



**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Young people’s perspectives of inequitable urban change in Lebanese towns affected by mass displacement

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## Abstract

This paper assesses the planning processes which shape urban change in the Beqaa Valley, Lebanon, from the perspectives of adults working in planning, and young residents. Beginning with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the towns of Bar Elias, Marj and Majdal Anjar have grown rapidly, as tens of thousands of people have been displaced there. Young Syrians and Lebanese residents’ experiences of urban change point to the role that planning processes play in inequitable urban change. Inequitable urban change negatively impacts Lebanese as well as Syrian residents. Post-2011 planning policies addressing the Syrian Refugee Crisis do not effectively address the planning processes which create and enable inequalities. They risk obscuring this source of common struggles and exacerbating inequalities.

## KEYWORDS

displacement, youth, Lebanon, inequality, urban planning

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The Syrian civil war has led to the displacement of over 1.5 million people to Lebanon (Government of Lebanon & UN, 2020: 8). There are 334,668 people registered as refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the Beqaa Valley, making the Beqaa the region with the highest number of registered

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displaced Syrians in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2021). Within the Beqaa Valley region, Bar Elias municipality has the highest number of registered people (29,802 people), the adjacent municipality Marj has the third highest (13,903 people) and Majdal Anjar the fourth highest (13,341 people) (UNHCR, 2020). Bar Elias' population has possibly doubled in size since the Syrian civil war broke out (UNDP, 2018). Before 2011, Bar Elias was a modest commercial centre in the Beqaa Valley, and Bar Elias, Marj and Majdal Anjar were seasonal homes for migrant labourers from Syria who worked in the agricultural sector. The agricultural and agro-food industries were (and still are) the dominant economic sectors in the Beqaa (Al Ayoubi, 2018).

Although the UNHCR has registered 865,530 displaced people as refugees, the Government of Lebanon (GoL) has not formally acknowledged displaced Syrians as refugees, calling them 'guests' in Lebanon and prohibiting international organisations from establishing formal refugee camps (Nassar & Stel, 2019). In the Beqaa, about half of the displaced Syrian population live in informal tented settlements (ITs), and about half live in rented brick and mortar homes (Government of Lebanon & UN, 2020). Rapid population increase, coupled with the GoL's no-camp policy, has led to an increased demand for rental property over the past decade (Dabaj et al., 2021). This in turn has fuelled the construction on, and repurposing of, agricultural land for residential purposes (*ibid*).

Although the GoL has not recognized displaced Syrians as refugees, it has officially recognized the 'Syrian Refugee Crisis' since 2013 (Nassar & Stel, 2019). Prominent politicians, including former Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, cite the arrival of displaced people as the reason for the state's inability to effectively plan and deliver necessary infrastructures, and for other crises, including environmental degradation and the 2019 economic collapse (Al Ayoubi, 2018; Hussein et al., 2020). In this narrative, Syrians' arrival in Lebanon marks a break with former planning competencies and the beginning of a new era for Lebanon, which is characterized by degradation of public goods and poverty. However, increasing inequality between Lebanese citizens, increasing economic precarity for lower- and middle-class Lebanese citizens, and persistently high poverty rates were evident before the Syrians' arrival (Baumann, 2019; Dewailly, 2019).

The claim that the protracted mass displacement of Syrians is the cause of public services' decline and rising poverty is contested by pre-2011 inequality and poverty data. Since planning policy and practice have an important role to play in the redistribution of prosperity through the funding and maintenance of public goods and services, this disagreement is pertinent to planning practitioners and scholars. This paper asks whether Lebanese planning processes are capable of supporting the fair distribution of prosperity in existing towns, in a time of mass protracted displacement.

To answer this question, this paper presents findings from a case study of three towns in the Beqaa Valley, Lebanon, which have high numbers of registered Syrian refugees relative to their population size and to the rest of the country. The study finds that young Lebanese and Syrian residents point to the role planning processes play in determining inequitable outcomes which negatively impact them. Their knowledge of inequitable planning processes is confirmed by literature about planning processes in Lebanon, and by interviews with adults who work in urban planning in Lebanon.

