Alternative plan to the Fouad Botros Highway project that was proposed by the Stop the Highway, Build the Fouad Botros Park Campaign



Stop the Highway, Build the Fouad Boutros Park, [online] [<https://stopthehighway.wordpress.com/>], accessed on 06-10-2022

- 35 By 2015, the campaign succeeded in stalling the project. Nevertheless, it is not the wealth of rational information that was gathered by the experts that convinced the municipality to stop the project. According to one of the members of the campaign, the main reason for the success of the campaign was that activists were able to convince owners of the affected neighborhoods that their plots were worth much more than how authorities had priced them.⁴⁸ When the pricing of the land was adjusted, the amount of expropriation alone exceeded the budget that the authorities had accounted for in the project.⁴⁹
- 36 A couple of years later, in spring of 2017, Lil-Madina Initiative started a campaign against a project for widening the historical Sultanieh Road, which threatened to wipe out the ancient Sidon Aqueduct and turn the Sultanieh Road into a 25-meter-wide highway. Similar to the Fouad Botros Highway, the plan for the widening of Sultanieh Road was drawn from an obsolete master plan for the city of Saida that was produced in the 1960s.
- 37 Lil-Madina Initiative's activists, inspired by the experience of the *Stop the Highway, Build the Fouad Botros Park* campaign, decided to mobilize people in neighborhoods that were

to be crossed by the planned highway. For that, they decided to use some of the strategies employed by the *Stop the Highway, Build the Fouad Botros Park* campaign.

- 38 Lil-Madina Initiative activists could mainly mobilize people whose houses were directly affected by the project in the Qaya'a, who were now convinced that the highway was going to split their neighborhood in two and would have a negative impact on their lives. Moreover, any expropriation that would be paid to them would not be sufficient to find a new house in similar neighborhoods within the city. The rest of the Sultanieh Road was passing through orchards and any widening of a road would have helped to raise real estate value, which pleased the land owners.

Figure 6. Aerial view and plan depicting in red houses that are affected by the highway project crossing the Qaya'a neighborhood



Lil-Madina Initiative, Limaza Yajib al-hifaz 'ala Hay al-Qaya'a? Takhtitat Haditha Tohaded Hay Saydawi 'Ariq (Why We Must Protect the Qaya'a Neighborhood? Modern Plans Threatening an Old Sidonian Neighborhood), 2017, [online] [<https://lilmadinainitiative.wordpress.com/2017/04/03/%d9%84%d9%85%d8%a7%d8%b0%d8%a7-%d9%8a%d8%ac%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ad%d9%81%d8%a7%d8%b8-%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%89-%d8%ad%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%82%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%b9%d8%a9%d8%9f-%d8%ad%d9%8a-%d8%b5%d9%8a%d8%af/>], accessed on 06-10-2022

- 39 Eventually, a committee with people whose buildings were directly affected by the project was established. Friday sermons were given at the two local mosques in Qaya'a,

and a petition was circulated in the neighborhood to ask for the abolition of the project. The media was called to cover the campaign, and news reports were aired on national television.

- 40 A couple of months later, the Qaya'a committee succeeded in receiving promises from public authorities that the road would be diverted around the neighborhood instead of crossing it. These favorable outcomes were important, but it was also clear that the Lil-Madina Initiative had succeeded in mobilizing local people only to a certain extent, remaining unsuccessful in reaching larger audiences in their bid to protect the historical Sultanieh Road and the Sidon Aqueduct and to stop the highway project altogether. They were thus unable to create, what Sidney Tarrow defines as, "shared meanings that inspire people to collective action" and that "shap[e] grievances into broader and more resonant claims."⁵⁰ Activists were unable to mobilize ordinary people for the sake of the more abstract causes of the environment or for the ideal of the "right to the city."

