



ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS SERIES

# LEBANON'S CLIMATE ACTORS

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Photo cover: People battle a forest fire near Meshref in Lebanon's Shouf mountains on 15 October 2019, as flames, fueled by heat and strong winds, spread across parts of Lebanon and Syria.

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## **About the Authors**

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## Introduction

Due to its geographic location and socio-political landscape, Lebanon is particularly vulnerable to climate change and is already experiencing its impact. Increasing temperatures, declining rainfall, and prolonged droughts and heatwaves are degrading the country's natural resources and people's health and livelihood. Further exacerbating the country's vulnerability to climate change are rapid urbanization, political instability, fragmented governance, war, and ongoing economic and financial crisis – all of which hinder effective adaptation and mitigation strategies.

To confront these challenges, and in an attempt to fill the gaps left by governmental inaction, Lebanese civil society organizations (CSOs) and activists are increasingly engaging with climate governance. Based on interviews with 16 of the main CSO actors involved in climate activism and advocacy in Lebanon, this brief delineates the landscape of climate activism identifying the actors involved, their demands, the challenges they face, their policy impact to date, and opportunities for progress.

## What is Climate Justice?

Climate justice extends beyond localized environmental harms to address the local, global, and systemic inequities associated with climate change. It highlights the unequal burden of climate-related disasters on marginalized communities and stresses the historical responsibility of wealthy, industrialized nations that have contributed the most to greenhouse gas emissions and therefore owe a “climate debt” to developing countries. Climate justice reframes climate action beyond technical fixes to reduce emissions, towards systemic change centered on human rights, social equity, and the inclusion of the most affected communities in decision-making.

The rise of climate activism in Lebanon coincided with the global rise in awareness and funding around climate, tracking conferences such as the Rio Summit in 1992 – which marked a turning point in global environmental policy, with the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – the Copenhagen conference in 2009, the Paris Agreement in 2015, and the subsequent Conference of Parties (COP) meetings. Held in the Arab region, the two most recent COPs (Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, and Dubai, United Arab Emirates) have especially propelled climate change to the forefront of Lebanese CSOs' activities.

Over the past decade, the increasing visibility of climate change as a global issue also brought a surge in funding opportunities which prompted many CSOs, whether previously focused on climate change or not, to integrate climate-related activities into their agendas. While this has driven and accelerated the growth of climate movements in Lebanon as well as enhanced their capacity in this area, it has also led to CSOs engaging in projects without the necessary expertise or interest to succeed, motivated by potential funding. As such, the evolution of climate activism in Lebanon can be described as donor-driven rather than following a bottom-up or top-down logic.

At the same time, however, climate activism in Lebanon – like environmental activism more broadly – is increasingly framed as an extension of broader social justice struggles, such as the 2019 uprising against corruption and governance failures.

## Who Are the Key Climate Actors in Lebanon?

While there is no shortage of environmental advocacy and campaigns in Lebanon, it is harder to identify a national climate movement focused solely on climate activism. CSOs remain focused on environmentalism rather than climate activism, with most Lebanese NGOs incorporating climate change as an additionality to their environmental activities. For example, the Lebanese Red Cross and International Red Cross (ICRC) have been working on climate action as well as Lebanese Oil and Gas Initiative (LOGI), an oil and gas organization, which has been linking its work to climate change by transitioning to renewable energy. The NGO IndyACT was among the first to work exclusively on climate change, participating heavily in climate negotiations and climate policy and advocacy in Lebanon and the region. However, while its work has been important in this sector, scandals and internal issues within the organization have halted and overshadowed its work. Other organizations that have incorporated climate into their activities work on reforestation (Lebanese Reforestation Initiative), mobility (Rider's Rights), seaside protections (Diaries of the Ocean), or food sovereignty (Jibal). YOUNGO, a central organization for all youth-led initiatives on climate action, and its local conference of youth, UNICEF's LCOY, provide a space for youth to discuss and vocalize their demands at a national and international level. Through the Fridays for the Future movement, youth have successfully utilized social media platforms to popularize climate issues.

Other local actors included **research and academic institutions**, which among other work, have highlighted the downsides of controversial policies and projects, such as the Issam Fares Institute (IFI) and the Nature Conservation Center (NCC) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), Legal Agenda, Public Works Studio, the Policy Initiative (TPI) and the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI). Independent media organizations like Daraj, Megaphone, Beirut Today, and Raseef22, and well-known individual journalists like Habib Maalouf, have produced discourse linking climate change to local political and socioeconomic issues.