## 2 | STUDY AIMS

This paper summarizes select findings from a case study of Bar Elias and the neighbouring towns Marj and Majdal Anjar. The case study investigated how planning processes have responded to, and shaped the outcomes of, rapid population increase due to protracted mass displacement, according to young residents. Planning is defined as actions on spaces and infrastructures which structure possible social and economic trajectories of a place (see Kamete, 2012; Watson, 2009). The case study did not aim to take a Marxist approach to understanding planning trajectories and outcomes. However, by discussing incidents of accumulation and housing and land-use inequalities, which are deemed significant by the young residents, this paper is relevant to Marxist planning literature (Holgersen, 2020).



This case study aimed to contribute to understandings of urban displacement, drawing on two key lines of enquiry. The first comes from refugee and forced migration studies, and the second comes from studies of urban gentrification, regeneration and major infrastructure development. In refugee and forced migration scholarship, focused on urban refugees, the dynamics of urbanization are seen to be affected by protracted forced displacements, as refugees engage with city-making activities (Fawaz, 2017; Harb et al., 2018). This scholarship critiques the camp as the proper or only 'refugee space', and debates the differences between the camp and the city, asserting that each takes on characteristics of the other (Agier, 2002; Darling, 2017; Martin, 2015).

In the second body of scholarship on displacement resulting from urban regeneration, gentrification and major developments, the focus is on displacement resulting from urban change, and on surfacing the precarity of those urban dwellers who are marginalized by urbanization processes (Atkinson, 2015; Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019). This literature engages with displacement as a processes of un-homing, which is not limited to physical relocation, and includes feelings of being precarious in one's home, or being marginalized in one's neighbourhood (*ibid*, Nixon, 2011). Arguing that this literature mainly deals with displacement resulting from capital accumulation and economic precarity in the Global Northwest, Yiftachel calls for a broader understanding which understands displacement as an outcome of multiple interacting processes, including, but not limited to, dispossession through capital accumulation (Yiftachel, 2020). These might include major infrastructural project implementation, legal formalism and pressures on people of different races, genders, religious affiliations and nationalities (*ibid*).

This case study is motivated to understand how protracted mass displacement to urban areas and urbanization processes interact to produce common outcomes for young residents, including recently displaced refugee and long-term residents. This case study adds to this literature by examining planning processes in three towns that would be considered 'small' relative to cities such as Beirut. The towns of Marj, Majdal Anjar and Bar Elias have relatively high numbers of registered refugees living there, compared with their pre-2011 population size and the rest of the country (UNHCR, 2020). In spite of this, smaller Lebanese towns do not feature in urban planning scholarship about displacement (with some exceptions e.g., Dabaj et al., 2021; Fawaz, Harb, & Al-Hage, 2021; Sanyal, 2014, 2017). This paper therefore responds to a call from Bell and Jayne (2009) and Ruszczyk and colleagues (Ruszczyk et al., 2020), to study typically 'overlooked' small urban areas. Small towns in Jordan and Turkey, such as Zaatari Village and Kilis, have experienced similar population growth as a result of Syrians' displacement (Erdem, 2019; Owens, 2021; Unsal Gulmez, 2018), but little scholarship has been devoted to them.

This study also contributes to a body of literature about young people and the urban realm, which we could call 'youth urbanism' for short. Young people's lives are often siloed into youth studies and youth-specific policies, and treated as separate from urban planning issues (Harb, 2018). However, the relationship between young people and their environments is mutually constitutive. Young people continually assess their environments to develop a practical knowledge of potential social, political and economic outcomes that are offered by urban areas (Deeb & Harb, 2013; Larkin, 2012; Lefort, 2020). Following examples set by scholars of youth urbanism (particularly Deeb & Harb, 2013 and Larkin, 2012), this paper treats young people's lived experiences as a valuable source of knowledge about the urban. It aims to understand urban planning processes and their impacts on residents from young people's perspectives.

### 3 | METHODS

The purpose of this case study was to investigate how rapid population change in existing towns due to protracted mass displacement in small urban areas was responded to, and shaped, by planning processes, according to young residents. The case study investigates planning processes and the distribution of prosperity through a literature review of formal planning processes in Lebanon, analysis of semi-structured interviews with adults who have a planning role and analysis of semi-structured interviews with young residents, focusing on their understandings of planning processes and their impacts.



The three towns constitute a clearly identifiable case from which case descriptions can be derived and compared with similar cases. Although the towns are separate municipalities, they are treated as a single case for this case study. The towns border one another and share relevant characteristics: they are small urban areas surrounded by agricultural land, they are all approximately 0–15 km from the Lebanese–Syrian border, their main economic activities are farming and trade of agricultural products (Al-Masri & Abla, 2017), they have high numbers of registered Syrian refugees compared with the non-refugee population and other municipalities in Lebanon (UNDP, 2018; UNHCR, 2020, 2021) and the populations are relatively poor in relation to other regions of Lebanon (UNHCR, 2021). The case study draws on multiple sources including documents, interviews and participant observation, to achieve an in-depth case study description and to develop converging lines of enquiry between the sources (Yin, 2018: 155).

