ENVIRONMENTALISM AND DISENCHANTMENT IN A DESTABILIZING WORLD: THE CASE OF LEBANON

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About the Author

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Contents

Introduction

This study interrogates environmentalism as a concept and contemporary practice in Lebanon by tracing how actors are positioned in relation to the Lebanese state when navigating change-making, abandonment, and the imperative of persistence. It understands environmentalism as emerging from socio-ecological transformation and as fundamentally different from environmentalization, which arises from reproductions within the current order—namely today's variations of neoliberal capitalism and the prevailing everyday mindset treating it as the most reasonable way to live.[1] Lebanon's current order is organized around a sectarian form of aggressive neoliberal capitalism—marked by puzzling tendencies such as championing free markets while selectively shaping them to serve entrenched power.[2] The study highlights how prefigurative politics—the enactment of desired futures by meeting everyday material needs for persistence—is emerging from Lebanon's political margins[3] and can give way to environmentalism.[4]

Even the most marginalized visions and practices trace back to broader entanglements—between states, current orders, and global environmental change. A systems perspective helps place what is happening in Lebanon within processes of reproduction through environmentalization or transformation from environmentalism. With the consolidation of power, states engage in feedback loops[5] with the current order they govern. Ultimately, these feedback loops either reproduce the current order or, at times, drive it toward fundamentally different configurations—all of which unfold within, and affect, the enabling and constraining parameters of the biophysical Earth system (i.e., the environment).[6] A specific current order, its surrounding environment, and the relationship between them (i.e., a socio-ecological system) can be studied at any geographic scale—regions, nation-states, and municipal communities being the most common—even though scales are fundamentally intertwined and constitute a global current order, environment, and socio-ecological system.[7] Scalar boundaries are, of course, not inherent but reflective of the user's purpose and perspective.[8]

Beyond the selection of scales, today's purpose, perspective, and socio-ecological systems are

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1   Arturo Escobar, Encountering Development: *The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton University Press, 2011.

2   Karim Makdisi, "Lebanon's October 2019 Uprising: From Solidarity to Division and Descent into the Known Unknown", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 120 No. 2, 2021 [Makdisi, 2021]; Kamal Dib, "Predator Neoliberalism", *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 13 No. 1, 2020 [Dib, 2021].

3   Political margins are understood as areas and groups historically deprived of influence over how power is organized or exercised. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

4   David Schlosberg and Luke Craven. "Sustainable Materialism", *Oxford University Press*, 2019 [Schlosberg & Craven, 2019]; Munira Khayyat, A Landscape of War: Ecologies of Resistance and Survival in South Lebanon, *University of California Press*, 2022 [Khayyat, 2022].

5   A feedback loop is an active process where the outputs of a system circle back and are used as inputs, forming a complex chain of cause and effect that influences the system's future behavior. Marco Scotti, Daniel Filipe Da Silva Pereira, and Antonio Bodini, "Understanding Social-Ecological Systems Using Loop Analysis", *Human Ecology Review*, Vol. 26 No. 2, 2020 [Da Silva et al., 2020].

6   John S. Dryzek, "The Politics of the Earth", *Oxford University Press,* 2021 [Dryzek, 2021]; Da Silva et al., 2020; Belinda Reyers et al., "Social-Ecological Systems Insights for Navigating the Dynamics of the Anthropocene", *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, Vol. 43 No. 1, 2018; Ulrich Brand, "How to Get Out of the Multiple Crisis? Contours of a Critical Theory of Social-Ecological Transformation", *Environmental Values*, Vol. 25 No. 5, 2016.

7   Katherine Richardson et al., "Earth Beyond Six of Nine Planetary Boundaries", *Science Advances*, Vol. 9 No. 37, 2023 [Richardson et al., 2023]; John W. Meyer et al., "World Society and the Nation-State", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 103 No. 1, 1997 [Meyer et al., 1997].

8   Sallie A. Marston, John Paul Jones II, & Keith Woodward, "Human Geography without Scale", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 30 No. 4, 2005; Roderick P. Neumann, "Political Ecology: Theorizing Scale", *Progress in Human Geography,* Vol. 33 No. 3, 2009.

primarily immersed in neoliberal capitalism. It presumes that natural resources are limitless or can be endlessly substituted and that, through technological innovation and manipulated market mechanisms posing as free, we will solve whatever the Earth system throws at us, keeping neoliberal capitalist structures intact and societies civilized.[9] The best available evidence challenges the logic of this global experiment—as scientists warn we have little margin for trial and error with a system that repeatedly demonstrates its inability to maintain planetary stability.[10] Nonetheless, as planetary destabilization (e.g., climate change, biodiversity collapse, and chemical pollution) becomes increasingly evident and directly experienced, policies, business models, institutions, armed forces, tourism destinations, show business, and a wide range of other domains and actors are engaging in environmentalization: a process of selectively using environmental evidence and critiques to construct identities and actions that ultimately reproduce neoliberal capitalism and one's role within it.[11]

On the other hand, planetary destabilization is engendering scholarship and practice around socio-ecological transformation, focusing on alternative futures.[12] Environmentalism is understood as diverse actions and processes that, regardless of their identifiers and foundations, create immediate and long-term socio-ecological transformations that could bring us within all nine life-supporting planetary boundaries.[13] Given the complexity, it remains uncertain which alternative social-ecological arrangements would steer the Earth system toward a safe operating space for civilization. Yet there is an actionable level of scientific consensus—grounded in biophysical thresholds—and a convergence of marginalized voices—rooted in lived experience and systemic abandonment—that, in Elizabeth Povinelli's terms, share the belief that it is "not this" current order.[14] That stance unsettles the rush for quick solutions that reproduce familiar harms and highlights the work of quiet persistence: slow, deliberate effort to stay present and leverage what is available, while refusing to let ideas about the current order harden into the only possible future.[15] This is not a revolutionary, anarchist, or sovereign Indigenous "no" to what the current order offers; it is an occupation of the open space between disenchantment and replacement.[16] Far from signaling absence, persisting in the in-between can give rise to imagination that challenges prevailing mindsets—i.e., it provides room for new, more autonomous and relevant imaginaries[17] to

9   Jeanne M. Bogert et al., "Reviewing the Relationship Between Neoliberal Societies and Nature: Implications of the Industrialized Dominant Social Paradigm for a Sustainable Future", *Ecology and Society*, Vol. 27 No. 2, 2022.

10   Nico Wunderling et al., "Climate Tipping Point Interactions and Cascades: A Review", *Earth System Dynamics*, Vol. 15 No. 1, 2024; Michael A. Long et al., "Neoliberalism, World-System Position, and Biodiversity Loss", *Sociology of Development*, Vol. 10 No. 3, 2024; Richardson et al., 2023; Johan Rockström et al., "Safe and Just Earth System Boundaries", *Nature*, Vol. 619 No. 7968, 2023 [Rockström et al., 2023].

11   David Ciplet and J. Timmons Roberts, "Climate Change and the Transition to Neoliberal Environmental Governance", *Global Environmental Change*, Vol. 46, September 2017; Bram Büscher et al., "Nature Inc.: Environmental Conservation in the Neoliberal Age", *University of Arizona Press*, 2019; Adrian Parr, "The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics", *Columbia University Press*, 2013.

12   Christoph Görg et al., "Challenges for Social-Ecological Transformations: Contributions from Social and Political Ecology", *Sustainability*, Vol. 9

No. 7, 2017; Viviana Asara et al., "Socially Sustainable Degrowth as a Social-ecological Transformation: Repoliticizing Sustainability", *Sustainability Science*, Vol. 10 No. 3, 2015; Michele-Lee Moore et al., "Studying the Complexity of Change: Toward an Analytical Framework for Understanding Deliberate Social-ecological Transformations", *Ecology and Society*, Vol. 19 No. 4, 2014.

13   Beyond climate, biodiversity, and pollution, the planetary boundary framework gives us a useful tool to conceptualize and quantify, in more totality, nine Earth system processes that enable a "safe operating space for humanity." It helps avoid the widespread dilemma of environmental trade-offs—where addressing one challenge can exacerbate another—by offering an integrated view of the Earth system. Richardson et al., 2023.

14   Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism*, Duke University Press, 2011 [Povinelli, 2011].

15   Povinelli, 2011.

16   Povinelli, 2011.

17   Imaginaries are understood as visions of desirable

breathe.[18] These imaginaries animate prefigurative politics, giving direction and meaning to efforts that can make alternative futures real.[19]

In stark contrast, environmentalization—unlike the deceptive misrepresentations typical of greenwashing—produces efforts that are likely genuine in intention, yet anxious, awkward, and constrained in their application, as they attempt to articulate a beneficial relationship to a destabilizing environment in deliberate or incidental alignment with the very order that is driving it. This process signals an inability or unwillingness to engage in the ontological and political questioning that environmentalism demands. Environmentalization often relies on dissociation and reality-splitting—used to preserve the logic of reinforcing the current order while attempting to care for the environment—or on an under-appreciation of socio-ecological systems.

In this context, the role of the state comes into focus, given that in change-making ecosystems, states are treated as the primary referent for shaping environmental conditions and determining what forms of action are considered relevant and acceptable.[20] The more actors center the state, the more its prosaic logic—i.e., its administrative rationale, economic rationale, and democratic pragmatism[21]—is likely to shape how they act and

condition what they consider normal and possible.[22] Centering the state during change-making can, whether deliberately or incidentally, reproduce the current order. However, literature highlights the potential of politically marginalized actors—who shoulder the brunt of planetary destabilization and interlinked social precarity—to imagine and enact alternative sociopolitical organizing toward environmentalism.[23] Their persistence—understood as efforts to meet everyday material needs and desires while expressing cultural life through relations with the surrounding environment—evolves to resist displacement and other forms of loss. Persistence positions the marginalized between disenchantment—with the state and the current order it upholds, when necessary and possible, even though their presence is already limited at the margins—and the imperative of living out a replacement.[24] More than coping, it can be thought of as the quiet practice of world-making.

Using political ecology and economy as a lens, the study focuses on two lines of inquiry, taking Lebanon as a case study:

futures, shaped by shared understandings of what kinds of social life and social order are attainable. Adapted from Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, University of Chicago Press, 2015.

18   Dryzek, 2021; Marit Hammond, *Imagination and Critique in Environmental Politics*, Routledge, 2022.

19   Schlosberg & Craven, 2019; Dryzek, 2021.

20   Hanne Svarstad et al., "Power Theories in Political Ecology", *Journal of Political Ecology*, Vol. 25 No. 1, 2018; Begoña Aretxaga, "Maddening States", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 32 No. 1, 2003 [Aretxaga, 2003].

21   Administrative rationalism relies on traditional experts and bureaucracy, depoliticizing issues and masking power imbalances. Economic rationalism uses market mechanisms, reducing complex socio-ecological processes to monetary terms. Democratic pragmatism emphasizes public participation and consensus but persistently yields incremental, watered-down solutions that do not disrupt entrenched power imbalances and

interests. These terms are adapted from Dryzek (2021).

22   Dryzek, 2021; Aretxaga, 2003.

23   Elia Apostolopoulou et al., "Radical Social Innovations and the Spatialities of Grassroots Activism: Navigating Pathways for Tackling Inequality and Reinventing the Commons", *Journal of Political Ecology*, Vol. 29 No. 1, 2022. [Apostolopoulou et al., 2022]; Dana Léo-Paul et al., "Success Factors and Challenges of Grassroots Innovations: Learning from Failure", *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 164, 2021; Arnim Scheidel et al., "Environmental Conflicts and Defenders: A Global Overview", *Global Environmental Change*, Vol. 63, 2020; Leah Temper et al., "A Perspective on Radical Transformations to Sustainability: Resistances, Movements and Alternatives", *Sustainability Science*, Vol. 13 No. 3, 2018 [Temper et al., 2018]; Frans Hermans et al., "Scale Dynamics of Grassroots Innovations through Parallel Pathways of Transformative Change", *Ecological Economics,* 130, 2016 [Hermans et al., 2016].