Lebanon's climate actors are also engaged in **regional climate networks**, most prominently

the Arab Network for Climate Change, the Climate Action Network (CAN) Arab World, and the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND). Given that Lebanon shares some environmental challenges with other countries in the region, these coalitions provide opportunities for collaboration and joint advocacy. Greenpeace and Roots' annual Climate Justice Camp has become a key event for youth from across the Global South to co-create, co-strategize, and build networks. Other regional youth alliances are also emerging such as "Forsa Khadra" (Green Opportunities), Arab Youth Sustainable Development Network, Arab Youth Climate Movement, Arab Youth Centre, and ChangeMakers Exchange.

Yet, more than local or regional actors, international organizations and foreign funders are the main actors leading climate action and activities in the country. Organizations such as Greenpeace, the European Union, USAID, UN agencies (UNDP, UNICEF), embassies, and development agencies (AFD, GIZ) are behind many of the projects offering financial and technical expertise.

## What Do Climate Actors Want?

Compared to environmentalist demands, climate-specific demands are less prominent in Lebanon. As one activist puts it, "To some extent, [climate advocacy] is quite superficial. I don't know how much the concept and the idea of moving away from fossil fuel completely is something that these groups are pushing for, especially in the Lebanese context where we're struggling so much to secure electricity". Indeed, Lebanon's continuous socio-political and economic instability pushes citizens and civil society to tackle more immediate and tangible threats and needs rather than focusing on long-term systemic change. Moreover, CSOs have focused more on raising awareness about climate change rather than articulating actionable, context-specific demands.

Nonetheless, CSOs have made climate-specific demands, namely in advocating for the Lebanese state to adopt the Paris Agreement and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and to mainstream climate action into national policy. Climate activists also argue that climate change must be treated as a political subject and integrated into national debates to address its impacts effectively – particularly from

an adaptation perspective given that Lebanon is a small contributor to emissions and greenhouse gasses.

At the international level, aligning with global climate justice principles, Lebanese activists emphasize the historical accountability of high-emitting nations for climate change, calling for unconditional reparations in the form of financial support, technology transfer, and capacity-building. They argue that climate justice requires systemic reforms, including tackling political corruption, economic mismanagement, and unequal resource distribution. Lebanese CSOs also advocate for global recognition of climate refugees and greater support for vulnerable populations.

The alignment of climate change demands with those of the G77+China shows the reliance on global frameworks and coalitions – which can empower and enhance the legitimacy of Lebanese CSO's advocacy but can also undermine their ability for more localized demands and approaches that reflect national contexts and needs.

At the governmental level, the state of Lebanon advocates for the following climate priorities in international frameworks:

**Climate Finance and Loss & Damage:** Lebanon advocates for increased international climate finance, particularly through mechanisms like the Green Climate Fund and the Loss and Damage Fund. Given its economic crisis, Lebanon seeks financial support to address the economic and environmental costs of climate change.

**Renewable Energy and Energy Transition:** Lebanon emphasizes the need for international support to scale up renewable energy projects, such as solar and wind power, and reduce its dependence on fossil fuels.

**Adaptation and Resilience:** As a country highly vulnerable to climate impacts, Lebanon prioritizes adaptation measures in sectors like agriculture, water management, and coastal protection.

**Climate-Induced Migration and Socioeconomic Justice:** Lebanon's role as a host country for refugees adds urgency to discussions on climate-induced displacement and migration.

**Strengthening Regional Collaboration:** Lebanon participates in regional initiatives, such as the Union for the Mediterranean's climate programs, to promote collaboration and knowledge-sharing on climate action.

More recently, Lebanon accused Israel of ecocide at COP28, using this platform to bring attention to the environmental damages caused by Israeli military actions and emphasizing the need for global recognition of these acts as ecocide. This moment emphasizes the intersection of climate justice, human rights, and accountability for environmental crimes on the global stage.

## What Are the Challenges to Climate Action?

The ongoing political instability and compounding crises in Lebanon are a major challenge and constitute an obstacle to effective change, often sidelining climate change concerns for more pressing issues. In terms of **governance**, the main challenges perceived by climate actors deal with Lebanon's fragmented political landscape, corruption, and weak governmental institutions that lack the capacity to deal with climate action. The lack of a unified national strategy also obstructs climate policymaking and implementation and impacts CSOs' ability to influence decision-making processes. Corruption within government institutions and inside some CSOs leads to challenges in securing funds, projects being sidelined, or funds being misused for personal or political gains. CSOs' dependency on patron-client relations with political elites has made them susceptible to political manipulation which undermines the credibility and effectiveness of their work especially in terms of systemic and long-term climate action.

Without the institutionalization of climate policies, the effectiveness of CSO advocacy is contingent on the personal political will of ministers, which obstructs the sustainability and continuity of projects. In addition, Lebanon's Ministry of Environment (MoE) lacks the financial and capacity resources and does not coordinate sufficiently with other ministries, which makes large-scale implementation of adaptation and mitigation efforts impossible. It is also important to note that the main climate unit in the MoE is headed by UNDP. While this is unusual and reflects governance issues, the capabilities and knowledge of the ministerial technical team have shown great promise in terms of climate-related efforts. The unit has played a role in increasing the collaboration between the ministry and CSOs,

especially youth (youth council + LCOY committee). They have also taken part in negotiations, identified the priorities and vulnerabilities of Lebanon, and recently created a task force involving CSOs from different sectors, hoping to create a strong network and build on these efforts for a national strategy on climate change.