Using the Opportunity of a Movement

- 41 Things would change dramatically starting on October 17th 2019, which marked the beginning of a major uprising across Lebanon. The protests were ignited by a series of events, among which were a strike of wheat and fuel importers, followed by a sharp loss in value of the Lebanese pound,⁵¹ and major forest fires around the country. These simultaneous crises revealed the moral, functional and financial bankruptcy of the state. Fuel was added to the fire when the government proposed new taxes on tobacco, petrol and on voice calls via messaging services precipitating a major cross-sectarian uprising.⁵² People took up main squares across cities in Lebanon, shutting down the country for several weeks while demanding the resignation of the government and the return of the funds that were considered to be stolen by the corrupt political elite.
- 42 Just days before October 17th 2019, activists in Lil-Madina Initiative learned that a surveying team were beginning their work on Sultanieh Road as a first step towards the implementation of the road widening project. They spent that day strategizing on how to confront this tragic reality. Little did they know that just days later their efforts would become pointless since the project would be stalled with the massive demonstrations and the economic downfall.
- 43 In the Eliya Square in Saida, Lil-Madina Initiative marched and raised banners for the protection of the orchards and against highway projects. Moreover, they raised signs for the protection of the Awali River, against a dam project that was planned in Bisri some 15 kilometers upstream from Saida. The Bisri Dam was intended to divert the water of the Awali River to provide the capital city of Beirut with fresh water and was mainly funded with a \$1.2 billion USD World Bank loan. For Lil-Madina Initiative, the Bisri dam would have had a major impact on the city of Saida, since the Awali River runs to the north of the city. The implementation of the dam in Bisri would have had a major impact on the ecosystem in the area. Moreover, by reducing the amount of water in the river by 90%, it would have deprived Saida of the water that it historically relied on for the functioning of the ancient Sidon Aqueduct and the canal systems in Wastani.

Figure 7. Talk and discussion in the Elia Square in Saida organized by The National Campaign to Protect the Bisri Valley and Lil-Madina Initiative about the Bisri Dam and its impact on Saida and on the region.



Ismael Sheikh Hassan, taken on 30-10-2019, in Elia Square Saida

- 44 As a matter of fact, no environmental campaign benefitted from the October 17th uprising as much as *The National Campaign to Protect the Bisri Valley*. The campaign was initiated in 2017. Some of the main activists who initiated the campaign had previously worked against other controversial projects, including the Janneh Dam in the north of Lebanon and the Fouad Boutros Highway in Beirut; and had therefore drawn lessons-learned from other experiences.⁵³
- 45 In Bisri, the activists worked on mobilizing the local population by organizing community meetings in different villages. More broadly, the activists aimed to mobilize the general Lebanese public mainly through the campaign's Facebook page and other national media outlets.⁵⁴ They decided early on to change the name of the campaign from "Stop the Bisri Dam," which was used at the very beginning, to the "National Campaign for the Protection of the Bisri Valley."⁵⁵ They framed their cause as a "national" cause: the dam would have not only impacted the livelihood of people and destroyed their valley; it would have destroyed a precious national ecosystem and heritage sites. More importantly, the project has a high probability to fail, since the type of soil in the area does not hold water, and can even be hazardous in a region prone to earthquakes.
- 46 As with many urban and environmental campaigns, well-designed images were disseminated on social media to trigger the emotions of the general public, showing the visual appeal of the site and the dreadfulness of the official project. Furthermore, similar to other activist campaigns, scientific and professional studies were conducted to reveal the dangers and negative impacts of the project. All of this material was shared with public officials and the World Bank in an attempt to stop the loan.⁵⁶
- 47 While the Facebook page of the campaign was gaining popularity, and more people were becoming aware and supportive of the campaign, on the ground it was much harder to mobilize people.⁵⁷ Some of the affected locals did eventually join the campaign, but not enough to generate a critical mass able to topple the government plans and stop the World Bank loan from going through.⁵⁸