24   Iokiñe Rodríguez, *Just Transformations : Grassroots Struggles for Alternative Futures*, Pluto Press, 2023; Amanda Machin, "Climates of Democracy: Skeptical, Rational, and Radical Imaginaries", *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews Climate Change*, Vol. 13 No. 4, 2022; Farhana Sultana, "Political Ecology II: Conjunctures, Crises, and Critical Publics", *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 45 No. 6, 2021; Temper et al., 2018; Povinelli, 2011.

1. How does deliberate and incidental environmentalization emerge from centering the Lebanese state?

2. At the margins, when and how does disenchantment with the current order make space for prefigurative politics toward environmentalism?

To address these questions, I propose a conceptual framework contrasting state-bent hypothetical actions (SBHA), which translates to "swimming" in Arabic, and social non-movements organizing with disenchantment (SNOD), which translates to "lean" in Arabic.[25] "SBHA" implies submersion in the state's prosaic logic, irrespective of whether an actor is for or against the state or the current order it reinforces. When submersed, swimming becomes imperative, and the movement symbolizes the perpetual enactment of change-making hypotheses (i.e., initiatives with theories of change that use causal logic to pursue desired outcomes). "SNOD" refers to an emergent pattern of leaning on each other and the environment—and the environment and others leaning back—to enable the mutual persistence of all.[26] Persistence through this circular leaning, or interdependence, breaks causal superiority (i.e., this leads to that) and undermines the relevance of the state and its prosaic logic.

The framework helps surface perspectives and examples of paradox, decision-making impasse, crisis-making, and complications that often accompany state-oriented environmental action in Lebanon. I do not consider these outcomes inherent to action concerning the state, but rather common and persistent within Lebanon's contemporary realities—which are, of course, subject to change. I find that, in the interest of clarity, time, and collective action in addressing destabilization and precarity, there is reason to focus more on SNOD. Through the lens of the framework, I use case studies of persistence at the margins to explore how SNOD is engendering prefigurative politics toward environmentalism.[27] I organize the cases

progressively, from those with the least to the most generative potential for such sociopolitical organizing. Rather than trying to offer a blueprint for environmentalism—which may, in any case, be unfathomable—I trace possibilities, at least for the cooperative and imaginative work it calls for. Case studies focus on waste pickers concentrated in urban centers who collect more plastics than the combined total of Lebanon's municipalities;[28] rainwater harvesting in Dannieh providing a backbone for local life; agro-food barter networks and solar proliferation at the foothills of Jabal el Sheikh, where armed conflict is persistent; and lastly wildfire and land management partnerships in Akkar. I end with an invitation for civil society actors concerned with governance and sustainability transformations to consider the role of SNOD actors and the spaces they inhabit when envisioning futures, framing problems, and engaging in change-making.

Methodology

The study is informed by 15 semi-structured interviews, direct observation of four formally organized events, field visits, and two focus group discussions (FGDs) that occurred in 2024 and early 2025. It also uses a self-reflexive approach to draw lessons from 10 years of environmental work experience in Lebanon involving over 40 projects housed in academia, the UN system, corporations interested in sustainability, civil society organizations supporting grassroots actions, and periods spent living in marginalized communities.

About half of my interlocutors were identified as engaging in SNOD and half in SBHA. The FGDs focused on SNOD actors, given their under-appreciation in the literature and the implications of their activities for environmentalism as framed in this study. The observed formally organized events included a panel discussion with lawyers, activists, and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) on the solar boom in Lebanon's electricity supply;

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25   The significance of this Arabic nomenclature will be further explored later, as it serves as a symbolic reflection of the ways these dynamics unfold.

26   Khayyat, 2022.

27   Schlosberg & Craven, 2019; Khayyat, 2022.

28   Laila Duisenova, "The Vulnerabilities of Informal Waste Pickers: A Critical Issue in Lebanon's Waste Sector", *ReFuse*, 2024, [Duisenova, 2024]; Sammy Kayed and Pedro Fernandez, "Baseline situation for selected single use plastic items in Lebanon", *WES Program*, 2023, [Kayed & Fernandez, 2023].

a press conference for a campaign to reduce the environmental health harms of electricity generators in Beirut organized by a member of parliament; a closed panel discussion by a group of long-standing environmental activists on the issue of queries in the Koura region; and a panel discussion at a university titled "Research as Environmental Activism". Field visits focused on parts of Beirut, Akkar, Dannieh, Shouf, Beqaa, and the Jabal el Sheikh area between the villages of Ain Aata and Chebaa. The FGDs were held with community members and volunteer firefighters around the Qammoua forest of Akkar and with community members and traditional farmers in the area of Jabal el Sheikh.

The Lebanese state and the environment

Given the centrality of the state in my distinction between state-oriented and disenchanted action concerning the environment, I provide the following foreground on Lebanon's socio-ecological relationships and how this study interprets the state's behavior.

Over millennia, Lebanon's landscapes have been shaped through traditional practices. The country's rich biodiversity (relative to the region) co-evolved with traditional land-based livelihoods, such as terraced agriculture and transhumance pastoralism.[29] For untold generations, the activity of diverse ideological groups, or sects, has supported ecological functions—e.g., forming micro-habitats, accruing soil, storing water, regulating fire, and maintaining ecosystem balance.[30] Before dominant Western environmental practice—rooted in the externalization of nature from society and the idealization of "wilderness" through human

exclusion—became influential in the 1970s, nature in Lebanon was not regularly viewed as a separate backdrop to be protected, but as co-constitutive of social, cultural, and economic life.[31] With the encroachment of modernity and associated globalization, the abandonment—or wilding—of land in Lebanon that once sustained traditional livelihoods has led to ecosystem degradation.[32] Yet in some places, where the promises of modernity have frayed, a lived sense of nature as inseparable from social life quietly persists.[33]

Particularly since the 1990s, Lebanon's social life, governance, knowledge systems, and landscapes have been significantly shaped by a fixation on neoliberalism—which, like dominant Western environmental practice before it, treats nature as a set of detached resources locked in a battle between protection and exploitation, ultimately favoring the immediate economics of the latter.[34] Along the way, prolific discourse has emerged on the state's sectarianism, corruption, and failure.[35] While these concepts are drawn from observed phenomena, scholars highlight how their construction risks being reductive, insular, and contradictory.[36]

29   Federica Corrieri et al., "Terraced Landscapes of the Shouf Biosphere Reserve (Lebanon): Analysis of Geomorphological Variables", *Biodiversity and Conservation*, Vol. 31 No. 10, 2021 [Corrieri et al., 2021].

30   Maryam Niamir-Fuller, "Sustainable Pastoralism: A Nature-based Solution Proven Over Millennia", *International Union for the Conservation of Nature*, 2022 [Maryam Niamir-Fuller, 2022].

31   Corrieri et al., 2021; Caroline Nagel and Lynn Staeheli, "Nature, Environmentalism, and the Politics of Citizenship in Post-civil War Lebanon", *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 23 No. 2, 2016, [Nagel & Staeheli, 2016]; Jedediah S. Purdy, "After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene", *Columbia Law Scholarship Archive*, 2015 [Jedediah et al., 2021]; Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martínez Alier, "Varieties of Environmentalism", *Routledge*, 2013 [Guha & Alier, 2013].

32   Jedediah et al., 2021; Guha & Alier, 2013; Corrieri et al., 2021; Maryam Niamir-Fuller, 2022.

33   Asef Bayat, "Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East", Stanford University Press, 2013 [Bayat, 2013]; Richard Peet and Michael Watts, *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development and Social Movements*, Taylor & Francis, 2004.

34   Makdisi, 2021.

35   Dib, 2020; Makdisi, 2021; Lydia Assouad, "Lebanon's Political Economy: From Predatory to Self-Devouring", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021.

36   Nora Stel, "Hybrid Political Order and the Politics of Uncertainty", *Routledge*, 2020; Éric Verdeil, "Infrastructure Crisis in Beirut and the Struggle to (not) Reform the Lebanese State", *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 26 No.

Critiques characterize sectarian narratives as distortive and unduly negative.[37] Far from being merely fragmented, sectarian societies—composed of internally cohesive yet ideologically diverse communities—can exhibit forms of cooperation under stress, leveraging their social fabric to navigate both political instability and environmental challenges.[38] Corruption can be seen not as a neutral descriptor but as a politically charged label that subjectively delineates what is deemed desirable and undesirable, thereby deflecting attention from deeper structural injustices—whether intentionally or inadvertently.[39] Reducing Lebanon's challenges to state corruption imposes an artificial boundary on a state that, in reality, is intricately woven into society,[40] thereby overlooking how its networks of power, patronage, and influence extend far beyond formal institutions and processes.[41] As Akhil Gupta observes, corruption narratives enable "people to construct the state symbolically and to define themselves as citizens", or apart from it.[42] These constructs often abstract and oversimplify critiques of governance and economic systems to the benefit of both political elites and certain segments of civil society.[43]

In terms of state weakness or failure, Sophie Chamas and Wendy Brown argue that the state may deliberately craft images of itself as "pervasively hamstrung", "but one player on the global chessboard", and ultimately "no longer the solution to social problems".[44] Foreign and Lebanese political elites propagate and exploit the notion that Lebanon is a "locally fragmented mosaic of conflicting communities with irreconcilable interests, always on the verge of breaking apart permanently," which in part rationalizes a fear-based retreat to sectarian groups and deference to sectarian leaders.[45] Jamil Mouawad and Hannes Baumann challenge the dominant perception of the Lebanese state as weak or absent.[46] They instead emphasize the intricate relationship between the state and a wide plurality of non-state actors who mutually reinforce one another's power. One interlocutor described this as "the spider web of government clientelist and nepotistic relationships that touch everything" (Beirut, 08/2024). Mouawad and Baumann propose the framework of "hybridity" to better understand the complexity of state-society relations and the politics of state abandonment in the cleverly titled article, "Wayn Al-Dawla" (Where is the Government?)—a rhetorical question frequently invoked by the public during instances of heightened social precarity.[47] However, these instances and the questions they engender never seem to pass, with Lebanon's "growing mass precarity and seemingly permanent crisis" as phrased by Chamas.[48] Lebanon's circumstances are better understood not as the result of a fragile state weakened by

1, 2018; Jamil Mouawad and Hannes Baumann. "Wayn al-Dawla : Locating the Lebanese State in Social Theory", *Arab Studies Journal,* Vol. 25 No. 1, 2017 [Mouawad & Baumann, 2017].

37   Fanar Haddad, "Sectarianism and Its Discontents in the Study of the Middle East", The Middle East Journal, Vol. 71 No. 3, 2017 [Haddad, 2017]; Ussama Makdisi, "The Mythology of the Sectarian Middle East", *Baker Institute*, 2017; Joanne Randa Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power*, Princeton University Press, 2016 [Nucho, 2016].

38   Ussama Makdisi, "The Mythology of the Sectarian Middle East", Baker Institute, 2017; Nucho, 2016; Haddad, 2017.

39   Susan Rose-Ackerman, "Corruption & Purity", *Daedalus,* Vol. 147 No. 3, 2018 [Rose-Ackerman, 2018].

40   Aretxaga, 2003.

41   Mouawad & Baumann, 2017.

42   Akhil Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State", *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 22 No. 2, 1995.

43   Rose-Ackerman, 2018; Dan Hough, *Corruption, Anti-*

Corruption and Governance, Palgrave Macmillan*,* 2013.

44   Sophie Chamas, *Community Organizing and the Limits of Participatory Democracy in Lebanon*, Routledge, pp. 47-73, 2022 [Chamas, 2022]; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton University Press, 1995.

45   Sophie Chamas, *Community Organizing and the Limits of Participatory Democracy in Lebanon*, Routledge, pp. 47-73, 2022 [Chamas, 2022].

