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Global South Conversations on COVID-19 and housing struggles

How the COVID-19 Pandemic has Shaped Housing Struggles in Lebanon

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Abstract

In this conversation, two of our Editors (Ana and Michele) encounter researchers and organizers from Lebanon to reflect about the struggle for housing in the midst of the pandemic. They are Mona Fawaz, Mona Harb, Karim Nammour and Farah Salka. In this conversation, we tackle issues of new and old forms of housing injustices, housing policy, old and emerging inequalities, as well as forms of organizing against increasing housing violence.

Keywords

Lebanon, COVID-19, housing struggles, crisis

RHJ: The COVID-19 pandemic has intersected already existing housing struggles, and the struggles for inhabitation worldwide. How this intersection unfolded in the context of Lebanon, so troubled already by old and new forms of urban injustice?

Farah: It is difficult and unfair to look at the immense housing crisis in Lebanon in the last year through only linking it to the pandemic and without giving equally close attention to the overlap between the many hard and almost absurdly mixed variables that pushed for the miserable situation the country is in today. A failed revolution (mostly due to the arrival of pandemic in the same year) followed by an economic and financial crisis, then

the full-blown pandemic, airport closures and all types of lockdowns, as well as the biggest and most horrific explosion that the country has ever known on 4 August 2020, contributed to already existing housing hardships. People and families, locals, migrant workers, refugees who reside out of the camps were no longer able to afford rent, plain and simple. People lost their jobs, lost access to their savings in banks, lost value of the little money they had left due to inflation, any chance or opportunity at finding other decent jobs in a country whose job market was struggling way before 2020 and where job market exploitation was always rampant.

Mona F: COVID-19 comes in Lebanon in the heels of a massive financial and economic crisis, and amidst social and political unrest. World Bank figures can help provide a picture of the current moment. Inflation in 2020 was estimated at 90%, unemployment at 37%, poverty at 55% and extreme poverty at 23%. These figures reflect a sharp increase from 2019 when unemployment, for example, was at 11%. It is impossible to consider the repercussions of the COVID crisis outside of a context that has produced severe housing precarity by making land—and housing consequently—primarily an asset designed to attract foreign investment and safely store capital.

Karim: When COVID-19 happened at the beginning of 2020, measures taken by the Lebanese government to curb the spread of the disease exacerbated an already dire situation. Salaries were worth less than one quarter of their original value, whereas rents and loans that were primarily contracted in US dollars became unaffordable to most debtors. To give a concrete example: the minimum wage in Lebanon before the 2019 crisis was about 450 US dollars, and today is only around 77 US dollars. Notwithstanding, the government did very little to alleviate the situation. It did not adopt a sustainable national strategy to fight COVID-19, resorting only to temporary solutions that exacerbated dire living conditions (e.g. nation-wide lockdowns). Furthermore, it did not adopt rent control policies, leaving tenants hostage to unfair and abusive market practices, all the while forcing them to "stay home". The scarce financial aid that the government issued to help households in need was distributed sporadically with no objective nor transparent criteria whatsoever. This left residents dwelling in a very unstable and abusive situation, with the possibility of becoming homeless during an international health crisis lurking on the horizon.

Mona H: COVID-19 has amplified the urgency of all struggles for rights, including for decent and affordable inhabitation of the city. Beyond housing, which has been well discussed by my colleagues, COVID-19 highlights the struggle for inhabitable city spaces, where people can hang out and be, and also meet and interact. The few available open public spaces in coastal cities (the seaside corniche, parks and gardens) have been closed off during lockdown, confining people to their crowded homes and dense neighbourhoods.

RHJ: Regulatory policy frameworks play an important role in shaping the failed housing and inhabitation infrastructures. How did housing and urban policy framework shape the current situation in Lebanon?

