**Submission to the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty - Visit to Lebanon -November 2021**

**Comments by Ruwad alHoukouk FR**

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Ruwad alHoukouk FR (FRH) is a Lebanese NGO that advocates for the protection and rights of vulnerable groups in Lebanon, namely stateless persons, refugees and asylum seekers, and migrant workers. FRH provides legal assistance and legal representation before relevant officials leading to submission court cases before religious and civil courts on matters related to civil events registration and acquisition of nationality; it conducts advocacy activities that include dialogues with the relevant authorities on matters related to improvement of protection and access to rights to vulnerable and marginalized population; it conduct research and publishes action oriented papers such as policy papers, legal studies.it addresses the need for law reforms and drafts law projects to improve existing laws that are archaic and contain many gaps; it produces and distributes widely material for raising awareness including booklets/fliers on KNOW YOUR RIGHTS, it organizes workshops with all relevant stakeholders on specific topics. It provides specific and tailored trainings to relevant stakeholders (lawyers, mid-wives, civil servants, school directors…) on how to identify the needs and follow-up of the targeted population.

FRH is happy to submit comments to the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, mainly to highlight the plight and poverty of an invisible and poorest population in Lebanon - the stateless population.

You may publish all this submission.

1. **The major challenges confronting Stateless population in Lebanon**

Poverty in Lebanon existed for many years at the national level due to structural inequality, laissez-faire neo-liberalism economy, inadequate social security and tax system, monetary and financial system, , high level of corruption in the public and private sectors, non-accountability and lack of public funding transparency,

Poverty has increased drastically since the financial crisis that started with the collapse of the banking system in 2019 accompanied with lockdown due to Covid19 pandemic.

According to the Lebanese Central Administration of Statistics, the Consumer Price Index, which gives an overview about the evolution of goods and services' prices consumed by households, revealed that Lebanon's monthly inflation rate soared from 89.7% in June 2020 to reach a dramatic level of 137.75% in August 2021.[[1]](#footnote-1) Because of the inflation, the drastic drop of the Lebanese pounds value, the illegal capital control and haircuts, the shortage of fuel, electricity cuts, and lockdowns, many businesses were shut down leading to a higher unemployment rate that reached 6.6% in June 2021.[[2]](#footnote-2)

According to reports by international Agencies, poverty in Lebanon has drastically increased over the past year and now affects about 74% of the population, warned the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) on 3 September 2021. It stated that 82% of the population lives in multidimensional poverty.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It should be stressed that these figures most likely do not include stateless persons, as they are not included in any surveys or mappings.

The financial crisis has affected the middle to poor classes and severely the stateless population.

The stateless population in Lebanon live in multidimensional poverty. They lack the most fundamental right to nationality. They are not recorded in any official records.

Thus, by the law, they are invisible and do not benefit from any socio-economic laws and policies nor have the right to own property or businesses. Stateless persons are not included in any socio economic studies and assessments of the official Central Bureau of Statistics, and there are no systematic nationwide assessments of their living conditions. Informal assessments by civil society organizations and the casework with stateless persons show that stateless persons have low education levels, low levels and unstable income which is not enough to meet basic personal needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, let alone education, and secondary health care, lack of access to secondary health care. They live in very remote underdeveloped regions that suffer from the lack of basic municipality services and public utilities, some still live in tents, sometimes many families live in one household. As such, they meet all the criteria and dimensions of extreme poverty. There is no doubt that the legal status of this population contributes to their poverty.

The exact number of stateless persons is unknown. There is no official statistic. They are estimated their number to be between 50 to 60 thousands. This figure excludes stateless refugees and unregistered children of migrant workers, the Palestinian stateless refugees, and abandoned unregistered children of unknown parents.

The stateless population is not homogeneous. They are dispersed in all regions of Lebanon but highly concentrated in Mt Lebanon, the North and Akkar, Bekaa, and Baalbeck-Hermel. The majority belong to one confessional Muslim group.

1. **The impacts of poverty on economic, social and cultural rights of Stateless population**

* **The Right to Access Public Health Care**

The Lebanese Public Health laws includes stateless persons to obtain primary health care. On the other hand, public coverage of hospitalization cost is not automatic. It is limited and obtained through a tedious authorization procedure on case by case by the Minister of Public Health. Stateless persons ignore such rights and in practice do not access them. Private medical sector is extremely expensive and is beyond the means of stateless persons. Many live with their health problems unattended.

* **The Right to Education**

Stateless persons have automatic right to access public schools. However, they have an *ad hoc* access to these schools following decisions by the Ministry of Education. The enrollment in schools has slowly increaed in recent years. However, the enrolment level is relatively small.

Since, Covid 19 pandemic in 2019 and the drastic deterioration of the security situation in the country, the ability to attend schools has faced drastic challenges for the stateless persons mainly because they are not nor are able to afford the cost – due to extremely rising prices - of equipments needed and internet cost to follow online courses. For the schools that continued to give some courses in schools, the rising costs of books and school furniture and transportation to schools were faced, not to mention the electricity long hours cuts per day and the high cost of parallel energy systems and generators, was another hindrance for online or schooling. Both were at risk.