46   Chamas, 2022; Mouawad & Baumann, 2017.

47   Mouawad & Baumann, 2017.

48   Sophie Chamas, "Researching Activism in "Dead Time": Counter-politics and the Temporality of Failure in Lebanon", *World Humanities Report*, 2023, [Chamas, 2023].

decades of civil war, but rather as the product of an actively present government with political elites strategically asserting their authority in some areas while abandoning others.[49] On one hand, the state demonstrates its presence in matters like economic manipulation—or "buying time" as Wolfgang Streeck describes it.[50] For example, the Lebanese state engineered high interest rates to attract foreign depositors with manufactured illusions of stability, despite the accumulation of underlying imbalances that finally burst in 2019.[51] In another example, the Lebanese state enforces prohibitive tariffs and stringent regulations on cement imports, enabling domestic cement mines and production—which are controlled by political elites and operate in clear violation of licensing, environmental protection, and health and safety laws—to generate exorbitant profit margins compared to the global cement industry.[52] On the other hand, the state selectively forfeits key responsibilities, particularly in welfare and public services—often failing to deliver functional water and electricity supply, solid waste management (SWM), and public healthcare and education, among other services typically ascribed to the state.[53] The state's policies of selective presence and absence condition society's relationship with nature—for example, by prompting communities to organize social life around seasonal water sources or unregulated groundwater pumping, rather than a reliable state supply.[54]

Through the state's hybrid engagement with key national issues, political elites consolidate power by exploiting private and nonprofit initiatives that either respond to opportunities they have manufactured or fill the voids they have created. Initiatives like water trucking, diesel generators, food aid, and certain forms of recycling and solarization often function as informal extensions of elite networks—effectively operating as unofficial Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)—rather than as neutral responses to state failure.[55] The private contracts for formal PPPs widely enacted by the state are regularly infiltrated—if not entirely composed—by political elite networks.[56] Despite recognizing its flaws, citizens, civil society, and foreign aid providers continue to treat the state as a potential neutral caregiver—often assuming, without critique, that strengthening the state's capacity will yield alternative futures.[57] At the same time, the state strategically cultivates an image of fragility and impotence—exaggerating it when useful or shelving it when not—to enhance its appeal and deflect scrutiny.[58] In a blatant example at a recent event for "Rebuilding Lebanon" through investment opportunities—which counters many of the state-sponsored narratives about the government's bankruptcy—the current Minister of Tourism stated, "The state is not broke. There was a decision to make it broke. Honestly, if we plan and manage, we don't need the World Bank or IMF or anyone" (Beirut, 06/2025). But even oppositional forces—such as anti-corruption and anti-sectarian movements—often reproduce this abstraction. By framing their struggles around state accountability, legality, and institutional reform, these movements risk legitimizing the idea of the state as a neutral arbiter.[59] In doing so, they overlook how such reformist logics can be absorbed into the state's strategic performance of fragility—leaving intact, or even reinforcing, its role in sustaining neoliberal

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49   Chamas, 2023.

50   Wolfgang Streeck, "Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism", *Verso Book*s, 2014 [Streeck, 2014].

51   Bassem Snaije, "Lebanon: Financial crisis or national collapse?" Barcelona Center for International Affairs, 2022.

52   David Wood et al., "Lebanon's Rigged Markets are Killing Competition", *Triangle*, 2020.

53   Mouawad & Baumann, 2017; Nucho, 2016.

54   UNEP, "Lebanon State of the Environment and Future Outlook", *UNDP*, 2021; Karim Eid-Sabbagh, "Wastewater Reuse in Lebanon: Shedding Light on Hydro-Social Politics at Multiple Scales", *Water Alternatives*, 2023 [Karim Eid-Sabbagh, 2023].

55   Nucho, 2016.

56   Stéphane Straub, "Lessons from Public-Private Partnerships in Lebanon", *International Growth Centre*, 2019 [Straub, 2019]; Human Rights Watch, "Cut Off from Life Itself: Lebanon's Failure on the Right to Electricity", 2023 [Human Rights Watch, 2023]; Karim Eid-Sabbagh, 2023.

57   Chamas, 2023.

58   Chamas, 2023.

59   Chamas, 2023.

power networks through calculated dysfunction.[60]

Mouawad and Baumann's concept of hybridity, in a twisted way, helps justify Lebanese state officials standing on international and domestic stages and taking credit for the reported 900% increase in solar power adoption over the last decade.[61] For example, at the region's primary annual energy conference in late 2023, the former Minister of Energy and Water boasted that the country is well ahead of its renewable energy targets as outlined in the Paris Agreement—the legally binding international treaty on climate change.[62] The Acting President of the Lebanese Center for Energy Conservation, appointed in early 2025, goes further, stating: "Lebanon… stands out as one of the few countries with a real chance to meet—and potentially surpass—its renewable energy goals," referring to the same agreement.[63] What is conveniently left unsaid from these positive developments in reduced CO_2 emissions and slightly improved air quality, however, is that solarization is neither the result of a "national energy transition plan" nor part of a "national commitment to reduce the impact of climate change", as Laury Haytayan describes.[64] Instead, the rise of solar energy reflects decades of deliberate state weakening of Electricité du Liban (EDL) and neglect of the electricity sector, the desperation (or resilience) of households and businesses turning to alternatives, and the growing affordability of solar technology.[65] These circumstances have enabled private-sector solar providers to gain economic and political power, positioning them as the future counterparts of private diesel generator providers in the neoliberal networks of political elites. There is already talk among interlocutors of the "solar mafia" (Beirut, 06/2025). While Lebanon switches to renewables, the same structural power imbalances and distributional outcomes in the country's energy sector are maintained: deeply unequal access to electricity.[66] State officials could offer more valuable insights at international forums and in treaties for environmental policymaking by openly acknowledging that Lebanon's most rapid and widespread so-called transitions—whether in energy, waste management, or water supply—are often outcomes not of formal governance, but of selective state abandonment and strategic dysfunction.

In February 2025, the Lebanese state went from a peak in internal political strife to forming a government with a popular president and a ministerial cabinet that included many technocrats, fulfilling a key demand of the October 2019 popular uprising.[67] While lifting the national spirit of many, doubts remain as to whether this government signals any fundamental change in Lebanon's current order.[68] Under this new government, the state may leverage power and sectarian neoliberal structures to produce more stable socio-politics, expand its role in providing essential services such as electricity, create more stringent security checkpoints, and lift the floor on poverty while simultaneously raising the ceiling on wealth. These developments would be welcomed by many residents even though they keep us on course for increased inequality, elite power, and market prioritization. By suppressing public discontent and capitalizing on hope, this could ultimately entrench dysfunction in the state's social contract—re-legitimizing state authority just enough to delay deeper reckoning and absorb civil society's transformative energies toward environmentalism.[69]

60   Chamas, 2023; Mouawad & Baumann, 2017.

61   Walid Fayad, Lebanon's Former Minister of Energy and Water, *Asharq Business Green,* October 2023, available at https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=649030663841890, [Fayad, 2023].

62   Fayad, 2023.

63   Mariam Younés, "Lebanon's Optimism for Renewables: An Interview with Dr. Joseph Al Assad," *REVOLVE*, 2025, available at https://revolve.media/interviews/lebanons-optimism-for-renewables

64   Laury Haytayan, "Renewable Energy in Lebanon: Chaos, Individualism, and the Drive for Survival", Arab Reform Initiative, 2024, [Haytayan, 2024].

65   Human Rights Watch, 2023.

66   It is worth noting that the inequalities in electricity provision and solarization pointed out by Haytayan (2024) and Human Right Watch (2023) are to some degree mediated by community social structures; I provide examples below.

67   Makdisi, 2021.

68   Reuters, "Lebanon PM Forms New Government, Pledging Reforms", *Reuters,* 2025, available at www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-pm-forms-new-government-2025-02-08/?utm_source [Reuters, 2025].

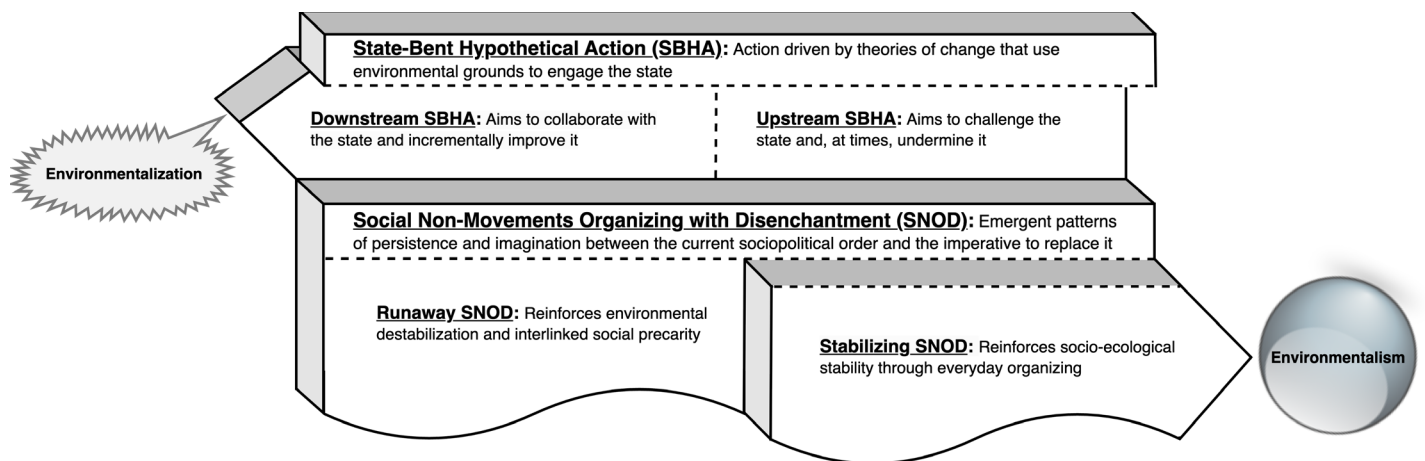69   Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, "The New Spirit of

Figure 1: Overview of how actions are positioned in relation to the state and the outcomes they tend to generate—environmentalization through reproductions of the current order or environmentalism through emergent patterns of persistence and imagination. While runaway SNOD is noted, its generative trajectory is treated as self-evident.

Conceptual framework

The study's conceptual framework helps illustrate how environmental action—depending on its positioning in relation to the state—can contribute to reproducing the current order or the emergence of prefigurative politics that open space for environmentalism and interlinked social stability.

Under SBHA, environmental action is concerned with the state and its prosaic logic and tends to operate on the "state's chessboard", constrained by established norms, strategies, and neoliberal power structures.[70] This informs the development of underlying hypotheses on: (1) how the state can be a more neutral caregiver and regulator; and (2) how access to essential services and welfare, provided by the state or its partners, can be improved. Hypotheses under SBHA—or theories of change—can mobilize diverse actions, from World Bank capacity building to state-targeted social uprisings such as those experienced in Lebanon in the summer of 2015 and autumn of 2019 under slogans such as "You Stink" and "Everyone Means Everyone", both directed at what many protesters denounced as an indiscriminately corrupt class of political elites. SBHA often involves extraordinary deeds, invokes

heroism, and is conducted as loudly as capacities allow.[71] It tends to be driven by individuals, formal entities, or collectives that dedicate significant resources to gaining popularity or influence over or within the state. SBHA often gains resources and legitimacy by upholding the ideals of administrative rationalism, economic rationalism, and democratic pragmatism as a kind of guiding lighthouse.[72] When treating the state's prosaic logic like this, SBHA justifies the primacy of traditional expertise over lived knowledge, the reduction of complex socio-ecological processes to monetary terms, and the softening of structurally entrenched power through bureaucratic forms of public participation.[73]

I consider SBHA to have two forms. The first form aims to collaborate with the state to incrementally improve or reform state institutions or processes, often through forms of capacity building, which I call downstream SBHA. Downstream SBHA tends to deliberately drive environmentalization; it is fundamental to understanding why, despite expanding environmental efforts over the last several decades,[74] destabilization continues to

Capitalism", Verso, 2018 [Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018]; Aretxaga, 2003.