Mona F: It is possible to argue that there is no housing policy framework in Lebanon. Instead, policies described as 'housing policies' are typically by-products of economic and financial decisions. Concessions are occasionally granted to well organized groups (e.g., tenants benefiting from rent control, groups resisting eviction from road projects), but they are far from guaranteeing a just societal outcome or shelter protection for the urban majorities. Yet, there are COVID-19 specific challenges. The preliminary findings of an investigation about shelter vulnerability that I am leading at the Beirut Urban Lab with Soha Mneimneh has shown that households defaulting on publicly subsidized housing loans were primarily those whose professions were affected by the COVID-19 crisis: they include a school bus driver, a hairdresser, and a cab driver, among others. To these groups, even the severe devaluation of the Lebanese pound that has considerably reduced the value of their housing loans is insufficient to secure the regular instalments. It is possible to extend this assessment to other groups, particularly lower middle income tenants.

Karim: This is where I slightly disagree with Mona Fawaz regarding the existence or not of a housing policy framework. Such policy does exist, but it was not designed to render decent housing accessible, it was rather designed to encourage investment in real estate, thus serving the bigger neoliberal project launched in post-war Lebanon at the beginning of the 1990s within a wider global trend of similar socioeconomic policies. That housing policy stems from the sacralization of 'the right to private property' as the cornerstone of Lebanon's philosophical identity as a constitutional state and economy. Its basic principles lie in encouraging people to primarily own real estate to secure housing, justifying this by the narrative of ownership being the most 'secure' medium to guarantee return on investment. This developed in the structuring of housing loan policies and mechanisms aimed to ensure first and foremost a substantial inflow of money in banks and other financial institutions to feed the Lebanese financial market and serve an unproductive economy primarily based on pegging the Lebanese pound to the US dollar, thus artificially stabilizing it. The state otherwise refrained from intervening in the housing market, be it in the creation of public housing or by controlling rents (the few interventions that exist in that regard are either scarce or inherited from various temporary policies issues since the mid-1930s and incompatible with current living conditions and needs). It is within that framework, and pursuant to a policy shift in 2018 regarding housing loans (when the Lebanese Central Bank halted its subsidized loan policy for being unsustainable and damaging to public funds), that the 2019 financial crisis and subsequent 17 October uprising happened, when banks started defaulting on their obligations vis-à-vis depositors, first by limiting the amount of retrievable monies in US dollars and then by halting it completely. The Lebanese pound collapsed to historic levels, and living conditions deteriorated fast and drastically.

Mona H: Urban policies in Lebanon never favored an inhabitable city, that people could appropriate and make their own. In the aftermath of the civil war (1990s), when post-war reconstruction policies were being elaborated, priority was given to large-scale projects and infrastructures that aimed to position Beirut as a global city and to attract foreign investments that would advance economic growth. In reality, these policies fragmented

and split neighborhoods, favoring private interests and profit. They also favored the use of private vehicles. They did so at the expense of integrated spatial interventions that would reconnect a divided and fragmented city and that would have been inclusive of the city's diverse groups. The municipality of Beirut refused for many years to open the largest park of the city, Horch Beirut. It took fifteen years of tireless lobbying by urban activists for the municipality to give in and open the park (Harb, 2018). Other available parks in the city are scarce and poorly maintained. Still, people do patronize open public spaces, especially in mixed-use, working-class neighborhoods, where you can find many young and older men occupying sidewalks and dead-end streets, playing backgammon, drinking coffee and smoking narguile (Harb, 2013). Often, these neighborhoods are marked by political and religious iconography and signs that define a specific territory and thus exclude people who do not identify with this hegemony. Some neighborhoods are less marked than others and their open public spaces are claimed by a more diverse crowd, such as those that were damaged by the Beirut port blast. All these forms of inhabitation, notwithstanding their male- and heteronormative-dominant features, were halted by COVID-19 which further revealed the high costs that city dwellers bear because of urban policies that privilege cities for profit over cities for people.

RHJ: At the beginning of the pandemic many media reported that we are 'all in this together'. But this is not how things looked like in reality. Many have shown how the pandemic has augmented existing inequalities and opened space for new ones to emerge. Where do you see the pitfalls of inequality in the existing housing system?