The study focused on planning policy material co-authored by state institutions, and on secondary sources which summarize planning policies, laws and processes. The literature review comprises state-authored planning policy, literature authored by UN agencies, activist literature and some academic literature. Literature was accessed via online searches of UN databases, including the UNHCR resources database and the UN-Habitat knowledge repository, and via searches of planning activists' websites. It occasionally draws on academic literature which describes formal planning processes, and texts which share primary or secondary data about the outcomes of planning processes.

The source of empirical data for this study is 17 interviews with young residents aged between 15 and 24 years old, which were conducted in Spring 2020, and nine interviews with adults.<sup>1</sup> This age bracket represents mid- to late-adolescence: a distinct period of development characterized by biological and social role changes (Sawyer et al., 2012). In Lebanon, this life phase is associated with important social role transitions: finishing foundational education, starting professional training, beginning work and starting a family of one's own. Young people in this age bracket are therefore expected to be taking on adult roles in society, and independently navigating societal challenges such as finding work and a family home.

This study included young residents with no experience of physical displacement across borders, as well as those with experience of physical displacement. This is because the study aimed to understand urban change from the perspectives of young residents of different nationalities, rather than to assess young Syrian or Lebanese residents' experiences. Adolescents aged 15–24 years old were deemed likely to have memories of urban change in the area, whether they had grown up there or had moved there since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011. The sampling procedure was a combination strategy which involved stratified purposeful sampling of young residents according to three criteria: (a) whether they had moved to the case study site during their adolescence or had been born there, (b) whether or not they attended school, and (c) whether they were male or female. The study aimed for an equal mix of participants across the categories. Young participants were identified by partner organisations and research assistants working in the case study area, and subsequently by chain sampling. Adult resident participants were older relatives of young participants who were approached at the same time as the young participants. Adult expert participants were purposively sampled based on one criterion, specifically, their experience working in planning-related fields in Lebanon. Ethics approval was granted by the University College London. Participants were provided with a copy of the information sheet and consent form prior to interviews and were given an opportunity to ask questions before the interview.

Details of each participant can be found in Table A1 (Appendix). All of the participants were either poor or extremely poor. All participants lived in rented homes. Most of the participants' families were either not in work, occasionally took low-paid piece-work jobs in farms or had their own small business. The majority of participants said that they were Sunni. Sunnis are the dominant religious group in the area. One participant said he was Shi'a, and another that he was atheist.

Interviews with young residents were conducted with the assistance of two young researchers, one Syrian man and one Lebanese woman. The researchers asked questions, supported by the author who also took observational notes. Each interview was done in a place chosen by the interviewee, where they felt most comfortable. Thirteen



interviews happened at the family home or in a relative's home, but four took place in other kinds of spaces, such as a shop front or a teacher's home. Nine interviews with adults, including four adults with a planning role and five adult residents, were conducted in person in 2020 in adults' homes, or over Zoom in Spring 2021.

Analysis of interview transcripts was conducted using NVivo. Descriptive codes were developed inductively, and axial coding was used to identify overarching themes. This paper shares findings relevant to three overarching themes: 'planning institutions and authorities', 'planning systems and practices' and 'income and poverty'.

## 4 | LITERATURE REVIEW

### 4.1 | Pre-2011 planning policy

Studies of planning in the South have established the role of non-state actors in planning processes (including non-governmental organisations [NGOs] and residents), that factional interests can be interwoven into seemingly democratic formal processes and that the line between informal and formal planning processes is blurred (see Watson, 2013). Old colonial laws and processes continue to be used and adapted in post-colonial planning practices (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003). These practices are shaping urban futures in the South, by creating the legal, material and social conditions for resource management and spatial interventions (Sandercock, 1998; Watson, 2006). However, many of these characteristics are not unique to the South (Avni & Yiftachel, 2015), nor are they the same in any two places. Following Bell and Jayne (2009), this paper contributes to a further contextualisation of urban planning processes and emerging urban futures by thinking from small urban areas in Lebanon.