70   Dryzek, 2021; Aretxaga, 2003.

71   Chamas, 2022.

72   Dryzek, 2021.

73   Dryzek, 2021; Aretxaga, 2003.

74   Rockström et al., 2023; Viktoria Spaiser et al., "Negative social tipping dynamics resulting from and reinforcing Earth system destabilization," *Earth System Dynamics*, Vol. 15 No. 5, 2024.

accelerate in Lebanon and globally.[75] The gap between effort and outcome underscores the need to critically reassess not just how much is being financially allocated or done for the environment, but in what way and to what end.

The second form of SBHA, referred to as upstream SBHA, positions itself in opposition to the state—challenging it, and at times seeking to undermine it. Routinely, when upstream SBHA attempts to address power structures or formulate genuine critiques of the state's prosaic logic, neoliberal sectarian capitalism—the organizing backbone of the state and the current order it reinforces—reveals its "astonishing ability" to absorb the critique, "incorporating it into a mutated version of itself, drawing on it as a source of strength and, in so doing, disarming it," as Chamas interprets Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello.[76] Upstream SBHA tends to incidentally drive environmentalization in contemporary Lebanon. If opposition often ends up strengthening the state and the order it seeks to challenge, then it is worth asking where possibilities for alternative futures toward environmentalism might exist today—even if they are slim.

SNOD is made up of disaggregated and collective imaginaries, practices, and innovations that emerge in response to marginalization. SNOD actors organize in the liminal space between disenchantment with a current order that largely abandons them and the imperative of meeting everyday needs and desires. The conceptualization of SNOD benefits most from Asef Bayat's work on social non-movements, where a questioning of dominant powers and the relevance of modernity in everyday life are akin to the understanding of disenchantment.[77] Bayat shows how this kind of position—without directly resisting or confronting the state—can still challenge it by "quietly encroach[ing] on" state authority, such as the "definition of neoliberal order" and control over shared resources.[78] Unlike Bayat, I contend that social non-movements not

only "encroach on the ordinary," but can also give rise to prefigurative politics and broader political change—through (1) disaggregated enactment of materially grounded imaginaries, and (2) collective organizing or organizational partnership when deemed appropriate.[79] Their imperative to meet everyday needs and desires is rarely recognized as political or counted as activism, governance, or policy—yet these practices are deeply political in their substance, function, and implications, as they both actualize and inspire alternative futures.[80]

For example, in SNOD, vigilance and social norms are helping regulate the quantity and quality of local fuelwood extraction from government-unregulated forests and the distribution of wood resources. This regulation is guided by lived knowledge—such as the behavior of tree pests, the importance of forest regeneration, the need to harvest again in the following year, and the cultural significance of certain trees. As a result, ecosystem regeneration and recovery is supported by reducing breeding grounds for pests, limiting the kinds of tree cutting that undermines the dispersal of seeds, increasing light penetration to seedlings on the forest floor, and lowering wildfire severity by reducing understory fuel that could otherwise carry fire into the canopy, where it can spread rapidly and become especially difficult to control. They then organize programs to give surplus wood to disadvantaged families at a community-subsidized cost.

This conceptualization of SNOD is informed by but distinct from concepts of grassroots activism, social movements, spatialities of resistance, and radical grassroots social innovations.[81] The main divergence

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75   Aretxaga, 2003; Richardson et al., 2023.

76   Chamas, 2022; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018.

77   Bayat, 2013.

78   Bayat, 2013.

79   Bayat, 2013; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019.

80   Schlosberg & Craven, 2019.

81   Khayyat, 2022; Apostolopoulou et al., 2022; Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez and Elia Apostolopoulou, "Against Neoliberal Natures: Environmental Movements, Radical Practice and The Right to Nature", *Geoforum,* Vol. 98, 2019; Adrian Martin et al., "Environmental Justice and Transformations to Sustainability", *Environment Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, Vol. 62 No. 6, 2020; Arturo Escobar, "Designs for the Pluriverse", Duke University Press, 2018; Temper et al, 2018; Hermans et al., 2016; Featherstone, David. "Thinking the Crisis Politically: Lineages of Resistance to Neo-liberalism and the Politics of the Present Conjuncture", *Space and Polity*, Vol. 19 No. 1, 2015; Leah Temper and Stanislav Shmelev, "Mapping

from the grassroots action discussed in this body of scholarship lies in SNOD centering disenchantment with the current order, as opposed to outrightly rejecting or seeking greater autonomy from it. They may welcome state or civil society support if it shows up, usually engaging pragmatically rather than ideologically. To the extent their political reality allows, grassroots actions in SNOD may not only rely on—but also actively seek out—state processes and institutions, nepotistic power networks, sectarian social capital, neoliberal practices, legal loopholes, and capitalist entities if these enable their persistence. When the state selects abandonment as the target strategy, and neoliberal capitalism fails on its promise—i.e., work hard, play by my rules, and you will be secure and succeed—the structural cracks do not necessarily swallow people into oblivion; they also become occupied with lived imaginaries. Persistence amid the realities of marginalization can prompt quiet organizing, not as a spare-time ideological engagement (leftist, ultra-nationalist, or otherwise) carried out after work and life duties are met, but as an outcome emerging from the necessities of everyday living.[82] But the same structural cracks that prompt quiet organizing for some can act as chasms of constraint, exhaustion, and loss. Oppression, fragmentation, co-optation, or the everyday struggle of pursuing unmet needs for persistence can keep marginalized people from living out their imaginaries for a different future. Looking into state abandonment and broken promises, I choose to cultivate the silver lining: political margins can become a generative space for genuinely imagining and gradually actuating alternative futures. This can be the case even if a community is not explicitly working together for political change or motivated by an ideology beyond persistence. SNOD offers credible potential for alternative futures—in the sense that actors are not dissociated from the current order or building something separate, but rather selectively drawing from it, embodying traditional practices and local norms, and innovating to fill structural cracks

and make a foundation for a more appropriate replacement.[83]

When persistence engenders prefigurative politics that can reinforce socio-ecological stability, I consider it stabilizing SNOD. However, I do not want to romanticize SNOD actors simply for their alternative imaginaries or the conditions of their marginality. I do not present stabilizing SNOD as a fixed or cross-cutting attribute of particular groups, areas, or periods. Rather, I understand it as a relational and emergent pattern describing some of the ongoing dynamics at the margins. SNOD can also entrench parts of the current order or give rise to other socio-politics—again, to the extent that their realities allow—that contribute to environmental destabilization and interlinked social precarity. I consider this runaway SNOD. Given the difficulty I had engaging with runaway actors directly, and my interest in exploring the possibilities of SNOD to generate environmentalism, in the case studies below, I focus on examples that are stabilizing and I organize them progressively, from those with the least to the most potential to enact desired futures. Through a final case study, I explain how partnerships between civil society and SNOD may support translocal environmentalism: the scaling of stabilizing SNOD by nurturing diversity and exchange in grassroots imaginaries, practices, and innovations that enable everyday persistence—while institutionalizing emergent organizing when and where grassroots agency can be sustained.[84]

SBHA

Downstream SBHA

The push for more hegemonic neoliberal capitalism in downstream SBHA tends to furnish actors

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the Frontiers and Front Lines of Global Environmental Justice: The EJAtlas", Journal of Political Ecology, Vol. 22 No. 1, 2015; Joan Martinez-Alier and Stanislav Shmelev, "Between Activism and Science: Grassroots Concepts for Sustainability Coined by Environmental Justice Organizations", *Journal of Political Ecology*, Vol. 21 No. 1, 2014 [Martinez-Alier, 2014].

82   Bayat, 2013.

83   SNOD may also become valuable for consensus building in environmentalism within ideologically fractured contexts, where some for example support capitalism or sectarianism while others strongly oppose them.

84   Hermans et al., 2016; Derk Loorbach et al., "Transformative Innovation and Translocal Diffusion", *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, Vol. 35, 2020, [Loorbach, 2020].

with considerable resources, as it aligns with the concentration of power and capital. This catalyzes environmentalization with downstream SBHA offhandedly reshaping its identity through counter-hegemonic concepts emerging from the margins. These include public participation, empowerment, localization, equity, resilience, decentralization, stewardship, autonomy, regeneration, transition, transformation, and various forms of justice—namely, social, economic, epistemic, and environmental—often recast without reflection on their radical or liberatory origins.[85] In this section, I discuss how political parties leverage environmental issues—focusing specifically on Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs); how corporations have responded to pressure to "go green"; and how the privatization and "NGO-ization"[86] of essential services and unmet needs help the state entrench its narratives and neoliberal power structures. Before that, I briefly touch on the origins of how the environment came to be externalized in Lebanon—a separation from social, cultural, and economic life that continues to influence environmental practice today.[87]

Concerns over the environment as an external entity began mobilizing civic action in Lebanon in the late 1960s, paralleling global trends primarily in Europe and North America.[88] As environmental legislation and conservation-focused organizations emerged in the West, Lebanese professionals who were educated there—alongside global shifts integrating environmental concerns into development priorities—advocated for the protection of natural aesthetics and "wilderness from urban sprawl, population growth, and overgrazing".[89] These

environmental notions continue to be propagated by the middle and upper classes, with Amita Baviskar describing this as "bourgeois environmentalism"—an approach that advocates a not-in-my-backyard mentality, prioritizes aesthetics, and conflates poverty with environmental degradation.[90] In Lebanon's case, this approach is further shaped by sectarianism.[91]

Sectarian political parties on the environment

As one member of Lebanon's largest network of environmental NGOs states: "You have environmentalists in every single political party. The environment is a very powerful vehicle to achieve political goals" (Beirut, 07/2024). Environmental problems can attract political elites, who see them as opportunities to gain media attention, project images of care, and gain more control.[92] This is particularly true around solar energy, SWM, and water provision. Political elites opportunistically embrace or dismiss scientific evidence on the health and environmental dimensions of development initiatives. For example, when solid waste incinerators were on the national agenda, some elites rose up to vigorously promote them while others sought to obstruct the proposal. Their stance aligned with whether their network—of contractors responsible for constructing and operating the incinerator facilities—was included or excluded from the proposed deal.[93] It is no surprise that political elites who stood to profit from incineration presented evidence in its favor. Less attention, however, has been given to political elites excluded from the financial benefits of incineration, who

85   Martinez-Alier, 2014.

86   Arundhati Roy, "The NGO-ization of Resistance", *Toward Freedom*, 2014, available at http://www.queensneighborhoodsunited.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/NGOization-1.pdf

87   Jedediah et al., 2021.

88   Julia, Choucair-Vizoso, "Lebanon's Environmentalists and the Fight for Nature: Reflecting on Successes and Failures of Recent Mobilizations", Arab Reform Initiative, 2024 [Choucair-Vizoso, 2024]; William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature", *Environmental History*, 1996.

89   Choucair-Vizoso, 2024; Nagel & Staeheli, 2016; Guha

& Alier, 2013.

90   Amita Baviskar, "Between Violence and Desire: Space, Power, and Identity in the Making of Metropolitan Delhi", *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 55 No. 175, 2003 [Baviskar, 2003].