**Resource constraints** are another hurdle to CSO effectiveness. Much of the funding for climate initiatives in Lebanon comes from international sources, which often impose structures and conditions that hinder systemic change. Historically, climate activism in Lebanon was largely self-funded by Arab civil society, as international donors initially doubted the ability of local actors to influence policy. Over time, this dynamic has shifted, with foreign funders – such as embassies, development agencies, and international organizations – becoming the primary sources of financial support for climate-related initiatives. This reliance limits the autonomy of local CSOs and perpetuates dependency on external aid. This donor dependency not only stifles innovation but also limits the ability of organizations to plan for long-term impact because funding cycles prioritize short-term projects. These dynamics force civil society organizations to tailor their projects to fit donor priorities rather than addressing the root causes of climate vulnerability in Lebanon. Smaller grassroots organizations face significant challenges in accessing funding compared to larger, well-established NGOs, creating imbalances within the climate movement and hindering the growth of inclusive, community-driven initiatives. With limited funding availability, CSOs also compete for limited resources rather than collaborate to tackle shared challenges.

The economic collapse has severely reduced the influx of funds, with many organizations struggling to maintain their operations due to currency devaluation and restricted access to foreign currency. Even the MoE, which previously provided small grants to CSOs, now relies entirely on foreign funding.

Despite these challenges, there are glimmers of hope. Initiatives like crowdfunding, private sector partnerships, and regional networks such as the Climate Action Network provide alternative funding avenues. Additionally, the announcement of a Green Fund/Climate Change Fund by the MoE signals a potential shift toward greater institutional support, though its implementation remains uncertain.

At the regional level, **political fragmentation and**

**economic instability** of many countries in the Middle East and North Africa complicate the establishment of long-term and effective regional coalitions. Climate coalitions have been focused on sub-regions rather than the region itself due to differences among Arab states. Moreover, variations in state involvement in climate governance impacts the ability to coordinate at the regional level. Coordinating efforts regarding climate action can be more challenging between countries where one government plays a direct role in climate action and policy (e.g., the United Arab Emirates) and another where civil society is driving climate engagement.

## Is There a Policy Impact?

While activists have raised awareness of environmental and climate issues, given the hurdles discussed in the previous section, translating this awareness into tangible policy changes remains a significant challenge. Climate actors highlight that many of the systemic problems activists have fought against in Lebanon, such as the lack of electricity, inadequate public transportation, and ineffective waste management systems, persist today. They also highlight that where there has been progress – such as the fact that Lebanon has even exceeded some of its NDC targets because of changes in the energy sector – the cause is not governmental action or civil society advocacy but rather individual and decentralized efforts in the form of solar panel installation.

However, there are instances where CSOs have been able to have a greater impact. For one, youth participation in political parties has proven crucial in pushing climate concerns into political discourse, pressuring political parties to adopt more climate-oriented policies, a move that some parties see as an attractive way to engage young voters.

The Paris Agreement in 2015 and the ensuing Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) marked a turning point, creating a space for collaboration between climate movements and government institutions and leading to greater engagement and consultation of civil societies through formal partnerships, participation in national climate plans, projects, and policy discussions. Yet, though they offer an advisory role for CSOs, these consultations do not necessarily entail active participation or

inclusion in decision-making processes and policy implementation.

CSO-government collaborations and CSO participation in international fora like the COP have depended on the ministers of the environment themselves – their knowledge, interest, and willingness to collaborate on the topic of climate change. “When there is this openness, there is a positive atmosphere for cooperation, but unfortunately this is not always the case and there are ministers who do not engage” (interviewee). The lack of institutionalization of climate change thus leads to dependence on individual commitment of ministers, which does not lead to sustainable, long-term policy impact. In certain instances, a particular minister can be beneficial to CSOs, such as former Environment Minister Nasser Yassin whom interviewees praised for his willingness to collaborate and facilitate their work. In 2015, only a handful of Lebanese civil society representatives attended COP21 in Paris. By COP28 in Dubai, over 100 individuals from academia and civil society were accredited by the Lebanese government, a significant achievement facilitated by Yassin.