Mona F: Access to shelter for the vast majority of urban dwellers (middle and low income) is largely negotiated rather than a sheer matter of rights: less than half the rental agreements or occupation agreements in Beirut, for example, are registered. This indicates that conditions (e.g., cost, delays) are negotiated among unequal parties rather than merely cleared through a framework of rights. These negotiations may work in some circumstances to the advantage of tenants, with landlords 'feeling' for the tenant, but they still expose the latter to higher levels of vulnerability and increase their dependence on the good will of the landlords.

Karim: To echo what Mona is saying here, the devaluation of the Lebanese pound widely affected lease negotiations 'among unequal parties' in the absence of a clear rights-based policy aimed at securing decent housing. Tenants—whose salaries (paid in Lebanese pounds) had decreased or remained the same, at best—were often asked to pay rents (contracted in US dollars), either in cash (USD) or in Lebanese pounds according to market prices (which represented more than five times the rate at which their salaries were valued). This led to de facto evictions, where tenants were forced to leave rented spaces they could not afford anymore.

It is also very important to note here that this happened despite legal and judicial protective mechanisms. In fact, Lebanese laws and regulations are clear regarding the requirement to accept payments in Lebanese pounds. Articles 7 and 192 of the Lebanese Monetary and Credit Law for instance, state that creditors cannot refuse debt settlements in Lebanese pounds at the official currency exchange rate even if contracts are drafted in

US dollars, otherwise they would be violating the law and committing a criminal offense in application of the aforementioned article 192. Enforcing these laws, however, would require judicial intervention, a costly and lengthy process for most residents. Furthermore, instead of intervening to protect residents by issuing rent controls or suspending debt settlement (e.g. vis-à-vis tenants), the state issued several laws to suspend legal prescription in favor of the rights of owners (e.g. landlords), leaving tenants without any proper and timely legal protection.

RHJ: How has this situation exacerbated existing structural systems of oppression, racism, sexism, among others in Lebanon?

Mona F: We need to account in this reading for two overlapping frameworks of vulnerability. On the one hand, we have to consider that the majority of refugees, migrant workers and vulnerable Lebanese groups access shelter informally through ad-hoc arrangements and/or informal contracts that lack any legal protection from landlord harassment, eviction, etc. On the other hand, the very presence of many of these groups, particularly migrant workers and refugees, is criminalized, their very presence rendered precarious because of path-dependent legal manoeuvres that force them into the category of illegal residents and/or workers. The confounded effects of these two conditions exposes refugees and migrant workers to harassment, undue evictions, etc. It is noteworthy, however, that refugees and migrant workers are not equal in the process, the latter having shifted their current strategy to options for repatriation while the former are 'stuck' in Lebanon. Among refugees, a common trend is to shift shelter between informal tented settlements in rural areas when jobs are not available, where they can more readily access aid, etc. and to move temporarily in the city in shared accommodations, when employment is available.

Farah: The testimonies of thousands of migrant families that have struggled with paying rent, unjust increases in rent, unmonitored exploitation by landlords, threats of eviction or actual eviction in the midst of a pandemic are proof of this. Many of the migrant workers are already facing multiple layers of hardships and oppression due to the deadly sponsorship system that their immigration status is affected by. Most migrant workers who live out of contract, not in the house of the sponsor or place they work, are stranded without residency papers, work permits and passports because the sponsor has confiscated that from them. So the sponsorship system intersecting with housing struggles and eviction threats due to all the above, made it impossible for many to carry on, and pushed migrants into homelessness. Especially since during COVID-19, landlords have no longer been flexible in allowing migrant workers to congregate in big groups in apartments (as they used to do before, in order to afford rent) or to rent new places no matter how bad their conditions are. Now, it is conditional that you prove that not too many people would live or use that space, in other words you are being watched, threatened and interfered in/on all the time. Not to mention the direct link between COVID-19, lockdowns, hundreds of businesses losing and cutting down on costs and staff, people losing their jobs and their ability to pay for rent and food as they would

normally do. These are just a few of a long list of examples of how this has impacted housing struggles.