91   Nagel & Staeheli, 2016; Choucair-Vizoso, 2024.

92   Nagel & Staeheli, 2016; Choucair-Vizoso, 2024.

93   Samar Khalil, "Impacting Policies: Waste Management and Advocacy in Lebanon", Arab Reform Initiative, 2022, [Khalil, 2022]; Jad Chaaban, "Lebanon's Waste Management Policies One Year After the 2015 Crisis", Jadaliyya, 2017, [Chaaban, 2017].

instead aligned with civil society and leveraged scientific evidence to oppose the plan—efforts I saw firsthand.[94] This kept the SWM financial pie on the table to later be divided in ways that favored opposition elites, while allowing them to bolster their image as caring for Lebanon, its people, and the environment—especially given that public opinion, civil society, and scientific evidence were overwhelmingly against incineration.[95]

Another strategy political elites leverage is outrightly challenging the Lebanese state to aid in its mutation when criticism and tension are high.[96] A stark example followed Lebanon's 2019 popular uprising, the largest in the country's history, which was partly driven by environmental concerns.[97] Some long-standing political elites—who for decades benefited from the state's hybridity that they facilitated—joined diverse calls for political revolution in 2019, encouraging their supporters to protest and presenting themselves as opponents of the state while ultimately tightening their grip on its future.[98] Their political party, which gained prominence during the Lebanese civil war, went on to perform extraordinarily well in the 2022 parliamentary elections, securing its largest representation in parliament to date.[99] In a testament to the "astonishing ability"[100] of the state to devour resistance and emerge stronger, no other political party holds more ministerial seats in the

February 2025 cabinet.[101]

Activists in various areas controlled by political elites explained how party members regulate civil society by gate-keeping who can benefit the communities under their influence. These local issues and the implications of addressing them give rise to coveted opportunities for building credibility and consolidating power. Regardless of the depth or breadth of local benefits an initiative has to offer, it usually must pass through political gatekeepers (e.g., a municipality or a government ministry) who prime it so that a political individual or party may appropriate credit should the initiative prove successful. Priming typically happens through formal media or informal communication networks. Conversely, if the initiative is unsuccessful, blame is routinely shifted onto the funder or implementor. This process of political intermediation reflects deeper patterns of patronage and conditional access. As one grassroots NGO leader observed, "An NGO gains entry into communities usually through municipalities which gained their entry usually through political loyalty or ties" (Beqaa Valley, 09/2024). Civil society initiatives can appear neutral to the public and funders while being caught or strategically involved in these dynamics—where affiliation enables access, success is politically claimed, and failure is disowned.

Discussions with interlocutors show how resolving key issues often appears tangential to securing political interests. In a joint project involving a municipality, the Ministry of Agriculture under a previous administration, and an intergovernmental organization (IGO) to distribute free pesticides to smallholder farmers, a member of the local agricultural cooperative shared their experience. "The municipality held on to the pesticides for years; they might have even expired while they slowly gave them not to farmers in need but to people that they politically like" (Beqaa Valley, 09/2024). When problem-solving takes a backseat to political maneuvering, projects that ostentatiously promise social and environmental benefits—like large-scale infrastructure—become especially prone to delays or shutdowns triggered by disputes. Alongside kleptocratic practices, such dynamics help explain the many cases of fully funded but nonoperational, partially completed, or never-built infrastructure recounted by interlocutors—from a solid waste

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94   Khalil, 2022; Chaaban, 2017.

95   Khalil, 2022; Chaaban, 2017.

96   Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018; Aretxaga, 2003.

97   Jennifer Hijazi "How Warming Helped Spark a Revolution in Lebanon", *POLITICO,* 2019, available at https://www.eenews.net/articles/how-warming-helped-spark-a-revolution-in-lebanon/?utm_source

98   Abbas Assi, "Insight 251: Sectarianism and the Failure of Lebanon's 2019 Uprising" – National University of Singapore – Middle East Institute, 2020.

99   The National. "Lebanon Election Results 2022 in Full: Which Candidates and Parties Won?" 2022, available at https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/lebanon/2022/05/17/lebanon-election-results-2022-in-full-which-candidates-and-parties-won/

100   Chamas, 2022.

101   Reuters, 2025.

processing facility in the south to water dams and wastewater treatment plants in the north.[102]

Narratives of state weakness merge with state-manufactured confusion about who or what is responsible for environmental calamities, enabling state actors to scapegoat marginalized populations—and even a structurally corrupt state, as if they were not part of it. This persistent deflection of accountability appears to serve political elites by shielding them from reputational harm and from reforms—especially those addressing overlapping legal jurisdictions—which, if enacted, would make scapegoating more difficult.[103] It is likely not a coincidence that regulations and governance surrounding Lebanon's water—its most abundant natural resource and a major focus of foreign aid—are marked by erratic development, overlapping and outdated laws, and a convoluted mix of public, private, and civil society actors operating without clear jurisdictions.[104] This disorder readily serves entrenched political and economic interests. As one interlocutor noted, referring to the routine scapegoating of marginalized groups: "When in doubt, one go-to option is to blame the refugees, but never the root causes of the problem" (Beirut, 10/2024).

Accountability in the networks of political elites and non-state actors is both much-needed and intentionally obstructed, though not impossible. For example, in Lebanon's largest conifer forest in Akkar, a few dozen organized illegal loggers—described by one interlocutor as "mafia types"—are well-known by name and address and are partly responsible for the area's unprecedented forest loss (Akkar, 09/2024).[105] For over a year, they remained in the open, acting with impunity. Just as the community began to see them as politically untouchable, the state's Internal Security Forces arrested one of

them—an event reported to have had important knock-on effects on the behavior of the others (Akkar, 09/2024). In reference to this, an activist who was helping expose them explained, "The state can do a lot if they want to. But 99% of the time, they don't want to. They confused us. For example, nobody really knows how much responsibility and power the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities [which controls the Internal Security Forces] has in terms of environmental issues" (Akkar, 09/2024).

The allure of PPPs

PPPs are considered good governance, or good-enough governance, by many of the global financing and foreign aid actors involved in Lebanon.[106] However, they serve to prioritize market interests over the provision of essential services that are distributed fairly and delivered with reasonable quality and reliability. With no effective governance, PPPs also tend to formalize kleptocratic, nepotistic, and clientelist practices. Although existing laws, most notably PPP Law No.48, prohibit such behavior and provide a framework for transparency and accountability, they appear to be passed to signal progress and shield the state from structural reform while still attracting investment.[107] PPP Law No. 48 was passed just ahead of the 2018 CEDRE donor conference in Paris, as the state tested whether merely having the law on the books would be enough to convince donors of a unified commitment to reform.[108] Interestingly, it was not—as very little of the $11 billion in pledged loans and grants have materialized.[109] Nonetheless, PPPs have played—and continue to play—an outsized role in Lebanon.

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102   Makdisi, 2021.

103   Georges Gharios et al., "Challenges of Post-war Policy Reforms in Lebanon's Water Sector – Lessons Learned", *Water Science & Technology Water Supply*, Vol. 21 No. 7, 2021, [Gharios et al., 2021]; Karim Eid-Sabbagh, 2023.

104   Gharios et al., 2021; Karim Eid-Sabbagh, 2023.

105   Sammy Kayed, "Lebanon's Unregulated Forests: How Tragedies Can Ignite Homegrown Transformations", Arab Reform Initiative, 2023 [Kayed, 2023].

106   Straub, 2019.

107   Straub, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Karim Eid-Sabbagh, 2023.

108   Albert Kostanian, "Privatization of Lebanon's Public Assets: No Miracle Solution to the Crisis", Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs,Research Report, American University of Beirut, 2021.

109   Denys Bédarride, "Lebanon: What are the first prospects for reconstruction for the country?", EcomNewsMed, 2025, available at https://www.ecomnewsmed.com/en/2025/01/21/lebanon-what-are-the-first-prospects-for-reconstruction-for-the-country/

These partnerships regularly benefit from state-curated crisis and savior narratives. For example, Lebanon received the Karadeniz power ships in 2013—portable power plants that, according to the EDL general manager at the time, were introduced to "ease the 2013 summer brunt of power demand".[110] They remained until 2021, supplying about 25% of Lebanon's total electricity demand at an annual cost of $130 million.[111] Reports and court filings allege that "political parties in government have kept EDL weak" and that the Karadeniz PPP included direct payouts to political elites.[112] The deal not only drained state budgets while allegedly lining the pockets of certain state actors; it also helped deter reforms that could have addressed Lebanon's distributional and environmental health damages, while providing the state with opportunities to peddle narratives of care and responsibility by bringing—then keeping—the ships to save the country from "total darkness".[113] The origins of who decided to place the Lebanese flag on the Turkish power ships—whether it was the Karadeniz company, EDL, or political elites involved in the deal—may never be known. Had the ships stayed only for the intended three months, the gesture might have seemed odd or unnecessary. But after eight years, the flag stood as a symbol of the state's dual strategy for maintaining the current order: facilitating crisis, then playing the hero who keeps saving the day.

Another PPP operating at the municipal level enabled a large and wealthy municipality—keen to emerge defiant in the wake of the 2015 national SWM scandal—to publicly and falsely claim that its community is "zero waste".[114] This image was made possible by a privately run collection and recycling facility that extracts a fraction of high-value recyclables from the solid waste stream, while the vast majority is aggressively dumped into a steep valley of the Beirut River. The accumulation triggered a landslide, damming the Beirut River with trash and debris and forming an artificial lake—all of which can be seen through satellite imagery—before collapsing in early 2017, flooding the entire river channel with plastics, reaching as high as 9 meters in some places, all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.[115] Another landslide of trash debris was recorded in December 2024. Astonishingly, some involved stakeholders and major foreign aid actors consider the program a regional model of environmental success.[116]

Three interviewed environmental professionals also highlighted that over 75% of the approximately 88 wastewater treatment plants in Lebanon, developed primarily through PPPs, are not operational.[117] In 2023, I visited three foreign-aid-funded and municipally operated wastewater treatment plants in southeast Lebanon. They were all built in late 2006 and 2007 in response to the 2006 July War in Lebanon. One was fully funded but never completed; another exploded years later in a residential area, though no one was hurt; and the third, instead of treating wastewater, causes it to fester anaerobically before being openly dumped—making the outcome significantly more toxic than if the wastewater had simply flowed raw into the local environment. Reportedly, around 400 households suffer from the readily perceptible aspects of this pollution—i.e., the odor. Given the stream's flow path and the area's predominant wind direction, this is also helping fuel pre-existing ethnoreligious

110   Simon Tisdall, "The Turkish 'Power Ship' Keeping the Lights on in Lebanon", *The Guardian*, 2018, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/11/turkish-power-ship-lights-on-lebanon

111   Ankit Kumar at al., *Dilemmas of Energy Transitions in the Global South: Balancing Urgency and Justice*, Routledge, 2023.

112   Human Rights Watch, 2023; Nada Maucourant Atallah, "Juicy contract, suspicious call for tenders – in the murky waters of Lebanon's floating power plants (part I of II)," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 2021.

113   Al Jazeera, Turkish firm tells Lebanon to fix debts or face power cuts," 2021, available at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/11/turkish-firm-tells-lebanon-to-fix-debts-or-face-power-cuts

114   Elisa Giannozzi, "Reacting to the Solid Waste Management Crisis: Investigation of a Public-Private Partnership in Lebanon", *Centre for Middle Eastern Studies Lund University*, 2018.

115   Google Earth, Beirut River Lower Channel, February 2017.

116   Eid-Sabbagh, 2023.

117   Jaka Kranjc et al., "Zero Waste in the Mediterranean: A guide on Developing a Zero-Waste Strategy for Local Municipalities in the Region", EU ENI-CBC-MED, 2022, available at https://www.enicbcmed.eu/sites/default/files/2021-03/MEDINA_designed_guidebook_EN_0.pdf.

tensions. As Lebanon more formally enters the reconstruction phase following the war that began in October 2023, the current government, under the Prime Minister's Office, officially hosted a recent event titled "Rebuilding Lebanon: Investment Framework, Business Opportunities, and Dispute Resolution." The event was attended by an impressive set of Lebanese state ministers and officials, businesspeople, and investors. As described in the official event invitation, "Particular emphasis will be placed on leveraging Public-Private Partnerships to drive infrastructure development and on implementing structural reforms to promote long-term economic and institutional stability."[118] Recordings of the event show no indication that lessons—whether from 2006 or otherwise—about the shortcomings of PPPs in delivering "economic and institutional stability" and "alternative dispute resolution" are being carried forward into 2025 (Beirut, 06/2025).