There are two prominent framings of the urban realm, and urban planning, in Lebanon. The first is the Lebanese city as a 'divided' or 'contested' place made up of fragmented ethno-sectarian territories whose borders are negotiated through acts of physical violence (Fregonese, 2020), welfare and service provision for certain groups (Fawaz, 2009; Randa Nucho, 2011) and control over planning activities (Bou Akar, 2018). The second frames the Lebanese city as a product of neo-liberal planning logics. Scholars emphasize the role of the private sector in housing provision, the free market as provider of services and the role of property markets in shaping neighbourhoods (Bekdache, 2014; Fawaz, 2016; Fawaz et al., 2018; Fawaz, Harb, Nammour, et al., 2021), marking the 1990s as a moment of intensification of neo-liberal planning (Krijnen & Fawaz, 2010). The ethno-sectarian territorialisation of cities is facilitated by the state's neo-liberal approach to housing provision and under-delivery of public services, and ethno-sectarian party elites' wealth has been facilitated by territorialisation of space and services (Bou Akar, 2018; Leenders, 2012; Parreira, 2020). Planning theory about Lebanon is overwhelmingly focused on the capital city, Beirut. Trajectories of urban change in areas such as the Beqaa Valley look different from those of the capital, where there are often clear ethno-sectarian majorities. However, insights about national planning authorities, policies and planning approaches are relevant to smaller urban areas.

In Lebanon, the authority to create new planning policies and to implement planning decisions can be described as a hybrid authority with multiple, sometimes conflicting, planning approaches (see Fregonese, 2012). The hybrid planning authority in Lebanon is made up of different state institutions, political parties, private businesses, and local and international NGOs (Leenders, 2016; Parreira, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2018). Apart from the Ministry of State for Planning, all state institutions with planning remits were founded prior to 2011. This includes the Directorate General of Urban Planning (DGUP), the Higher Council of Urban Planning (HCUP), the Ministry of Public Works and Transportation, Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Agriculture and the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR).

Although there is a lack of clarity around the formal remits of the various planning authorities (UN-Habitat, 2013), there is a law from 1983 which describes the formal planning process (Public Works Studio, 2018b). The DGUP develops general master plans for the country and detailed plans for specific municipalities. The detailed plan is presented to the municipality, which is given a month to respond, and then it is presented



to the HCUP. The municipality is deemed to have accepted the plan if they do not respond. The draft is presented to the Council of Ministers (the executive body of Lebanon appointed by the president) to be ratified by decree. This final step is rarely completed within the legal time limit (3 years), which nullifies the plan. Whilst decisions have been made for highly populated areas of the country, 85% of land in Lebanon has only a partial plan or is covered by an unratified draft (Public Works Studio, 2018a). Bar Elias has a ratified plan, Majdal Anjar a partial plan (i.e., for a sub-municipal area) and Marj is unplanned (*ibid*).

Even in areas with ratified plans, municipalities have been systematically under-resourced and under-empowered to implement plans (Parreira, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2013). The Independent Municipal Fund distributed from the central government is insufficient and is allocated according to unofficial criteria, such as votes for political parties in central government (Parreira, 2020). Among the few revenue-raising activities municipalities are allowed to partake in, are the collection of construction permit taxes and rental fees (*ibid*). Infrastructural projects can enable private exploitation of land when well-connected individuals and politicians are able to stake a claim to project resources. Individuals in public office often have a stake in private businesses, which are contracted to deliver on infrastructural projects without oversight from accountability mechanisms (Boswall & Minkara, 2021; Leenders, 2016).

Ambiguities of planning authorities' remits, delays and suspensions of decisions, and the real value private owners and businessmen offer to municipalities, creates room for manoeuvre for those who know how to exploit it (Fawaz, 2016; Public Works Studio, 2018b). An approach to planning which incentivizes municipalities to enable private owners' exploitation of land, and explicitly welcomes the involvement of the private sector in infrastructural planning means that private landowners and private businesses have a legitimized role in shaping planning decisions.

## 4.2 | Municipalities in crisis response

The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) is the UN and GoL plan for responding to mass displacement from Syria and is updated annually. The LCRP has consistently named municipalities as key actors in responding to the changing needs of residents (Government of Lebanon & UN, 2020). The municipality identifies itself as being closer to residents than other state institutions, and therefore best placed to adjudicate on the claims of displaced Syrians and Lebanese residents, to maintain security (*ibid*: 16) and to communicate local priorities (*ibid*: 116). Municipalities have become focal points for new resources from international and local NGOs and foreign governments (Parreira, 2020: 143). Their current remit ranges from policing and security, livelihood-creation, service provision to ensuring access to education (UN & Government of Lebanon, 2021).