- 48 According to one of the main activists working against the dam, the campaign benefitted greatly from the fact that the corruption for this project was widespread and involved many political parties and public officials on all sides of the political spectrum, implicating even those who usually act as political opponents.⁵⁹ In fact, the Bisri Dam project stood as a clear case of the corrupt apportionment between most political factions in Lebanon that wanted to profit from the project, and in so doing, increased the national debt.⁶⁰ The Bisri Dam project was a palpable demonstration of the post-Civil War and post-Taif agreement culture that distributes “the spoils of public office, privileges, and state resources” amongst the political leaders.⁶¹ This fact was very well exposed by the activists working on the campaign. In fact, at times their statements caused them to be threatened and even physically harassed and assaulted.⁶²

Figure 8. Facebook post from The National Campaign to Protect the Bisri Valley exposing corruption in Bisri Dam project



By National Campaign for the Protection of the Bisri Valley, [online] [<https://www.facebook.com/savebisri/photos/1057795827914031>], Posted on 17-02-2020, Accessed on 20-09-2022

- 49 It is not a coincidence that the start of the 17th of October uprising, with its rallying cries being the fight against corruption in political elite circles, propelled the campaign against the Bisri Dam project which quickly rose to be one of its movement’s central causes. From that point on, the main activists on this campaign no longer needed to function as organizers, since different groups organized themselves. When they called for demonstrations to stop the project, a torrent of people arrived in Bisri from all parts of Lebanon. They broke the gate to the project area and camped and demonstrated on-site, all in view of news crews and reporters.⁶³ This is when the campaign turned into a movement and its outcome was the halting of all works on site; and a year later, the revocation of the World Bank loan.

- 50 The experience in Bisri was an example of how urban and environmental activists can benefit from extra-ordinary circumstances, such as the Lebanese economic collapse and popular uprising in 2019, in order to mobilize ordinary people. Although this mobilization was quite inspiring and achieved significant successes, it also has its limits. This becomes apparent when one realizes that the mobilization of ordinary people in the case of Bisri was, in fact, extra-ordinary: a temporary set of demonstrations that were not transformed into a longer-term and more lasting political mobilizations. As the Lebanese-uprising of 2019 started to lose its momentum in 2020, people who were temporarily activated started to lose faith in the ability of the uprising to achieve its objectives. As people started to go back to their everyday lives, the city squares emptied out once more.

Tapping into the Everyday Life of People

- 51 In September 2020 -- the same month that the World Bank loan for the construction of the Bisri Dam fell through -- members from the Lil Madina Initiatives joined forces with other citizens and were able to temporarily acquire two pieces of land (Fig. 1) to start a community garden initiative based on principals of agro-ecology and cooperation. The biggest plot was in a very central location in Saida, on a main road some 200 meters away from the Eliya Square where the 17th of October demonstrations were taking place the previous year. The other plot was to the south of Saida.
- 52 Both plots of land were originally part of the historical orchard landscapes of Saida, but had become neglected, full of trash and rubble. The owners of the larger plot were real estate developers who, with the crisis, had put development projects for the site on hold. Activists signed an agreement that would see the land owners get half of what would be produced (in cash or in actual vegetables), and half of profits of any activity that would take place on their land, in return for letting farmers use it for two years. The contract could be renewed if both parties agreed to it.