Given their wide reach and influence, PPPs create a cross-cutting paradox for Lebanon, with one interlocutor claiming they are "better than nothing" (Beirut, 10/2024). Formal PPPs, along with the "generator mafia, solar mafia, and water trucking mafia" (Beirut, 6/2024)—which, as outlined in previous sections, can be considered as unofficial PPPs—are "forced upon us" and so "we are stuck improving them" (Beirut, 10/2024). Interlocutors with this view acknowledged their dilemma: improving these systems may make one aspect better at the expense of legitimizing the whole package of inequalities and injustices they give rise to. An interviewed air quality scientist explained how approximately 50% of Beirut's air pollution—which elevates the risk of cardiovascular diseases, premature death, and various cancers—is attributed to diesel generators (Beirut, 07/2024). Additionally, about 44% of Lebanon's population relies on water delivered by tankers, often of uncertain quality and at costs up to six times higher than in 2019.[119] This

places a significant economic strain on a population already facing economic hardship. Given such widespread entrenchment, it is understandable that interlocutors pragmatically seek to "work with what we have," despite the broader implications of legitimizing these types of service provision (Beirut, 07/2024).

Going green in the private sector

Not all private sector actors in Lebanon rely on PPPs for environmentalization; many instead adopt frameworks derived from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to deliver market-friendly solutions.[120] Multinational corporations are increasingly shifting from greenwashing to "greenwishing":[121] setting sustainability goals that are ambitious by their own standards, re-branding themselves by incorporating adapted versions of the critiques against them, and, often in good faith, attempting to articulate their beneficial role in addressing planetary destabilization.[122] While they routinely fall short of their own sustainability targets, they also tend to lack the fundamental value shifts needed to drive structural change toward environmentalism.[123] Many corporations are rather wishfully convinced they can both reinforce their role in neoliberal capitalism and address planetary destabilization.[124] This tends to result in some contorted rationalizations that attempt to mask deeper contradictions.

Nonetheless, corporations can colonize segments of civil society—a trend that garners considerable

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118   The official invitation for the event from where this quote was sourced has been taken offline. However the event details and agenda can be found here: CIArb, "Agenda: Rebuilding Lebanon: Investment Framework, Business Opportunities and Dispute Resolution", Chartered Institute of Arbitrators, 2025, available at https://www.ciarb.org/media/5aih1q4p/lebanon-branch-conference_programme-4.pdf

119   Nora Fayssal et al., "Navigating the Water-energy Nexus Amidst the Lebanese Economic Crisis", *AQUA –*

Water Infrastructure Ecosystems and Society, Vol. 73 No. 5, 2024.

120   Streeck, 2014.

121   Austin Duncan, "Greenwish: the wishful thinking undermining the ambition of sustainable business", *Real-world Economics Review*, 2019; Streeck, 2014.

122   Streeck, 2014; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018.

123   Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Simon & Schuster, 2014, [Klein, 2014]; Streeck, 2014.

124   Klein, 2014; Streeck, 2014.

respect in Lebanon.[125] Public officials regularly disseminate photos on social media with a variety of multinationally branded environmental initiatives. Before the 2019 financial collapse, Lebanon's prematurely celebrated banking sector was significantly engaged in environmental initiatives, particularly youth engagement, awareness campaigns, nature reserves, and renewable energy. Now, companies in the oil and gas industry and the fast-moving consumer goods sector are particularly active in climate change and pollution initiatives. As a rule of thumb in this environmentalization, the flashier, the more market-friendly, and the more tightly proprietary the impact, the better. In societies eager for straightforward actors and exhibiting low trust and classist tendencies, household-name corporate branding of environmental initiatives can lend credibility even among interlocutors who self-identify as oppositional to dominant powers.[126] I have worked in and around many of these circles and initiatives where this paradox persists. For example, in the Fall of 2023, I served as a judge for an impact entrepreneurship competition that awarded significant funding to its winners. A recycling startup regionally renowned as a sustainability champion was pitching their new initiative targeting schools. After their pitch, I asked the team if they had considered how their alcohol and sugary carbonated drink sponsors might be using this recycling initiative as a vehicle to advertise to school-aged youth. They said no, and some fellow judges thought I was offensively pessimistic. They defended the startup and the sponsoring companies by asking me, "Who else is going to support this kind of environmental innovation in the country, the government?" (Beirut, 10/2023). Knowing that development funding and diaspora aid for environmental initiatives were declining, I responded: "That's true. Maybe they won't be able to get any other funding."

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125   Rob Gray et al., "NGOs, Civil Society and Accountability: Making the People Accountable to Capital", *Accounting Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 19 No. 3, 2006.

126   Matthias Lehner Sue and Vaux Halliday, "Branding Sustainability: Opportunity and Risk Behind a Brand-based Approach to Sustainable Markets", *Ephemeral Journal*, 2024; Estella Carpi, "Bringing Social Class Into Humanitarian Debates: The Case of Northern Lebanon", Middle East Institute, 2019; Fawwaz Traboulsi, "Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon", Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 1997.

NGO-ization

Half of my interlocutors echoed the belief that elite political projects, corporations, and much of the nonprofit sector in Lebanon often blur together—indirectly enabling one another or directly collaborating. Many of Lebanon's NGOs—and NGO-like entities in academia, for instance—can be understood as operating in a highly competitive landscape, though not for market shares or electoral votes. Instead, they often compete in subtle turf wars for credit and visibility—both in the public eye and in the donor imagination—over who or what defines a solution in their target areas.

NGOs in Lebanon have gone through various growth spurts. Of notoriety is the period between 1990 and 1996 when the number of registered NGOs grew from 1,586 to more than 3,500.[127] As one environmental community organizer explained, in his village of 4,000, there are 48 registered NGOs and "none of them are really working" (Shouf, 10/2025). Yet, "when the municipality brings a donor, a few scramble to show they are alive". He reported that the first time he tried to organize with them, no one showed up. The second time, he coordinated with the municipality to create plaques essentially "commemorating their existence" and invited them to a reception to receive them. "All of them showed up," and while they "discussed some local environmental issues, no organizing came out of it". He asked: "If a tree is planted in the forest and no one is there to take credit for it, does it even count?" When recognition enters the picture, dormant actors tend to spring to life—revealing that, for some, legitimacy is less about engagement and material outcomes and more about being seen. Like corporate CSR and ESG programs, fiercely proprietary, competitive, and ostentatious impact in NGOs and IGOs may be stifling cooperation, a cross-cutting imperative for environmentalism.

Another interlocutor reported:

There are 400-500 environmental NGOs in Lebanon, and I've worked maybe with 20% over the last years in my role strengthening NGO networks. Nobody compliments each other unless they are forced to in front of funders. Once someone gets a new project, there is no clapping for them, the target beneficiaries, or the resources going to an issue that we all are supposed to care about. There is

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127   Bayat, 2010.

gossip. There are attempts to find out how they got it (the fund), to take ideas, and to copy (Beirut, 10/2024).

Yet another interlocutor asked me: "Do you know how many NGOs don't register their workers or pay taxes but are fighting for reform? Do you know how many environmental nonprofits proudly work with oil and gas companies and world-class polluters? This is only some of the hypocrisy" (Beirut, 09/2024). One went as far as to say: "I sometimes think if the NGO elites were running the government, it would be worse than what's going on now" (Beirut, 08/2024). Three interlocutors closely involved with primary environmental NGO networks in Lebanon shared similar views and reported crippling internal struggles. This dysfunction is real and widely reported—and it reflects how actors are losing sight of what is needed and what is at stake in the face of environmental destabilization.

This does not mean nonprofit actors in downstream SBHA do not create a vital impact. For example, in 2022, the UN, in collaboration with contracting NGOs, provided over 1.4 million cubic meters of water via water trucking to approximately 235,000 displaced Syrians[128] and provided food assistance to approximately 200,000 vulnerable Lebanese.[129] This creates a paradox for shifting neoliberal power structures within and beyond the nonprofit sector: As NGOs are largely rewarded for their competitive behavior in addressing Lebanon's vital needs, political elites face less pressure over their role in sustaining a dysfunctional social contract and capitalize on ready-made opportunities to associate themselves with project successes. As the head of a grassroots NGO put it: "We learned that [political elites] come in at the end to pick the harvest after we do all the hard work. We got them used to picking the harvest. And now we have to find defensible ways to keep them out" (Beqaa Valley, 09/2024). Others gave examples of organizations that, while claiming to uphold apolitical values, do not actively exclude political elites from decision-making or credit-sharing (Beirut, 07/2025).

There is a recurring tendency in Lebanon to overlook lessons from past initiatives that aimed to, but

did not, drive lasting change.[130] When it comes to not learning—whether by choice, default, sluggish bureaucracy, operational overload, or whatever else—there's little at stake for IGOs and NGOs, and no meaningful accountability mechanisms in place. Whether a project genuinely incorporates past lessons on driving lasting change—or is simply well-articulated while ultimately prioritizing other functions, such as ensuring salaries for staff—is almost always determined privately by development funders. Yet, despite being well-positioned to hold actors accountable and encourage a culture of reflection that could improve the likelihood of longer-term impact in the development sector, funders often coordinate only at a high strategic level—if they engage at all. On Lebanon's treadmill of development initiatives, an untold number of projects step in, run in place, report on their key performance indicators, rinse, repeat, and ultimately make little structural or sustainable change. Given the volume of funding that enters the country, this is jarring—assuming, of course, that the outward-facing goals of these initiatives are genuine. The 2025 halt in the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programming dealt a massive blow to Lebanon's development sector. USAID accounted for 23% of total aid inflows to Lebanon in 2023[131] and 20% in 2024.[132] Its abrupt disruption coincides with other Western funders who are considering or actively reducing their foreign aid allocations.[133] While the funding contraction has created many challenges for Lebanon's development sector, it may also slow things down in ways that open space for reflection and greater uptake of past lessons.

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128   UNHCR, "End of Year Sector Dashboard: Water", 2023.

129   USAID, "Lebanon – Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #1", 2024.

130   UNESCWA, "Lebanon on the Brink: UN Warns of Catastrophic Collapse", 2024, [UNESCWA, 2024].

131   "United Nations Aid Tracking Report for Lebanon", 2023, available at https://lebanon.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/2023%20Aid%20Tracking%20Q4.pdf

132   "United Nations Aid Tracking Report for Lebanon", 2024, available at https://lebanon.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/2024%20Q4%20Lebanon%20Aid%20Tracking%20report%20%28as%20of%2031%20December%202024%29_0.pdf

133   Emma Farge, UN cuts aid appeal after donors slash budgets", *Reuters*, 2025, available at https://www.reuters.com/world/un-cuts-aid-appeal-after-donors-slash-budgets-2025-06-16/

Still, even within this loop of donor-funded reproduction of the current order, some experiences complicate the story. Interlocutors—and my own experience—point to genuine horizontal collaborations among environmental NGOs and, at times, the state, where stakeholders consistently prioritized a collectively defined goal over visibility or funding gains. As an interviewed farmer said, referring to the ability of NGOs to cooperate on systemic issues: "If we get involved with a UN or NGO program, we've learned to expect a show but we're pleasantly surprised when it's not. And every once in a while, we are surprised" (Nabatieh, 06/2024).

I, along with some of my interlocutors, cannot help but feel conditioned gratitude for the foreign aid and development work that touches Lebanon through downstream SBHA. It is a disorienting reality to witness people you know—or know of—receive life-changing food aid, while recognizing it is part of the problem. Or to support development efforts—such as those aiming to install filters on diesel generators to reduce cancer risks—while knowing they may ultimately entrench a dysfunctional public service.