## 4.3 | Young people in crisis response

The GoL and international agencies have rarely been able to raise more than half of the projected costs for funding the crisis response (Government of Lebanon & UN, 2020: 9). The crises which beset long-term and recently displaced residents of Lebanon are protracted crises which show no sign of immediate improvement. International aid agencies have expressed concern that multiple crises have created a 'lost generation' within Lebanon: young Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinian and other migrant and refugee youth who have grown up without education, secure access to food, water or shelter, and who have low chances of finding work or being able to leave Lebanon (UNICEF & World Vision, 2018).

Young people are *de facto* included in municipalities' broad remits, and are affected by planning strategies and funding deficiencies described in previous sections. Their experiences are not necessarily the same as adults' and, as this paper argued earlier, ought to be considered in their own right. The following sections focus on the planning processes which shape urban change in Bar Elias, Marj and Majdal Anjar. They describe planning practices from the



perspective of adults with roles in infrastructure and local planning, and from the perspective of young Syrian and Lebanese residents.

## 5 | PLANNING IN PRACTICE

### 5.1 | Adults

Interviews were conducted with four adults who were working in planning in Lebanon, whose narratives about planning processes point towards important continuities between pre-2011 planning processes and crisis response planning. Of the four adult interviewees who had a planning role, there were two who worked in Bar Elias, Marj and Majdal Anjar, and two who worked on national policy.

One interviewee sat on a planning committee for one of the three municipalities. He described how NGOs arrived in the area with ‘projects at hand’ (projects which they had already planned and wanted to implement) and hundreds of thousands of dollars to spend on them. The projects ranged from providing health care services to rehabilitating public sports facilities. The NGOs’ staff would tell the committee that ‘these projects wouldn’t have come if it weren’t for Syrians’. The interviewee said that the municipality’s decisions about which projects would be approved would be based on ‘which would have more corruption in it.’ He offered several examples where tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of dollars ‘vanished’ and the entire project took an extraordinary amount of time to implement. The municipal planning authority he describes is a hybrid authority which includes international NGOs, members of the municipality and the committee, whose role seemed wholly inconsequential. According to him, the municipality functions as a group of self-interested individuals who use their authority within local government to unilaterally decide where funds should be directed, and to siphon resources from projects.

An interviewee with expertise in infrastructure planning explained how the process of siphoning money from internationally funded projects works. ‘Everybody [any state department and UN agency] wants their share of the pie, even if the share of the pie is building an export centre, getting the money from their employees, [...] and then closing it’. The point of the project is not the export centre, he explained, but ‘getting money for their employees’ by claiming to have a legitimate role in the project and then employing or contracting those you have a connection with. This connection might be with a family member or a member of your political party, but it might also be your own business (see Boswall & Minkara, 2021; Leenders, 2016). In Lebanon, ‘big companies [...] don’t need support from the state, they are the state anyway’. His statement echoes academic and activist literature which describe the connection between public office and private businesses, lack of accountability and corruption (*ibid*). According to this interviewee, the private sector, which plays a legitimated role in Lebanon’s urban planning system (Leenders, 2016), functions as a means of siphoning resources from projects.

When planning processes fail to meet residents’ needs and to properly deliver shared infrastructures for non-elite residents, residents develop their own strategies which potentially contribute to the further degradation of shared assets. An expert in national water policy discussed a major loan from the World Bank to improve wastewater treatment facilities and address pollution in the Litani River. She explained that the loan project was doomed to fail, because the electricity supply needed to run wastewater treatment plants was not available, so ‘[municipalities and industries] just diverted it somewhere [other than the Litani River]’. She described how farmers in the Beqaa were unable to access clean water, and use the still polluted water from the Litani, as well as tap into wastewater networks and groundwater, in spite of official circulars prohibiting these actions. Tapping into these water sources is not only unhealthy but contributes to the reduction of clean water available (International Water Management Institute, 2017). Failure to address a fundamental weakness in the infrastructural system because of poor resource planning led to wastage of public funds, and to farmers adopting unsustainable strategies to maintain their livelihoods.