Figure 9. Nohye Al-Ard Community Garden established in October 2020 Qaya'a

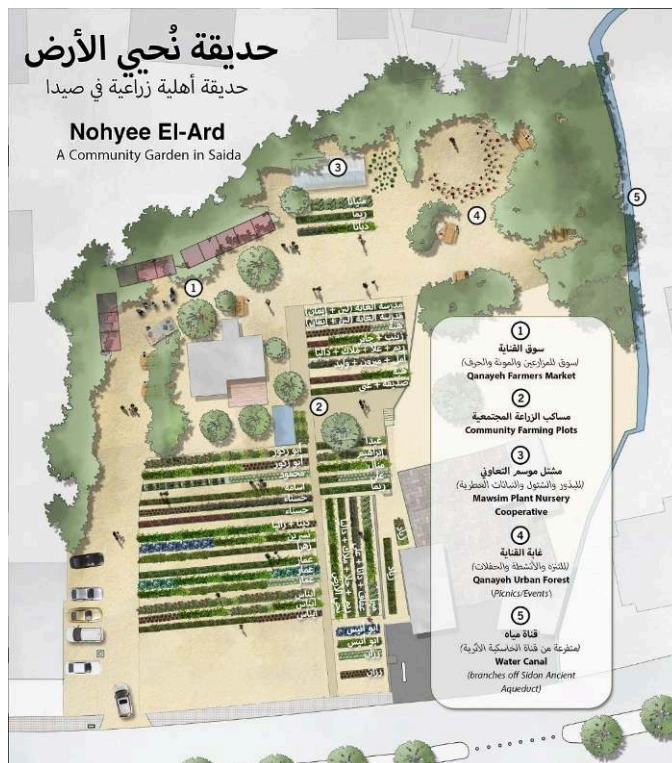


Taken by Ismael Sheikh Hassan, 25-02-2021 [online] [https://www.facebook.com/Nohye.Alard/?hc_ref=ARTockDBV0VmUTdYkHjeSivX670tGt-Tbw4yC3EhB_xWVWzAZVUY-0ELYS85VS0bnw&fref=nf], accessed on 06-10-2022

- 53 A call was made on Lil-Madina Initiative Facebook account for any person living in Greater Saida who wished to receive a small parcel of land for planting in the newly named Nohye El-Ard (which translates into 'We Revive the Earth') garden. Ten people joined the community garden initiative and the members were trained in permaculture and agro-ecology⁶⁴ through a local NGO, the Soils Permaculture Association of Lebanon. ⁶⁵ Simultaneously, they collectively cleared the site and prepared the land. They then carved trenches and filled them with wood and organic material, and created no-dig raised garden beds following the German technique of *Hügelkultur*. Finally, seeds were sowed into the beds according to companion planting methods.
- 54 The beds were to host a full and complex ecosystem that would be strengthened by the no-tilling and no-pesticide policy in the garden. The ecosystem would be further reinforced by covering the ground with organic material and spraying it with a compost extract that hastens the production of micro-organisms that are important for healthy soils. The agricultural methods adopted at Nohye El-Ard were a response to modern, agribusiness farming practices and their reliance on mono-crops, chemical pesticides, and chemical fertilizers. The participants were eagerly learning about the soil and vegetation and the science behind it, while at the same time gaining awareness of the crucial role played by natural expanses and orchards in the urban environments.
- 55 A seedling nursery project was developed by some of the members to provide seeds and seedlings for the garden while promoting heirloom varieties to a wider audience in the city. With the nursery, the members of Nohye al-Ard became conscious of the difference between heirloom seeds and commercial seeds that are produced by international corporations responsible for monopolizing seed production around the world.

- 56 Moreover, members of Nohye al-Ard became aware of the principal of food sovereignty, described by Raj Patel as “the right to produce and eat [one’s] own food [...] without having to rely on other people, organizations, or governments for handouts.”⁶⁶ By rediscovering their relationship to the land, members of Nohye al-Ard became more critical of the corporate control food production and were therefore more aware of their right to access land for the sake of food sovereignty.
- 57 Eventually, members started harvesting the fruits and vegetables. The plots produced an abundance of food, more than could be used by the gardeners and their families. It was decided to sell the surplus and discussions were had on how to price the produce. Produce had to be priced so as to compensate members for their labor while making fresh and organic food affordable for the general public. This was especially important, given the consensus among members that accessing healthy produce was a right for all.