Upstream SBHA

Upstream SBHA in Lebanon—actions rooted in theories of change that directly oppose the state while leveraging its prosaic logic in part or in full—can be as risky as they are encouraging. Some who suffer from Lebanon's seemingly permanent precarity or are unwilling to tolerate it any longer find opportunities for hope in upstream SBHA. Actors are celebrated for calling out and generally opposing the state, often detached from how well-founded, well-communicated, or accepted their political aspirations may be.[134] As Chamas observes, "Political action rooted in desire becomes fixated on the action; on the illusion of movement, effectiveness, and the possibility of success; and not its potential end goals."[135] In upstream SBHA, activism and activist circles risk becoming self-referential—centered on maintaining norms, internal dynamics, and a sense of belonging—

serving more as identity markers than as vehicles for substantive change. This form of activism can be insular, prioritizing the act of protesting, engaging in critique, and maintaining gate-kept circles over the pursuit of environmentalism.[136]

However, some upstream SBHA actors have been able to turn their imaginaries into material progress toward environmentalism. This includes individuals, collectives, and NGOs working to halt the construction of the World Bank-funded Bisri Dam in a biodiversity hotspot in Shouf; resisting the privatization of the Dalieh seacoast in Raouche; and reopening Horsh Beirut, the capital's largest public park.[137] While the Bisri Dam case gained international significance, there is debate in recent studies and among interlocutors about whether activism, the customary behavior of political elites, or Lebanon's first-ever default on foreign debt[138] was the decisive factor in the World Bank canceling the project loan.[139]

Nonetheless, upstream SBHA tends to operate on the state's chessboard, where the current order shapes the terms of engagement.[140] Despite some material progress toward environmentalism by upstream SBHA actors, sectarian neoliberal capitalism has a remarkable ability to absorb, neutralize, and postpone confrontations with its opposition and contradictions rather than reckoning with them in a way that disrupts its foundations.[141] The following

134   Sophie Chamas, "Laughing Sectarianism Away: The Possibilities and Limitations of Lebanese Satire", *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 2019; Chamas, 2023.

135   Chamas, 2023.

136   Sophie Chamas, "In Search of Utopia in Post-political Beirut: The Pragmatic Turn and the Decline of Radical Imaginaries in Activist Lebanon", Oxford University Research Archive, 2020.

137   Choucair-Vizoso, 2024.

138   Michael Safi, "Lebanon to Default on Debt for First Time Amid Financial Crisis", *The Guardian*, 2020, available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/07/lebanon-to-default-on-debt-for-first-time-amid-financial-crisis.

139   Choucair-Vizoso, 2024.

140   Dryzek, 2021; Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

141   Streeck, 2014; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018; Aretxaga, 2003; William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism : Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*, SAGE Publications, 2016.

themes reflect some of the impasses and paradoxes of activism in upstream SBHA as it unfolds in Lebanon. These anecdotes are shared not to diminish the efforts of those engaged in contemporary activism, but to humanize the struggles that are involved in this work. It is important to re-emphasize here that the tendency for incidental environmentalization from upstream SBHA is by no means inherent but conditional on the times. Many of my interlocutors hope this will soon change.

At a panel discussion in the summer of 2024 on Lebanon's solar boom, one member of the audience accused the World Bank, who was represented on the panel, and the EU of hiding behind sustainability and state capacity building when their real goal is making life a bit more tolerable to keep refugees and would-be migrants in Lebanon (Beirut, 6/2024). In reply, a well-known activist who was sitting near me rhetorically said, "So what? I want to stay here," (Beirut, 6/2024) highlighting a key rift in Lebanese activism: some see foreign aid—even when coming from the same source—as a tool of control, while others view it as a means of shaping their own future. Another interlocutor, the head of an NGO, explained that he does not want to support the ulterior motives of funders—such as keeping refugees in Lebanon—and refuses funding that requires logos on projects, yet this decision has left him in serious financial hardship (Shouf, 09/2024).

At the end of a different panel discussion on cement mines in northern Lebanon with legacy activists who are mostly in esteemed professional roles, a well-dressed older man rose up, made clear his sectarian identity, and started berating the panel for again forgetting his home region of Dannieh. His point became emotional, and some agreed with him, while others argued that Koura suffers more, at which point he abruptly left the event (Koura, 08/2024). In SBHA, the widespread culture of individualism and competition not only influences the pursuit of proprietary impact but can also lead actors to internalize environmental struggles and amplify disputes on who or where suffers more, rather than prioritizing collective organizing around shared challenges.

A prominent figure in the 2015 anti-corruption "You Stink" movement said with terse aversion: "I'm done. Too many cooks in the kitchen. Everyone wants to be their own boss in activism. They want to be the hero. Even if they don't say it, they want people to say it of them" (Beirut, 09/2024). He began one of our conversations by critiquing another prominent activist for focusing on symptoms instead of root causes. But when we turned to how root causes resist change, he exited the conundrum, saying: "That's why I'm done." He no longer identifies as an activist, despite running an NGO that fights government corruption by focusing primarily on transparency. He readily acknowledges that this now-popular work of exposing and evidencing state corruption has yet to result in structural political change.[142] Defeatism, burnout, and shifts toward less radical and more practical action appear to be common experiences and considerations among interlocutors who worked on state-oriented political change in Lebanon.

In sum, upstream SBHA left most interlocutors with a few primary choices: give up; enter an inwardly facing activist circle; or root yourself and your efforts in political ideologies that gain safety and traction through practical adherence to the state's prosaic logic, as deeper, more radical, or complex rationales provoke fears of drowning in controversy or silence.

Whether working toward more hegemonic neoliberal capitalism or otherwise, many seem to believe that Lebanon is in a league of its own. To use the words of a World Bank regional authority: "I've worked all over the world and I've never seen any [political] situation like Lebanon. It's purely ridiculous" (Beirut, 06/2024).

Stabilizing SNOD

Some who challenge the state are dealing with paradox, by shifting toward the materiality of place, a lived unification of multiple realities, and spaces that enable an imaginative engagement with the future. As one interlocutor put it: "If you want to get something meaningful done here, there's a meeting space" that balances between the current order and something else (Beirut 10/2024).

These spaces may lie in the disenchanted margins where local persistence gives way to the politics of desired futures. Here, the "politics of hope" are

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142   BTI, "2024 Lebanon Country Report", 2024, available at https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/LBN?utm_source

more present than the "politics of confrontation".[143] In stabilizing SNOD—the focus of this section— people engage in a mutual lean (byisiendo in Arabic) on each other and on the environment. And the environment leans on them to enable the mutual persistence of all. As an interlocutor said in reference to the surrounding environment: "What I need from it, it needs from me" (Shouf, 09/2024). This internalization of the environment aligns with best available conservation science on the region,[144] which envisions a biodiverse future and human well-being not as a trade-off, but as co-constitutive. Untethered from economic rationalism, the multi-directional leaning in SNOD reflects not a mode of transaction but a total way of being—one in which existence itself is defined through reciprocal dependence.

In some communities practicing SNOD, there is even a term of endearment in Arabic—sanoud—which loosely translates to both "the one who leans" and "the one I lean on". Even elements of interspecies justice, a recent call among environmental justice thinkers on the inherent value of all living things,[145] can be found in SNOD with one segment of a FGD centering around how, "All animals have souls, and if we care for theirs, they'll care for ours" (Beqaa Valley, 09/2024).

Their disenchantment extends to the narrative of the environment as an external entity. Another grassroots interlocutor told me: "I don't even like to say the word environment…I never thought of myself as doing anything for the environment, even though you're explaining to me how I may be" (Akkar, 09/2024). One FGD participant rhetorically asked, "What's the difference between an activist and a politician working on an environmental issue?" He then answered his own question: "The activist is not the only change-maker, the politician is not always a liar, and the environment is not everything that's green" (Beqaa Valley, 09/2024). None of my interlocutors in SNOD appear interested in engaging

with prevailing environmental debates—such as how seriously climate change should be taken. Instead, the realities of their persistence already assume the need to adapt, leaving little room or need for such debates in the first place. Instead of questioning the changes in their local environment, they respond as their lives require— and as much as they can. Despite lacking access to, and often interest in, the platforms where prevailing environmental debates take place in Lebanon, they may ironically be forming more relevant understandings of what is happening and what should be done.

Reflecting on her community's persistence, one interlocutor described state and NGO actors this way: "None of them are reliable. One day they are here and one day they are gone, but my village stays" (Beqaa Valley, 11/2024). Referring to the armed conflict that began in October 2023, another FGD participant said: "We learned the gifts of working the land from past wars. And with this last one—while they're bombing next door—our homes are filled with relief. This is our lesson on stability" (Hasbaya, 09/2024). The other participants all nodded in agreement. Having lived in one of their communities at the base of Jabal el Sheikh during the start of the war, just outside the occupied Golan Heights, I can attest to this as an outsider. Their sense of multidimensional security while pressure waves from explosions rattled windows was unsettling to me. I struggled to balance my participation in their culture of reciprocal deeds and material exchanges.

The daughter of a village elder, who explained she is proud that her father is a falah (Arabic for land worker) told me: "Don't give me money; give me the ability to be in the land, give me the freedom to do what I want with my traditions. And guess what? I already have that" (Hasbaya, 09/2024). While I was sitting among a group of civil defense government firefighters in Akkar, a fire broke out in the forest that lies within their jurisdiction. They discussed whether they should respond to the fire, and after a phone call, decided that the community-run volunteer fire response unit is better positioned to put the fire out. We sat back down to continue our conversation. I met with that informal unit the next day, and they explained how they had a handle on the fire and "extinguished it in one hour" (Akkar, 09/2024).

In the subsequent case studies, I discuss SNOD in reference to waste pickers and three regions

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143   Chamas, 2023; Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja, *Introduction: Worth the Wait*, Routledge, 2020.

144   Jedediah et al., 2021; Guha & Alier, 2013; Corrieri et al., 2021; Maryam Niamir-Fuller, 2022.

145   David Schlosberg and Danielle Celermajer, "Multispecies Justice: Theories, Challenges, and a Research Agenda for Environmental Politics", *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 29 No. 4, 2020.

in Lebanon. To show that something larger is emerging beyond material persistence, I sequenced the case studies from what I consider to be the least to the most generative of imaginaries and agency in prefigurative politics. To be clear, I do not consider stabilizing SNOD as a condition that uniformly defines a group, place, or time period. Rather, I treat it as an emergent pattern—visible relationally—that characterizes some of the ongoing dynamics at the margins. While all the cases have implications for environmentalism, I end with one that may be engendering prefigurative politics potent enough to influence the state and scale translocally.

Urban waste picking

Although there are other SNOD cases emerging in Lebanon's urban centers, I did not have the opportunity to engage with them during my fieldwork for this study. However, I will briefly discuss the struggles of waste pickers I have engaged with over the past six years—who are less driven by disenchantment and more by avoidance of the state altogether. Concentrated in urban centers, waste pickers collect many items that would otherwise end up in landfills—where 57% of Lebanon's solid waste goes, despite widespread concerns about their compliance with basic sanitary standards[146]—or in open dumps, which receive the remaining 42%.[147] In an example of the bourgeois environmentalism that emerged in Lebanon 50 years ago, waste pickers have been largely abandoned by both the state, civil society, and IGOs. While few actors report on their challenges, pay them as day laborers, or include them in SWM master plans—which remain unimplemented—many instead reduce their struggles to matters of urban visual aesthetics, rather than recognizing them as deep structural injustices. Nonetheless, these 4,000 to 10,000 waste pickers—whose numbers remain uncertain, partly due to their neglect even in research—are responsible for huge environmental work.[148] By quantity, plastic is

the most environmentally detrimental material in our solid waste streams, and waste pickers collect and facilitate the recycling of more plastics than the combined efforts of Lebanon's municipalities.[149] Most pickers are undocumented, young, and, of course, would prefer a different livelihood. Yet in interviews, I found them filled with commendable defiance against all odds. It is due to them, and the formal and informal private collection operators, that significant recycling is currently happening despite major losses in funding for sorting-at-the-source and solid waste material recovery facilities. The national scrap metal industry also relies heavily on them, which is another example of political elite networks profiting from abandonment: in 2022, scrap copper exports (Lebanon's 5th most exported product) were valued at $198 million [150] and scrap iron exports (the 8th most exported product) were valued at $106 million.[151] Despite the substantial environmental contributions of the circular economy they enable, waste pickers receive only a trickle of the revenue and remain trapped in cycles of economic and environmental injustice—exposing themselves to serious occupational health risks while facing limited alternatives for self-determination and income generation.[152]

Rainwater harvesting in Dannieh

In the Hrouf area of Dannieh, grassroots innovators are proliferating life-altering rainwater harvesting ponds in a region with no readily accessible surface water sources nearby. The Hrouf is particularly abandoned by the state, with limited public water connections to households, no wastewater network, no streetlights, a closed public school,

146   Rana Sawaya et al., "Landfills in the Context of Municipal Solid Waste Management in Lebanon: A Review Focusing on Greater Beirut Area", *Jordan Journal of Earth and Environmental Sciences,* Vol. 14, No. 4, 2023.