The increasing number of civil society actors at COP reflects a growing recognition of the importance of civil society in climate negotiations. However, challenges remain, including limited funding opportunities and restricted access to negotiation rooms, which are often reserved for government delegations. Moreover, many CSOs must rely on party overflow badges, which require them to align with the government's perspective, limiting their ability to advocate independently. At COP27 in Egypt and COP28 in Dubai, access for NGOs was tightly controlled, reflecting a broader trend of repression of civil society. Overall, climate actors interviewed for this brief agreed that Lebanese CSOs' impact on shaping policy direction or decision-making remains minimal. The movement is still considered young, with many participants attending COPs primarily for networking or presenting their work, rather than engaging in substantive advocacy or lobbying.

At the governmental level, Lebanon's influence at COPs is constrained by its geopolitical weakness and limited negotiating power. As a small, economically struggling country, Lebanon often relies on regional alliances and international coalitions to amplify its voice. For example, participation in the Arab Group and G77 provides Lebanon with a platform to advocate for climate finance and adaptation support. However, these groups are often dominated by countries with conflicting interests, limiting Lebanon's ability to

push for progressive climate policies. Lebanon has made some progress, such as its observer role in the Loss and Damage Fund and its participation in the National Adaptation Plan committee, emphasizing the importance of climate adaptation finance.

The Lebanese delegation plays a critical role in shaping national and international climate policies at COPs. Comprising representatives from the Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Energy and Water, and other governmental bodies, the delegation participates in high-level negotiations, bilateral meetings, and regional discussions, such as those within the Arab Group and the G77. Lebanon's participation in these groups reflects its status as a vulnerable country demanding more ambitious climate action. The Lebanese delegation has demonstrated technical competence and diplomatic skill, particularly in distancing Lebanon from positions that do not align with its national interests. The delegation's core group, often supported by UNDP experts, has been praised for its ability to navigate complex negotiations.

However, the delegation's effectiveness is often hampered by domestic challenges, including political instability, economic crisis, and weak institutional coordination. Frequent changes in government and the Ministry of Environment, with new ministers appointed almost annually, have disrupted continuity, leading to inconsistent preparation and shifting demands for each COP. While the UNDP climate unit provides some stability, the absence of a clear, well-defined national strategy has left Lebanon's delegation without precise demands, relying instead on a broad vision of where the country aims to be. This fluidity can be leveraged strategically, but it also highlights the need for better coordination and capacity building within the delegation. The absence of a clear mandate from the central government further complicates negotiations, as delegates must navigate competing interests and priorities.

Additionally, the reliance on government-led negotiations often sidelines the perspectives of civil society organizations, despite their critical role in advocacy. While collaboration with the government ensures access to international platforms, it also raises concerns about the translation of policies into tangible climate action on the ground.

## What Can Be Done?

To improve implementation, the following priorities are identified:

### To the Lebanese government:

- Draft a national climate policy. In the absence of state policies and implementation measures, the role of civil society is limited to spreading awareness and trying to replace the government in doing projects themselves. CSOs role would be to support the success of these projects and contribute to achieving their objectives.
- Foster inter-agency and cross-sectoral dialogue among the multiple stakeholders including CSOs, the private sector, and the government as well as between ministries themselves to discuss priorities and needs, build trust, and develop true long-lasting partnerships. This also entails the identification of clear roles for each entity involved.
- Adopt a participatory approach between the government and civil society with the establishment of stakeholder forums for networking, collaboration, discussion, and division of labor.
- Facilitate access to resources for CSOs. If not possible on the financial level, facilitate access to land, space, permits, and in-kind or research support.
- Create a Green Climate fund to support joint climate-related projects.
- Promote decentralization efforts where municipalities take localized actions.

### To CSOs:

- Advocate for climate justice and demand from the government a just transition that includes the most vulnerable communities and ensures equitable access to resources.
- Push for accountability and transparency in governance, especially the independence of the judicial system.
- Focus on community-based adaptation efforts, highlighting the voices of local communities and supporting projects that can increase resilience

to climate effects.

- Develop a unified national strategy and coordinate priorities separate from donor-driven agendas.
- Forge strategic alliances with other national organizations, the private sector, and regional and international actors to advance climate goals. Regional dialogues can also lead CSOs to influence broader policy frameworks and advocate for coordinated climate action in the region.
- Create consortia to be able to access larger amounts of funding, reduce replication of work, and create greater impact.
- Invest in local knowledge production to document and analyze context-specific climate change effects and projections that reflect realities on the ground.
- Produce knowledge in Arabic that is accessible to the public.
- Deepen knowledge of climate change through training, awareness campaigns, and capacity building.
- Push for deeper dialogue with donors to better align priorities with actual needs instead of simply accepting funds and following directives.

### To donors:

- Forge stronger partnerships with grantees and trust the judgment of people on the ground who have firsthand insight into local challenges and opportunities.
- Diversify grants to include diverse types and sizes of organizations.
- Provide capacity building for proposal writing.
- Provide core funding for organizations to ensure sustainability.
- Increase transparency and availability of information about what projects are being done in Lebanon to reduce overlap in activities.



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