Figure 10. Plan of Nohye Al-Ard Community Garden with the location of the vegetable beds (including the name of the participants), the marker, the nursery and the forest area (the historic unfunctional water canal is included on the map in blue)



Nohye Al-Ard, [online] [https://www.facebook.com/Nohye.Alard/?hc_ref=ARTockDBV0VmUTdYkHjeSivX670tGt-Tbw4yC3EhB_xVWVwZAVUY-0ELYs85VS0bnw&fref=nf], Accessed on 06-10-2022

- 58 A Sunday market was then established in Nohye al-Ard community garden. In parallel with the market, public events and performances were organized to promote the land as a public space, and soon enough it became a popular site for visitors from Saida and beyond. Nohye al-Ard community garden quickly came to represent an alternative model for public spaces, one that stood in contrast to municipal parks and plazas.⁶⁷

Figure 11. Public Event (Clown me in) at Nohye Al-Ard Community Garden on the 20th of November 2021



Ismael Sheikh Hassan, Nohye Al-Ard, Saida, 20-11-2021, [online] [https://www.facebook.com/Nohye.Alard/?hc_ref=ARTockDBV0VmUTdYkHjeSivX670tGt-Tbw4yC3EhB_xVWWzAZVUYy-0ELys85VS0bnw&fref=nf], Accessed on 06-10-2022

- 59 The number of members in the Nohye al-Ard community garden increased with every new season. By the end of the two-year agreement, the garden comprised nearly 50 members, who came from different social and political backgrounds, professions, age groups, etc. Of course, this meant that they needed to organize themselves, which they did by creating a number of committees: a committee for the market, a technical committee that organizes planting and overlooks pest control, a committee for irrigation, a committee for social media, a committee for marketing, etc. Some of the activities were the responsibility of the respective committees, while others were done by all members communally.⁶⁸ As they organized themselves and built a community around the garden, a new network based on solidarity and mutual aid was created amongst the members who would otherwise have never met in their everyday lives.
- 60 In September 2022, by the end of the two-year agreement, Nohye al-Ard lost its large plot of land that hosted the Sunday market. The owners of the land refused to renew the agreement and asked the farmers to vacate the property without providing a clear reason for the decision. The garden's members speculated that the owners were unhappy to see their private land transform into a much-visited public space and may not have been satisfied with the financial returns from the sale of produce, which were meagre in financial terms when compared with the high value of the land. Today, what used to be a very buzzing green space, has returned to its original state of heath land.
- 61 Nohye al-Ard community has kept the other smaller plot of land in the south of the city and is still planting and using it for social activities, with the condition to hand it back to the owner once he has decided to build on it. Meanwhile, they are on lookout for another plot of land that guarantees a longer stay, and have been aiming for publicly-owned lands with the realization that being granted public lands requires advocacy and

mobilization in the face of the sectarian-political elite who typically control these resources.

- 62 While the Nohye al-Ard initiative is currently going through uncertain times, for the people who were involved, a new ethos was created that stands in contrast to clientelistic relations and market economy dynamics, and seeds for a new understanding of citizenship and civic action were sowed. In fact, as Rina Ghose and Margaret Pettygrove have shown, community gardens are often “conceived as spaces through which citizens can challenge dominant power relations and claim rights to the city.”⁶⁹ Most importantly, they are spaces that can sensitize ordinary people about issues of environmental care and stewardship, and can provide what professor of landscape architecture, Anne Whiston Spirn, has called, “landscape literacy.”
- 63 Indeed, the story of Anne Whiston Spirn in West Philadelphia is quite revealing. At the end of the 1980s, she found herself unable to persuade public officials, developers, and ordinary people of the importance of paying attention to the environmental injustices affecting Mill Creek, one of the poorest neighborhoods in West Philadelphia.⁷⁰ Thus, she arrived at the conclusion that there was a landscape literacy problem and, together with students from the University of Pennsylvania, she initiated an environmental education program for school children organized around the urban watershed in West Philadelphia. The initiative transformed into a program on landscape literacy and community development and, by the end of the program, Spirn noticed that it has engendered new attachments with the landscape which she recognized as the basis for any change on the ground.⁷¹ Nohye al-Ard initiative was motivated by similar aims in the hopes that the new attachments forged between people and land would form a solid basis from which to tackle the nation’s environmental challenges.