## 5.2 | Young Syrians

Four young Syrians in their late teens – Amer, Amin, Mohammed and Dahlia<sup>2</sup> – moved to Lebanon around the age of 14. They had all moved between repurposed buildings, relatives' homes and small apartments within the first few months of arriving. Amer shared his story of having to move three times within a few months of arriving in Bar Elias before the family found a one-bedroom home, where the rent was 'back-breaking'. Dahlia chimed in that 'this is Bar Elias's problem, because it doesn't have a job, it doesn't have a job that would secure your life in the level that you need'. Amin expanded on this: 'Bar Elias doesn't hold any properties of a city'. According to these young people, Bar Elias doesn't offer people the employment opportunities so that they can afford the high rent.

They described how, although the area had become built up 'when the Syrians started to arrive', this did not solve the issue of housing insecurity:

Interviewer: All of you suffered in terms of housing when you first arrived at Lebanon?

Amer: A lot.

Mohammed: The housing was so ...

Dahlia: The atmosphere we're used to isn't like that of the villages and 'the random ones' [...] All of us were raised in cities, and even villages [in Syria] were more like cities.

Amin: This [area] isn't considered anything.

*\*Dahlia laughs\**

[...]

Interviewer: Nothing, and with some organization, nothing improved from when you first came?

Amer: No, the opposite, actually. It's worse.

Amin: The landowners would construct a building and just start renting it.

Amer: Whoever has a home or land, would destroy buildings and construct new ones, and no matter how much of the road they take, it doesn't matter to them.

For this group, the contribution of privately developed housing to housing stock does not alleviate their housing insecurity. Instead, private development undermines the general development of the area. The young Syrians illustrate a symmetry between how the area is developing, the short-term opportunism of Lebanese landowners looking to make a quick buck and Syrian refugees' need to avoid homelessness. Moreover, the private landowner is an authority whose actions are not reprimanded by the municipality. Public goods such as the road are 'taken', and the municipality does not protect them or provide an alternative.

Expanding on this theme, the young Syrians describe the power structures they see in the arrangements of the built environment:

Amer: The buildings are built randomly, to the point where a landowner can say "I own this piece of land" and when a road is planned to be paved, the municipality can't [do it] because someone [owns the] land and wants to construct a building. He does that and he starts renting it. [*Mockingly*] "I'd get \$1000 per month".

Interviewer: Who would hold them accountable for this?

Amer: Who would hold them to account?

Amin: Who would hold them account them here? Mafias? [...]

*\*Dahlia laughs\**





Amer: They would pull out their weapons.

Amin: They'd kill a person like it was normal and put their heads to sleep. Mafias.

According to this group, individualistic opportunism is only curtailed by more powerful individuals. Amin signals the existence of a power structure in Bar Elias which can be known through the mundane arrangements and rearrangements of the built environment, as well as through dramatic stories of violent and remorseless killing. The only authority in the building development processes they describe here are individuals with differing abilities to wield power to claim a private right to land, and the municipality is rendered powerless in the face of these claims.

### 5.3 | Young Lebanese

Whilst they do not share the same experiences of forced displacement as the Syrians, young Lebanese people are affected by the same planning practices. Hyat, a young Lebanese woman in her mid-adolescence, had been living in Marj her entire life. When asked what changes she had observed in the local area, she said:

'Everything has evolved concerning houses. Everything in this town has changed. How can I say it? Old fields are houses now. They created a new district. Do you recall the place where we walked you yesterday? There wasn't that number of buildings previously. There are a lot of buildings, some are not even finished yet'.

The agricultural lands for which the Beqaa is known have become new urban districts within Hyat's living memory. The buildings which Hyat notices are not sub-standard homes rented to displaced people, such as those the Syrians described. When prompted to talk more about the kinds of buildings she has noticed, Hyat says that 'people are evolving here in El Marj, and want to do things better, they tend to imitate each other'. Hyat has noticed that larger, modern homes are being built in the area, and are stoking neighbourhood aspirations. Hyat has recently started sleeping in a separate room from her brother, which she says is partly because of 'growing up' but also because 'modernity was spread' and neighbours started to divide up their homes.