Karim: In addition, lockdown measures issued by the government primarily targeted workers with low and lower-middle incomes (e.g. daily workers, informal workers etc.) by forcing them to 'stay home', whereas others were either exempted from such measures (e.g. medical professionals, journalists, lawyers, public officials etc.) or were able to afford working from home. This meant that residents who were forced to stay home and were unable to work from home had no access to decent work (or any work at all) and eventually were unable to afford housing in the absence of effective state aid or intervention. Finally, it is also important to highlight the repercussions of this situation on vulnerable and marginalized populations (e.g. womxn, members of the LGBTIQ+ community etc.) who were forced to either stay home or move back with their biological families, in what often constituted hostile and abusive environments, in a country that still criminalizes homosexuality and lacks a proper and effective mechanism to protect womxn from gender based violence.

RHJ: COVID-19 and its management has intensified traumatic experiences of loss and dispossession. Has this created new spaces/opportunities for state repression and violence in Lebanon?

Mona F: COVID-19 hit Lebanon after six months of popular mobilization and a powerful and unprecedented national consensus on the necessity for political change. The response to the pandemic allowed a rapid reversal of the situation, with ruling political parties emerging as the conduits through which health measures will be unrolled (Harb et al. Forthcoming). In addition, the government took advantage of the lockdown to raze protesters' tents and dismantle the last elements of the popular mobilization. Since then, the pandemic serves as a (pathetic) excuse to criminalize protestors—including those demanding direly needed subsidies during the lockdown—and its effects are slowly naturalizing control over people's mobility and practices.

Farah: The most important thing to point out is that the dysfunctional state we're in would impose lockdowns, curfews and all kinds of restrictions on people wanting the ability to still move around their daily lives with precaution and calculation—workers of all sorts (drivers, domestic workers, care-givers). The government would never provide any support, services or alternatives for daily workers, poor communities (which makes up the majority of the country today) or viable solutions/answers. At the same time, it only makes sense that government/municipalities/local authorities adopt policies and guidelines that force tenants to be flexible and keep them from throwing families out of their houses in these intensely harsh periods if they can't afford to pay the same rent or pay on time. This never happened. If you get evicted during lockdown for example, how and where will you move? With what money? The whole situation is that you can't afford to pay rent, so what scenario are you being pushed towards besides homelessness? And then with the Coronavirus, how much more vulnerable would you and your family be when having to deal with these variables of uncertainty and fear, more so when you are migrant workers who don't have friends and families in Lebanon, airports are closed and

you can't return home, you can't afford to go back anyway, and going back to where when a couple is from two different countries (risk of family separation) and/or you both don't have access to your passports because of Lebanon's sponsorship system. It's just too much on all fronts. People cannot afford decent conditions of hygiene and social distancing, food on the table, healthcare for their families and children, so how will they be able to afford inflexible rent on top of all that? Countless cases, stories, pictures of migrant women walking on streets of Beirut during 2021, either because they were thrown out of their employers' house or because they've been forced to work for free, promised salaries they never received, lost their mind and senses due to all the absurd levels of injustice they faced in Lebanon.

Karim: COVID-19 came months after the 17 October uprising. The country was in upheaval, and the Lebanese regime was at its weakest point. The pandemic and the panic it caused constituted an opportunity for the regime to fortify its position and weaken its opponents. Governmental measures taken to fight the pandemic adopted a repressive approach—criminalizing non-compliance —and were thus used to draw a new architecture of subjugation and normalize the establishment of a police state. On this basis, and amidst the domination of COVID-19 panic over public debate, <u>fundamental rights and freedoms were progressively discarded and individuals reduced to their purely biological being in the name of implementing rules to combat the pandemic, all in the absence of any public debate necessitated by the concept of a democratic society</u> (Nammour, 2021). Movement was prohibited and privacy violated without any serious objection. Moreover, on 27 March 2020, demonstrators' tents in downtown Beirut were even burnt down on the pretext of combating the pandemic, as Mona mentioned. The event was a succinct material translation of the regime's desire to show its power and authority over the popular uprising. The normalization of the police state was also reflected in the institutionalization of the militarization of disputes and crises in the country, even between private parties. For example, in labor disputes, some employers did not hesitate to summon the armed forces (the riot police or Army) to confront dismissed workers (as in the cases of the <u>RAMCO workers</u> and the <u>American University Hospital workers</u>). Likewise, following the Beirut port explosion on 4 August 2020, the regime hastily <u>declared a state of emergency even though it was pointless</u> and then extended it twice even, though its legal conditions were not met <u>(in contravention of the Constitution)</u>.