Conclusion

- 64 Reconnecting people to nature and re-establishing the role of nature in cities are not a simple task in this neoliberal era. These aims are all the more difficult when the market economy in question is embedded in a clientelistic system. It is an important political matter that needs collective and political forms of contestation. Looking for powerful allies within the system is very often bound to fail. The only other option that urban and environmental activists are left with is to try to persuade and mobilize ordinary people.
- 65 Mobilizing ordinary people who are living in a clientelistic system seems only possible when their apparent personal interests are at stake. Alternatively, in such a context, they may become mobilized only in extraordinary times, as the result of a political, economic or environmental crisis. Activists should be ready to make the best of such moments, and develop frameworks that can ease the process of bringing new waves of people into the contestation process.
- 66 Lil-Madina Initiative activists employed multiple strategies to make a case for the importance of integrating natural places in the city and to protect natural ecosystems that were being destroyed by infrastructural and real-estate development projects. While these strategies mobilized small numbers of people in the city, the general public tended to shy away, often fearing the consequences of confronting the traditional political-economic elite.

- 67 Of all the initiatives attempted by Lil-Madina, the Nohye al-Ard community garden created the most tangible and concrete demonstration of the social potential and agricultural value of land in the city. Moreover, it provided a clear example of the ability of people to be custodians of spaces used in common, which stands in clear opposition to public spaces managed by municipalities and other private entities. Moreover, Nohye al-Ard linked people from different backgrounds in a space based on cooperation and mutual aid.
- 68 Finally, the Nohye al-Ard experience has clarified that for mobilizing ordinary people in a clientelistic market economy, urban and environmental activists should start from their everyday life. Nohye al-Ard brought natural systems and cycles -- planting, pruning, composting, reaping -- into everyday routines and opened spaces for such embodied forms of environmental and ecological awareness to exist. While the whole process did not create a palpable environmental change, it nevertheless promoted landscape literacy and made space for the development of a counter culture; a new culture of the everyday through which, according to de Certeau, the “fatality of the established order” may be, with time, effectively “subverted.”⁷²

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23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 62–63.
25. At several occasions, while meeting with people from Wastani, they remembered petrified that some of those who resisted or were vocal against the 1980s land-pooling and re-subdivision project were later penalized with their new piece of land (with its location or size) in the project.
26. See Howayda Al-Harithy et al., "Saida Urban Sustainable Development Strategy; Action Plans Report," Action Plans Report, Lebanon, June 2014, [online] [<http://www.medcities.org/documents/22116/42242/Final+Report+Action+Plan+and+Appendixes.pdf/39cdb1fc-6469-441c-aa2e-2f65275d6fdf>].
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52. "Lebanon Protests," *op. cit.*
53. Activist on the National Campaign for the Protection of the Bisri Valley, Interview 3, interview by Lyne Jabri, September 11, 2021.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.*
61. Bent Leenders, "Nobody Having Too Much to Answer For," *op. cit.*, p. 179-80.
62. Activist on the National Campaign for the Protection of the Bisri Valley, Interview 3, *op. cit.*
63. Activist on the National Campaign for the Protection of the Bisri Valley, *op. cit.*
64. Permaculture and agro-ecology promote holistic, natural, regenerative and ethical approaches to agriculture and land-management and are in opposition to modern industrialized monocultures which rely heavily on synthetic pesticides and fertilizers.
65. Later, some of the participants would receive a training of trainer (TOT) by the same NGO, to be able to train new comers and other interested people and therefore transmit knowledge.
66. Raj Patel, "Food Sovereignty," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36, n° 3, July 1, 2009, p. 663-706, [online] [<https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150903143079>].
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68. Almost all the work in the gardens was based on voluntarism, whether for establishing the gardens or other relevant activities, organizing, maintaining, promoting, selling etc. Actually, the Nohye al-Ard initiative was approached at several occasions by different organizations and NGOs to fund a cash for work process in the gardens which was refused, since it would have destroyed the ethos of mutual aid and support. Moreover, the gardens did not need much resources to function. It mainly relied on a monthly fee that every member had to pay to cover for the running of common expenses.