Although Hyat's family home has been sub-divided and extended, the houses which Hyat describes as having raised local aspirations are not affordable for her. She has recently become engaged, but her fiancé cannot afford to rent or purchase a home, and her parents' financial situation is 'even worse' than his. Abdul, Hyat's 22-year-old neighbour, offers an explanation for why many local residents cannot afford new houses. He said that the government 'has never supported' residents who worked in agriculture, which is one of the dominant industries in the area (Al Ayoubi, 2018). He described the massive losses his family and neighbours had experienced as water supplies became too contaminated for agricultural use. He explains that 'we draw water from Anjar (a town next to Majdal Anjar), our stake was reduced from 70% to 15%, [and the water is] contaminated water, saturated with sewage and factories' waste. Farmers were forced to drill boreholes in order to secure clean water [avoiding] imposed controls and causing low agricultural turnout', echoing the statements from the water policy expert described earlier. Abdul describes how the gradual destruction of the natural assets which made the Beqaa Valley an agricultural hub has not only been permitted by local government, but how farmers are punished with restrictions on drawing clean water. The result, Abdul says, is that 'people are starving'.

Abdul and Hyat's narratives describe a landscape of growing inequality between Lebanese residents. The government has 'never supported' those who rely on the maintenance of public infrastructures to secure a livelihood. Meanwhile, those who are able to continue to extract wealth are building extravagant villas in the neighbourhood: an ostentatious sign of wealth in a place where people are struggling to feed themselves. The event of Syrians' displacement was notably absent from their narratives. Instead, well-established practices of abandonment and restrictions imposed by government, and private sector-led development, contribute to material conditions of inequality in the town.



## 6 | DISCUSSION

The displacement of approximately 1.5 million people from Syria into Lebanon has been cited as the cause of infrastructural degradation and increasing poverty. It catalysed the LCRP, in which displacement is framed as a crisis, and relations between Syrians and Lebanese are seen to be precarious and a threat to security. Municipalities are given a central role in the response to the crisis and the perceived threat to security.

In their narratives about urban change, young people point to how planning processes have created the conditions of inequality and underdevelopment which affect their lives. Young Syrians' lived experience of displacement is different from young Lebanese, and the challenges they face are often specific to their status as displaced people, particularly with regards to work, education and mobility (Nagi et al., 2021). However, young Syrians and Lebanese residents both refer to material conditions of inequality between residents, and to their abandonment by local planning authorities. The only crisis response strategy mentioned by these young people was an increase in housing construction, which seemed to principally benefit building owners. Although the Jordanian and Turkish state have responded to housing needs with formal shelters, the same private sector-led housing provision is evident in smaller towns such as Zaatari Village (Jordan) and Kilis (Turkey), where rents have increased in response to increase demand from displaced Syrians, and are placing unbearable financial pressures on local residents (Erdem, 2019; Reed, 2013). Evidently, crisis response planning has not alleviated pre-existing failings of government to fairly distribute or protect resources.

The LCRP policy document names municipalities as key decision makers in arbitrating claims to resources made by different communities, who are defined by nationality. From the perspective of young residents and adult experts, recognition of Syrian and Lebanese residents' claims to resources is principally made on the basis of private property ownership rather than nationality. Private property owners are able to negotiate with public authorities by claiming a right to develop property on their land. This could be beneficial to renters who need shelter and cannot afford to purchase property themselves. However, young Lebanese and Syrians point out that this approach principally benefits the owner, contributes to the 'random' development of the area, and is detrimental to other kinds of use such as agriculture or the development of shared infrastructures. Moreover, interviews with young residents have shown that municipalities are seen as relatively absent in the violent exchanges between residents, that they are neglectful of residents' shared needs, and that they attend or bend to private owners' desires. They discuss a common experience of inequality where residents are divided on the basis of individual wealth and property.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

This paper has assessed planning processes in three towns in Lebanon, through interviews with adults with planning roles, and young Syrian and Lebanese residents. Young residents' experiences of urban change signal the role of planning practice in producing inequitable outcomes among residents. Expert interviews and planning policy literature have shown how planning policy and practice enable private accumulation of wealth by incentivising municipalities to allow private exploitation of land and inviting private businesses as key stakeholders in planning. These suggest that pre-2011 policy and planning practice has set the stage for further wealth accumulation during the 'refugee crisis'. Young Syrian and Lebanese residents' common experiences also point to what crisis response planning has obscured: the inequitable planning processes which are common sources of struggle for Lebanese and Syrian residents, and which partially determine the outcomes of crisis planning.