RHJ: State measures have failed to protect vulnerable populations in the countries we come from. How have different non-state actors responded to the challenges during the pandemic in Lebanon? How have people responded? What did established movements do? Did any new forms of organizing emerge in this situation?

Mona F: A look at the report of the UN housing rapporteur on COVID-19 shows that Lebanon has not taken any measures to protect vulnerable populations. Informal and ad-hoc decisions taken by some public agencies, particularly after the Beirut port blast, hardly qualify as a recognition of shelter vulnerability. Popularly, demands have been made on social media to put a moratorium on evictions and/or bank seizures but in the absence

of adequate channels of communication and/or policymaking, many decisions are addressed in the private realm with tenants being sometimes able to leverage support from NGOs, other neighbors, religious groups or others. Again, we are faced with conflict resolution through the informal negotiated framework rather than a visible or predictable acknowledgement of rights. Anecdotal evidence points to important roles played by local strongmen, religious authorities and/or local party representatives but also social networks in Beirut, Tripoli, Saida or Halba where we have collected stories of negotiation over access and protection of shelter, but even for asking banks to be more patient with an individual loan repayment…I reiterate that while such informal arrangements may produce positive resolutions for tenants or mortgage holders, they are far from guaranteeing a just framework of conflict resolution or securing housing justice.

Karim: The Lebanese government barely intervened or took any effective measures to help or protect vulnerable populations and those most affected by COVID-19 measures (the same can be noted regarding those affected by the Beirut port 4 August 2020 explosion). Instead, different forms of movements aimed to fill the gap left by the state were noted.

On one hand, various traditional political parties, local strongmen and businessmen intervened by proposing various forms of aid to their constituents, in what constituted an attempt to 'whitewash' their tarnished image pursuant to the 17 October 2019 uprisings and regain whatever social standing they could get out of it by reiterating a well-established trend of clientelism in various communities. On the other hand, various—existing or newly created—non-governmental organizations intervened by either providing aid or services to affected communities. This form of intervention comes as a continuation of the well-established trend of intervention by private actors to fill various gaps in public services, left by a recalcitrant and dormant state. It must be noted however, that this form of intervention raises more issues than it provides solutions, mainly that it is not sustainable, it establishes a form of 'privatization by NGOs' (to quote David Harvey), and that its mechanisms are not necessarily compatible with the principles of accessibility, transparency and accountability in a democratic society.

Also, it must be noted that various forms of social movements developed as well in the middle of the crisis—sometimes as a continuation of the 17 October uprising—notably in the northern city of Tripoli. These movements were mostly triggered by an ever-growing deterioration of living conditions in the country, with certain areas (the likes of Tripoli) being affected more than others (Beirut for instance). It comes as no surprise that these movements were faced with unprecedented state violence (sometimes using lethal force), given the fact that COVID-19 measures were also being used to establish the police state, as mentioned previously.

Mona H: While the government tried to use the pandemic to claim its authority through an authoritarian response centered on the Army and its credibility through the ministry of public health that started publishing statistics, figures and measures, sectarian political parties reasserted their power over the territories they control, through deploying branded tents to distribute medical kits or dispatching trucks disinfecting streets (Harb et al., Forthcoming; see also this report on 'a sectarianized pandemic' by IAI). Municipalities