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70. Anne Whiston Spirn, "Landscape Literacy and Design for Ecological Democracy: The Nature of Mill Creek, West Philadelphia," in Henrik Ernstson and Sverker Sörlin(ed.), *Grounding Urban Natures: Histories and Futures of Urban Ecologies*, The MIT Press, 2019, p. 110, [online] [<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11600.001.0001>].

71. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

72. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

ABSTRACTS

This article is about urban and environmental activism in a place driven by market economy and clientelism; two conditions that, when conjoined, make it very hard to protect the environment from encroachment by the forces of urbanization and industry. The context is Lebanon, where many urban and environmental initiatives have been sprouting in the last decade. In this difficult context, what strategies can urban and environmental activists use to make a case for the stewardship of the environment? What opportunities might they use to mobilize ordinary people, who are often relegated to being the clientele of political patrons, to mobilize collective action over environmental issues?

In fact, mobilizing people is the only way to go when political leaders and public officials turn a blind eye. The article concentrates on the experience of Lil-Madina Initiative, an activist group in the city of Saida that has been trying to make a case for ecological rejuvenation in the city since the formation of the collective in 2013. By backing the experience of Lil-Madina Initiative with other activists' experiences from Lebanon, the article demonstrates that ordinary people are often mobilized only once their perceived personal interests are at stake, or, exceptionally, within extra-ordinary conditions such as an uprising. The article concludes by providing the example of a community garden in Greater Saida, to demonstrate that ordinary people may be mobilized when the subject of contention — in this case the agricultural lands of Saida — becomes part of their daily lives and routines.

Cet article porte sur l'activisme urbain et écologique dans un lieu mû par l'économie de marché et le clientélisme ; deux conditions qui s'entremêlent rendent très difficile la protection de l'environnement. Le contexte est le Liban, où de nombreuses initiatives urbaines et environnementales ont vu le jour au cours de la dernière décennie. Dans ce contexte difficile du

Liban : quelles stratégies urbaines et écologiques utilisent-elles pour défendre l'environnement ? Quelles opportunités utilisent les militants pour mobiliser les gens ordinaires – la clientèle de patrons politique – pour lancer des actions collectives contentieuses sur les questions environnementales ?

En fait, mobiliser les gens ordinaires est la seule voie à suivre lorsque les dirigeants politiques et les autorités ne sont pas à l'écoute. L'article se concentre sur l'expérience de Lil-Madina Initiative, un groupe de militants de la ville de Saida qui tente, depuis 2013, de défendre les éléments écologiques de la ville. En s'appuyant sur leur expérience, et en y rajoutant l'expérience d'autres militants au Liban, l'article démontre que les gens ordinaires sont généralement mobilisés lorsque leurs intérêts personnels sont en jeu. Sinon, ils pourraient être aussi momentanément mobilisés pour l'environnement dans des conditions extraordinaires, tel qu'une révolte. Enfin, l'article donne un dernier exemple – celui d'un jardin communautaire à Saida, pour démontrer que les gens ordinaires pourraient éventuellement se mobiliser lorsque le problème écologique – dans ce cas les terres agricoles de Saida – fait partie de leur vie quotidienne.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Militantisme, Mouvements écologistes, Gens ordinaires, Clientélisme, Jardin communautaire

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AUTHOR

LYNE JABRI

Lyne Jabri is an architect and urbanist. She worked on the reconstruction project of Nahr el-Bared Refugee Camp in the North of Lebanon between 2009 and 2010. In 2012, she completed her Master's in Urbanism and Strategic Planning at KU Leuven with a master's thesis on water and urbanism in the city of Saida in Lebanon. In 2013, together with a small group of urban activists, she formed Lil-Madina Initiative in Saida. She started her PhD at KU Leuven in 2019, and is currently researching through an action-research methodology, urban activism in conditions of clientelism. Since 2020, she is part of Nohye al-Ard; an initiative working on community gardens in Saida.

lyne.jabri@kuleuven.be