This paper reminds policy makers working in crisis response in urban settings to consider how established inequitable planning processes might shape the outcomes of well-intended programmes. Policy makers must avoid contributing to the existing private wealth of property owners with humanitarian aid. They can do this by establishing accountability mechanisms which include sub-contracting arrangements to private businesses and non-profit organisations and supporting the delivery of public assets. Whilst municipalities have been shown to be



distrusted, it has also been shown that their funding is insufficient and they are not empowered to act strategically. Policy makers ought to ensure that municipalities are financed properly and supported to develop and realize strategic plans for their area, which meet the needs of non-elite residents. This will likely require a change in planning policy which allows municipalities to develop their own plans, which does not incentivize private development at the expense of public service delivery and which embeds transparency and participation of non-elite residents.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This study was interrupted by the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020. Sample sizes from the 2020 study are therefore limited. To address this limitation, this paper draws on the research of others, and builds on findings from previous studies conducted in 2016 and 2019, with adolescents and adults living in Bar Elias, Marj and Majdal Anjar (Hamadallah et al., 2019; Nagi et al., 2021; Sender et al., 2022).

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms

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## APPENDIX A

TABLE 1 Participants' details

AGE	GENDER	HOMETOWN	YEAR ARRIVED IN BEQAA	OCCUPATION
17	Male	Homs, Syria	2012	No occupation
16	Male	Aleppo, Syria	2014	No occupation
16	Male	Raqaa, Syria	2013	Occasional labourer
18	Male	Deir al Zour, Syria	2013	Occasional labourer
16	Female	Jarahieh, Beqaa	Since birth	Shop worker
22	Male	Jarahieh, Beqaa	Since birth	In education
15	Female	Jarahieh, Beqaa	Since birth	No occupation
19	Female	Syria (missing home town information)	2011	Housewife
17	Female	Reef Damascus, Syria	2018	Housewife
15	Male	Homs, Syria	2014	In education
18	Male	Damascus, Syria	2013	Recently finished education
18	Male	Damascus, Syria	2015	Recently finished education
18	Male	Damascus, Syria	2013	Recently finished education
18	Female	Damascus, Syria	2015	In education
19	Male	Aleppo, Syria	2013	Occasional labourer
19	Male	Aleppo, Syria	2013	Occasional labourer
18	Male	Reef Damascus, Syria	2018	In education
18	Female	Bar Elias, Beqaa	Since birth	No occupation
Adult	Female	Damascus, Syria	2017	Seamstress
Adult	Female	Reef Damascus, Syria	2018	Housewife
Adult	Female	Bar Elias, Beqaa	Since birth	Housewife
Adult	Male	Homs, Syria	2011	Occasional labourer
Adult	Male	Jarahieh, Beqaa	Since birth	Agricultural trader
Adult	Male			Municipal committee member
Adult	Female			Water policy expert
Adult	Male			Agricultural policy expert
Adult	Male			Humanitarian worker



**Resumen.** Este artículo evalúa los procesos de planificación que dan forma al cambio urbano en el valle de la Beqaa (Libano), desde la perspectiva de los adultos que trabajan en la planificación y de los jóvenes residentes. A partir del estallido de la guerra civil siria en 2011, las ciudades de Bar Elias, Marj y Majdal Anjar han crecido rápidamente, debido a que decenas de miles de personas han acabado desplazadas allí. Las experiencias de los jóvenes sirios y libaneses que viven allí sobre el cambio urbano señalan el papel que desempeñan los procesos de planificación en un cambio urbano desigual. La desigualdad en el cambio urbano afecta negativamente tanto a los residentes libaneses como a los sirios. Las políticas de planificación posteriores a 2011 que abordan la crisis de los refugiados sirios no abordan eficazmente los procesos de planificación que crean y permiten las desigualdades. Se corre el riesgo de ensombrecer esta fuente de luchas comunes y de exacerbar las desigualdades.

**抄録:** 本稿では、レバノンのベカー高原(Beqaa Valley)における都市変化を左右する計画過程を、計画に従事する成人と若い住民の観点から評価する。2011年のシリア内戦勃発を契機に、何万人もの人々がシリアから退避したため、バルエリアス、マルジュ、マジダル・アンジャルの町は急速に成長した。若いシリア人とレバノン人住民の都市変化の実体験は、不公平を生じる都市変化における計画過程の役割を指摘している。不公平を生じる都市変化は、シリア人だけでなくレバノン人の住人にも悪影響を与える。シリア難民危機に対処するための2011年以降の計画政策は、不公平を生み出す、かつそれを許す計画過程に対処できていない。こうした過程は、共通の課題の根本的な原因を漠然とさせ、不公平をさらに悪化させる危険を孕んでいる。