played a policing role, implementing <u>curfews</u> and lockdowns, often in discriminatory ways against Syrian refugees and migrants. Informal settlements and camps were seldom sites of response for any actor, including international organizations. Conversely, NGOs and collectives mobilized quickly in response to the pandemic, sometimes in continuation of aid efforts initiated during the October 2019 uprisings and other times as a solidarity response.[1] While some were organized and followed clear protocols, such as the ones led by NGOs, INGOs and universities, others were looser and more spontaneous and took the forms of campaigns and nascent collectives. Some initiatives were more horizontally organized, such as <u>Baytna Baytak</u> which secured free homes for doctors and nurses in close proximity to hospitals, in cooperation with the private sector, and <u>Habaq</u> which was initiating organic agriculture experiments in Akkar. A Facebook group '<u>Liban Troc</u>' set up by a small group of women was responding to dozens of daily requests for social and medical aid that were being resolved through networks of solidarity, engaging civil society groups and the private sector. Such initiatives were collaboratively designed as acts of solidarity, making a claim over the political significance of their actions as secular acts of human dignity or national solidarity. They also focused on beneficiaries as participants rather than passive recipients of assistance. They sought to organize society and build capacity among people, recognizing their agency and capacities to self-manage their affairs. Thus, NGOs and collectives set up shelter options for professionals in the medical field, in creative ways that do not involve real-estate speculation. They worked on securing food beyond the provision of food boxes, experimenting with local agriculture and farming. They paid attention to the importance of infrastructures of care in these enduring times, establishing online and WhatsApp networks of information exchange where mutual aid is able to deploy effectively, in addition to providing moral support to a range of people in various ways.

Farah: We, the <u>ARM - the Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon</u>, set up an emergency team dedicated to supporting migrant workers and refugees facing housing evictions. For context, nationalities of communities we supported in the above were mostly Ethiopian, Sundanese, Sri Lankan, SieraLeonese, Cameroonese, Syrian, Kenyan and others. There were many challenges, mostly that most, if not all, the people who needed attention on their housing struggle, needed also basic food services provided, on the daily, as they had no means to cover this or that being jobless and migrant in Lebanon, very much in a trapped cycle. The team was small, resources were scarce, cases were flooding in the hundreds each month, and our capacity was only able to cover a dot in an ocean of crisis and needs but we and others did our utmost best with what we had. We would receive cases through our housing helpline, through migrant community leaders, through our cases team in ARM (dedicated to handling abuses, violations and emergencies with migrant domestic workers (MDW)) and repatriation team (dedicated to supporting MDWs trapped in Lebanon due to 2020 crises and needing support in fixing their papers

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[1] There are many examples of solidarity that were reported in the press such as <u>here</u>, and <u>here</u>. In this report, Goulordava underscores the 'collective sense of obligation to help one another during [...] tumultuous times' and 'the need for collective support' that prompted many NGOs and local organizations to mobilize in response to the pandemic, and in the absence of an effective national response (2020).

and financing their return home). What we would offer was an initial assessment of the case, negotiating and contributing to finding the middle ground between migrant tenants and landlords and/or convincing landlords in various ways on decreasing rent, being more patient, taking less than the total number of months owed, etc. We also established very few, albeit solid, referral pathways to certain organizations that cover housing support for MDWs too.

Sometimes negotiations would go well, and we could get midway with the discussions with landlords, cutting out on certain unpaid months, more patience, lesser monthly rent, accepting to get paid half or less. Some landlords exhibited kindness and understanding in the crisis, some were under pressure to pay up their monthly commitments through receiving their rent which is the only source of income for them, others were landlords in their 70s and 80s and could not make any concessions although they were nice people more or less. Other times, landlords would be violent and abusive, resorting to different intimidation tactics like shouting, visiting tenants everyday, locking tenants out and their stuff and belongings (even papers) in the house as an intimidation tactic for them to pay up their late rent. Other horrible practices included cutting electricity and water, withholding documents, threatening to throw belongings out if payment deadline is not kept. Others see themselves as entitled to be serviced in exchange for housing. We have not one documented case where there was policy intervention on this in support or protection of tenants at risk of eviction. How are people supposed to move around when evicted in the middle of a lockdown during a pandemic in a country with dire financial crisis and where people struggle to even consider supporting each other as before?

The guidelines/criteria we followed for rent support of eviction cases depended on various factors looking at the holistic situation of renters such as: number of people in household/ their levels of vulnerability (medical conditions, pregnant/single mothers, disabilities, chronic diseases, level of unemployment, number of babies, SGBV, mental health cases, suicidal tendencies, legal status, documented or undocumented); rent amount/ number of unpaid months; their age/ability to work; their family status (e.g., no friends or relatives to shelter them, or their only friend already has an over-housing situation at home which is putting them in a vulnerable state themselves); their relationship to the neighborhood as a support system (e.g., how long have they been in the neighborhood); if they were evicted before; how long they have been in the house, whether they have a written contract; how many months they owe; their relationship and history with the landlord; how the negotiation goes, etc.