* **The Right to Work**

Stateless persons have no legal existence, consequently no legal documentation needed to access the formal labor market and the social security. They usually work in daily or seasonal low-income generating jobs. They are exploited by their employers who pay them less than the already low paid co-workers. They have no access to benefits and allowances, and do not enjoy the protection of the labor law or that of the labor courts. Since their income is low, on ad hoc daily basis, they lack the possibility to exit poverty. Their lack of access to basic and fundamental rights keeps them in poverty.

* **Civil and political rights**

Stateless persons do not possess official identity document to proof their legal status. Thus they are denied civil, political rights. They have limited mobility and do not enjoy freedom of movement, although in practice checkpoints disregard their lack of documentation. They cannot participate in any local, regional or national elections. They cannot join trade unions.

# Impact of Covid19

In the first quarter of 2020 the Government of Lebanon announced a state of general mobilization and medical emergency and a national lockdown: it called for all citizens to stay at home, ordered closure of public spaces, restaurants, shopping areas, and other non-essential, private and public institutions, causing many people to lose their daily income. These extreme measures and developments had the potential to wreak havoc on the economy which was already suffering a steep recession and a financial crisis.

For stateless persons and other marginalized groups in Lebanon, the implications of lockdowns were further exacerbated. These persons are usually daily wage earners or self-employed in small labor jobs, and have no fixed salaries.

In addition, the risk of spreading the virus in the stateless community remains high. The type of support and prevention needed by this marginalized community is high and remained unaddressed. They had no access to hygiene and prevention kits when distributed by local authorities, and have no means to provide these by themselves, given the high cost thereof.

# Lebanese government actions to combat poverty

Following the economic and financial crisis in October 2019 the socio-economic repercussions of COVID-19 and the anticipated soaring poverty rates in 2020, the Lebanese government announced the distribution of food and hygiene packages to household identified by the National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP). The government decided to scale up the NPTP to $452 million, which fully funded by a World Bank loan for Lebanese nationals only. The total number of families benefiting is minimal, around 5000.

Stateless persons are not included in the scheme. Stateless spouse and children born to Lebanese father are not counted as family members when it comes to food cards and have no access to the other services available to their siblings and other family members.

To date, NPTP remains the only functioning governmental anti-poverty response, in a country marred by soaring inequality. On 30 June 2021, a law was passed, to grant a ration card to Lebanese poor families. This card is envisaged as a replacement for the “support” policy implemented until recently, whereby the government contributes - using the money of all taxpayers including the most poor - to the cost of basic needs such as bread, fuel and medicines. The implementing regulations of the new law are not finalized yet. However, it is limited exclusively to Lebanese families and excludes non-Lebanese and stateless persons.

As part of the response action plan, the Government provided a stipend of approximately 200$ for the children enrolled in the public schools. However, this included only children of Lebanese nationality, and excluded the Syrian refugees and stateless individuals.

The social and economic policies adopted by the Lebanese government to date suffer from many shortcomings and were unable to address poverty:

* The NPTP budget cannot support economic growth, transform the life chances of the poor, increase their assets, or enhance their income-generating capacity and their ability to exit poverty.
* There are no updated mappings of poverty.
* The services do not cover all the basic needs.
* The poverty line needs to be recalculated with the drastic drop of the Lebanese pound value
* The support is ad-hoc
* Does not address the social and economic structures that reproduce poverty.
* Poor families tend to be large, while the NPTP limits the food and cash assistance to 6 members only. As mentioned above, it covers only the registered children discriminating between siblings and not providing for all the poor members of the families.
* The “support” policy aimed to support the poor was a blind one, benefiting rich and poor equally.

# Recommendations to Lebanese Government to combat poverty

The State should consider all the population segments in its social and economic programming, especially the most vulnerable persons such as the stateless.

* Addressing the structural reasons behind durable inequality.
* Developing effective universal social protection schemes.
* Adopting transparent sustainable public policies to address root causes of poverty and encouraging income generation activities.
* Ending corruption so that public funds and taxes may be used to build social programs that combat poverty and inequality.
* Adopting fair and ascended taxation universal system
* Enacting capital control legislation to make the richest 10 per cent in Lebanon, who hold nearly $91 billion of wealth, to fund the gap for poverty eradication by making annual contributions of 1% of their net wealth.
* Submitting regular fiscal and monetary reports annually in order to prioritize the expenses and program social assistance and poverty eradication programs.
* Adopting radical structural changes including labour market changes; the reduction of elite control of productive assets and the universal free provision of basic services including health, education, public transport and water sanitation.

1. <http://www.cas.gov.lb/images/PDFs/CPI/2020/9-CPI_September_2020.xlsx> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=LB> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099102> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)