Also, negotiations with landlords relied mostly on: how dependent they are on this monthly rent payment, if they've been lenient and already reduced the rent and want to help but he cannot afford to do so anymore, if they cover utilities or not. We do not pay rich landlords not affected by the financial crisis, nor abusive landlords, nor those who did not do any compromise. We accordingly calculate a score that would guide our decision about how many months of support, partial or full, we could help with. We referred the negotiation process to a lawyer within our circles when and if the person in contact with the tenant is a lawyer, not the landlord themselves.

Depending on the situation/landlord, if the landlord depends on the rent or has been nice as per the tenant's feedback or has been patient for several months, we would introduce ourselves as a group of individuals working together to protect people from being evicted as the situation has been very bad and many people, from all nationalities, are losing their jobs because they lost their jobs due to the corona/economic crisis. We would usually mention ARM is partnering with Housing Monitor for them to be clear on the framing for the organizations supporting on this.

We had different scenario scripts for a negotiation call. We would say that we learned that they have been asking tenants to leave the house if they don't pay soon. If we knew of this tenant as we were supporting them with food and we would remind landlords that these people are seeking support with food, so how can they be able to afford rent. This was a useful trick. Usually here the conversation would start on how the situation is bad and we would try to direct the conversation to how we are all affected, Lebanese, Syrians, migrants. We would underline how politicians are not affected and instead they put us, tenants and renters, in confrontation between each other while it is not anyone's fault but the government. Then we would turn to personal matters. We would use examples of the bank closing one's accounts or not being able to see a family member for several years for their inability to come. We would then apologise and say that if there was no corona or economic crisis, we wouldn't have called to have this conversation (for poor landlords). We would underline how the tenants have been paying all before the crisis but now it is not up to them as the situation is completely out of hand. We would pose questions such as: why would we contribute to people losing their houses when this is the basic right for everyone on this earth, to at least have a roof over their head? We would also explain how we have been receiving tens of calls every day of people actually throwing people out and their stuff on the streets, to make this comparison of them vs those bad landlords. Sometimes it was useful to talk about the situation about migrant workers in general: aren't you watching the news? Many migrant workers want to go back to their country but they are stuck here. We would insist how it is important to stand in solidarity together now more than ever, then thank them for being patient before, and ask them to be more patient. We would that try to negotiate to collect donations for the expenses and utilities only.

RHJ: Thinking post COVID-19 in terms of housing struggles in Lebanon, what are the biggest challenges ahead?

Mona F: It is less COVID-19 than the financial crisis that we have to look at in Lebanon. A year from now, it is expected that further impoverishment and a limited framework of 'social protection' that is likely to reproduce dependence on political parties rather than mobilization will exacerbate vulnerabilities. It is concerning to me that most mobilization happens to denounce individual landlords (e.g., evicting) and demonizes developers. At the Beirut Urban Lab, we seek to locate this debate within a wider policy framework in which we point to the very conception of land in Lebanon's political and economic system as the root core of the housing crisis. In sum, the urban/housing crisis necessitates a different approach to land as a shared amenity, a change in ethos. This is likely to disturb

not only powerful decision makers but also members of the middle classes who were encouraged to invest all their lifetime savings for decades in the purchase of a home.

Karim: I agree with Mona that the main issue that needs to be looked at in Lebanon is the financial situation which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indicators show, so far, that there won't be national holistic and sustainable strategies aimed at facing these crises. Nevertheless, the health crisis did raise important problematics, both in Lebanon and globally, forcing us to rethink the various spaces we dwell in (Chayka 2020). This includes: revising housing design in a manner that allows isolation for long periods and social distancing between residents of a single housing unit, which entails access to adequate housing close to basic services, public spaces, and the workplace; reviewing public spaces and local residents' access to them. This requires working to increase these spaces (especially green ones) near various neighborhoods and making them accessible and safe so that people can leave their homes and mingle responsibly and safely in accordance with prevention guidelines; revising workplace design to be safer for workers whose jobs require them to be present (by, for example, reducing workroom crowding or creating individual workrooms) and even to limit the need for remote work, which can undermine team spirit and obstruct serendipitous intellectual exchanges and connections.

Mona H: Lebanon is going through compounded crises (economic, financial, political, social) which put the health crisis in relative perspective. A year from now, Lebanon's financial collapse will have led more people in poverty and precarity, and the urban question will be marked by acute issues such as eviction, abandonment, vacancy, militarization, securitization and territorialization. Housing justice organizing will need to face a delegitimized and authoritarian state that will be increasingly resorting to violence and repression to exercise its power. It may also suffer from the possible departure of activists who may choose to emigrate, or from the increasing levels of burnout impacting mobilization more generally in Lebanon.

Farah: In the case of ARM, a combination of approaches: maintain a small fund for shelter emergencies and housing evictions that cases team/repatriation team can dispose of for specific cases and find within the migrant communities, focal points willing to temporary host cases who have been evicted with financial support from ARM. The lockdown has definitely created the conditions for the situation to worsen but no one sees things getting any better even when the lockdown is over.

RHJ: As the world experiences new failures in international solidarity with emergence of vaccine nationalisms — leaving everyone more at risk of Coronavirus — do you think that global housing struggle will foster new international solidarities?

Farah: It must, there's no other way out or forward.

Karim: There is clearly a shared global pattern of housing financialization that is eliciting learning and lesson sharing across contexts.

Mona F: When I attend international conferences and/or read the work of colleagues advocating for the right to housing, I find important convergences between the patterns that we are facing in Lebanon and others observed elsewhere. In many ways, the historical re-organization of cities into propertied landscapes, the deployment of cadastral map and the adoption of the ownership model as the sole form of understanding landscapes during the colonial period have affected Lebanese cities in the same ways that they have affected others, prefiguring the ongoing crisis. Today, we see lower middle-income households forced to adopt negative coping mechanisms to pay mortgages they were convinced they needed to pay in order to secure long-term housing in Beirut, and this should recall similar trends observed, for example, by Madden and Marcuse in New York, and in California, etc. These trends tell me that there is a lot to learn from the resistance mounting in other national contexts against the ownership model, transgressions and reinventions that could be adapted, reformed, reinvented. I am particularly inspired by ownership models like community trusts or cooperatives and would love to see them adapted as a strategy to help Beirutis secure a stock of affordable housing in the city that retains its use value.

Mona H: I increasingly sense that Lebanon has become very isolated and poorly connected to other global struggles. For the majority, the focus now is on daily survival, with little means to invest in organizing and mobilizing. My fear is that we dwell in hopelessness and despair, with little options besides waiting. Yet, many activists and organized groups are leading important discussions about rights and political change, even if few focus on housing struggles. The work developed at the Beirut Urban Lab (BUL) and by <u>Public Works</u> is worth highlighting in this respect, especially in its efforts at forging linkages to regional and global housing struggles. One of the key research tracks of BUL seeks 'to unravel the actual materialization of neoliberal policymaking in urban contexts and to document its repercussions on the spatial fabric of cities [including its] housing stock, as well as its social impacts on families and individuals looking for housing.' Public Works is a research studio that, 'aims to forge possibilities that make urban planning a democratic process where ordinary citizens can understand, judge and take decisions to make interesting, viable and just spaces.' Both organizations invest in reflecting on alternative, more inclusive and equitable, proposals to advance the social value of land (e.g. BUL: mitigating real-estate interests in the <u>post-blast recovery</u>; <u>City of Tenants</u>; on <u>property taxation</u>; <u>You Can Stay in Beirut</u>; Public Works: <u>Housing Monitor</u>, <u>Think Housing</u>). Such housing initiatives matter as they contribute to social mobilization and organizing which are essential components in the long journey towards political change in Lebanon. They can certainly get further consolidated and enriched if stronger connections and more productive solidarities are forged with other global housing struggles.

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