147   World Bank, "Summary of the Lebanon Solid Waste Roadmap for 2023-2026", 2024.

148   Duisenova, 2024; Kayed & Fernandez, 2023.

149   Duisenova, 2024; Kayed & Fernandez, 2023.

150   The Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Scrap Copper in Lebanon", 2024.

151   The Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Scrap Iron in Lebanon", 2024.

152   Tara Rava Zolnikov et al., "A Systematic Review on Informal Waste Picking: Occupational Hazards and Health Outcomes", *Waste Management,* Vol. 126, 2021; Elizabeth Saleh, "Recycling Policies from the Bottom up: Waste Work in Lebanon", Arab Reform Initiative, 2021.

and no municipality serving the community I worked with. As one farmer put it: "It's like we live on another planet, not just outside of the Lebanese government" (Dannieh, 09/2022). In these political margins and with reduced yearly rainfall exacerbated by climate change, they have anticipated the state failing them while drawing lessons from it. One of the abandoned water storage dam projects in their area had progressed as far as installing a geomembrane—an impermeable synthetic liner designed to enhance water retention and prevent seepage. Upon visiting the site, some farmers realized they could do the same by placing a thick plastic sheet in their rainwater collection ponds. They tried it and dramatically increased water availability for irrigation in communities that are heavily reliant on agriculture.

After years of trial and error, these frugal rainwater collection ponds demonstrate a kind of simple brilliance. When building them, locals wait for intense periods of rain and observe the natural flow paths of rainwater runoff on their land, often at bends along compacted dirt roads. Once they find the best position for the collection pond, they work together to dig a cavity, borrowing equipment from one another and meticulously removing any rocks that could puncture their plastic sheet, thereby extending its lifespan. Lastly, they make a small channel connecting the natural rainwater drainage path to their collection pond and place a small open dugout along the channel. This dugout filters much of the suspended debris from the rainwater by allowing the water to settle before entering the collection pond. It has worked so well that in one community of 2,500—with no organizing municipality—over 300 rainwater collection ponds now exist. This has enabled the village, where nearly everyone is involved in farming to some degree, to sustain two agricultural seasons. These ponds have become the backbone of their social and economic life and a primary buffer against displacement. As a local representative told me, in reference to the state and NGOs: "If they want to come and improve our water supplies, we won't say no; but if they do not, it is OK" (Dannieh, 09/2022).

In terms of environmentalism, this is not just what is conventionally called frugal engineering or low-footprint design—it is a continuation of our traditions that mutually support society and surrounding ecosystems. This practice reduces soil erosion, recharges groundwater aquifers, and creates ecological habitats—not to mention the substantial savings in construction materials and fossil fuel-based energy compared to the only locally viable state-driven alternative: groundwater pumping and transport. That is not to say such a project would not benefit them, but during meetings with the North Lebanon Water Establishment and relevant UN agencies, we found it was not on their agenda anyway.

Land management around Lebanon's largest conifer forest

Around the Qammoua forest at the top of Akkar lie generational natural resource disputes and a forest that has come alive with human activity. As a whole, this activity has an uncertain ecological impact—it may stabilize or destabilize the forest system—but it remains a lifeline for the many surrounding communities. There are dangerous levels of militant tree cutting taking place in Qammoua—a form of destabilizing SNOD that I covered in a 2023 article.[153] Yet locals are also growing community-led programs to trim the understory, as they have done for generations, reducing the intensity of wildfires and providing free fuel wood to struggling families. Many families are themselves practicing traditional fuelwood harvesting if they have a mule. Amid generations of multifaceted state abandonment, social norms have come to support sustainable practices that curb the overharvesting of the forest.

An exemplary form of stabilizing SNOD can be found around perennial water springs, where relatively well-off community members pay for pipes to connect their homes to the spring's water supply, gaining a surplus of water. They then extend these connections to entire buildings and neighborhoods, providing a stable water supply that is largely of drinking quality.

As one community member of Akkar el Atiqa explained: "I don't have to tell you what it means to have a stable water supply in your house, but this also saves some families $75-100 a month because they do not need the only other options, purchasing domestic water from tankers and

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153   Kayed, 2023.

bottled drinking water. These are huge savings. And this shared reliance on nature's bounty and on each other makes our neighborhood stronger" (Akkar, 09/2024). Meanwhile, Lebanon's state-run water infrastructure was significantly affected by the most recent armed conflict and remains on the "verge of collapse," with reports dating back to 2021–2022 warning that over 70% of the population is at risk of losing access to state-supplied water.[154]

Here, too, neighbors remain in constant exchange with each other. Another community member explained: "Since the 2019 economic crisis, we all became more involved in the land and made habits of planting, raising chickens, and goats, and sharing these fortunes with one another. Thankfully, we didn't lose these traditions because they are supporting us now" (Akkar, 09/2024). When I asked if he thought these habits would go away if the economic situation improved, he said: "Maybe, but I don't think so. We aren't just getting water, food, and wood for heating in these exchanges. We're taking a lot of pride in overcoming the challenges, relying on each other, and providing for ourselves".

Agro-food and energy networks below Jabal el Sheikh

Along the foothills of Jabal el Sheikh, grassroots initiatives range from the widespread raising of sheep, goats, and chickens to the cultivation of rain-fed crops with drought-tolerant heirloom seeds passed down through the generations. Solar panels—sometimes just one or two—glisten on nearly every roof, and drinking-quality water is piped into most households. All these practices have persisted despite an ongoing war concentrated on the outskirts and a municipal government that collapsed in 2016, only re-emerging in 2025. When the village's private diesel generator service broke down in 2019, it was never reinstated—solar and some wind energy have since become the primary electricity sources. At this point, there's no need for the village generators to return. But this came with sacrifices: some sold valuables—such as a car or a wedding ring—to afford a solar power system.

Farmers develop a variety of innovations—such as preserving seeds with wood ash, practicing crop rotations, and symbiotic pairings—while shepherding units manage the livestock of up to a half-dozen families, rotating milk provision among them.

They unfortunately rely on an open solid waste dump to manage their village's garbage, but this also helps mitigate health risks associated with pests and waste accumulation. Through their diaspora and a village-run committee, the community was able to fund and manage a state-of-the-art solar groundwater pumping system. When a new water pump was needed, personal connections were used to secure one from the UN. They are accommodating shepherds from the heart of armed conflict zones, resolving grazing disputes, and innovating resource-sharing arrangements that allow both local and nonlocal shepherds to graze and hydrate their livestock at the built rainwater collection ponds. There is state-unsanctioned tree cutting on public land, but it follows an interspersed approach, focusing on species that regenerate relatively quickly through fairy ring behavior. Additionally, they remove low-hanging tree branches, reducing understory fuel and the intensity of climate-fueled wildfires.

Out of these forms of persistence emerges a rich ethical capital—trust and reciprocity within social networks, guided by norms of accountability, transparency, and fairness—that strengthens local organizing toward socio-ecological stability.[155] It is not without its problems, but people I engaged with feel confident in their ability to collectively improve as needed.

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154   UNESCWA, 2024; UNICEF, "Water Supply Systems on the Verge of Collapse in Lebanon", 2022.

155   A. K. Guptta et al., "Mobilizing Grassroots' Technological Innovations and Traditional Knowledge, Values and Institutions: Articulating Social and Ethical Capital", *Futures*, Vol. 35 No. 9, 2003.

Environmentalism in merging state-bent and disenchanted action

Actors involved in SBHA can translocally scale environmentalism by reflexively supporting stabilizing SNOD. Given the risk of co-optation by the state, it is worth recognizing that actors engaged in SNOD are not regularly concerned with resistance and are perceptively cautious of offhanded institutionalization. Rather, by nurturing their prefigurative politics, partnerships have the potential to pull the state toward them, as illustrated in one final case study. In the village of Meshmesh in Akkar, a community-led initiative founded in 2011, which recently turned into an NGO, is making waves across Lebanon. They are discovering new plant species, fomenting social backlash, cultivating ethical capital to effectively slow down socio-ecological harms, and serving as a springboard for grassroots innovation.[156] They have resourcefully built nimble fire trucks capable of traversing rugged terrain, developed tools for extinguishing fires in hard-to-reach areas, and implemented cost-saving farming practices that avoid chemical inputs. They are also engaging in a rainwater harvesting program that is particularly notable, as it is changing the community's relationship with NGOs and using the material outcomes of improved persistence to enable shifts in local governance. In gaining national attention, they were approached by numerous academics, governmental officials, and well-funded IGOs and multinational NGOs. They describe much of their initial experience with these actors as one of exploitation and disempowerment, where their accomplishments were extracted and used as the basis of fundraising efforts, while they were given minimal budget allocations and left out of program decision-making. However, they drew lessons and spoke at length about an ongoing long-term project in which a multinational NGO broke with convention, providing flexible, patient, and trust-based support that is enabling them to mobilize their grassroots

network around rainwater harvesting, gather local knowledge, frame problems, and settle on collective goals. The multinational NGO maintained due diligence while putting faith in the community's ability to manage funds around the historic feuds and micro-politics of the village. They created elemental trust[157] with one another while dealing with the debilitating issue of not having water for irrigation. Through the partnership, an active network of farmers emerged, gaining the means to independently collect water through innovative and frugal engineering of passive rainwater catchment systems, co-designed and built in collaboration between the multinational NGO's technical experts and the farmers themselves. These ponds are designed in shapes that maximize water-holding capacity, conserving land and reducing evaporation losses. The know-how to replicate them now resides with dozens of farmers in the village. Given its undeniable material outcomes, the program is "becoming institutionalized within the municipality without compromise" (Akkar, 9/2024) with publicly held equipment and finances managed by the municipality and distributed through a community-run resolution process. The program serves as one example of how partnerships can enable translocal environmentalism by pulling the state toward their imaginaries and avoiding co-optation when institutionalizing with autonomy.[158]

SNOD could benefit from more patient, trust-based programming—support that neither indiscriminately romanticizes grassroots knowledge and aspirations nor undermines them, but instead genuinely places grassroots innovators and leaders in the driver's seat, with supporting actors serving as facilitators and mediators.[159] Civil society, genuinely concerned with just transformations, arrived at this strategy usually through intensive individual

156   UNDP, "Akkar Trail – Equator Initiative", 2024.

157   Amy Lansing, et al., "Building Trust: Leadership Reflections on Community Empowerment and Engagement in a Large Urban Initiative", *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 23 No. 1, 2023.

158   Hermans et al., 2016; Loorback et al., 2020.

159   Stacey Faella & Ryan Roberson, "The Strategic Value of Trust-Based Philanthropy", *Stanford Social Innovation Review,* 2024; Barbara Grimpe et al., "From Collaborative to Institutional Reflexivity: Calibrating Responsibility in the Funding Process", *Science and Public Policy,* Vol. 47 No. 5, 2020.

and collective reflexivity.[160] The reflexive process is fundamental to transformative partnerships with SNOD actors, as it involves unpacking underlying perspectives and generating new ones that allow for a better understanding of systemic issues and one's role within them.[161]

Conclusion

In contemporary Lebanon, a great deal of SBHA—regardless of its direction—is marked by paradox, complication, crisis-making, and impasse, tending to reproduce the current order of sectarian neoliberal capitalism and the mindset that treats it as the most reasonable way to live. While upstream SBHA has made some noteworthy material outcomes toward environmentalism, it is largely contributing to incidental environmentalization by giving the state and networks of political elites the opportunity to postpone, absorb, neutralize, and mutate in response to confrontation rather than disrupting the foundations of the current order they reinforce. The study invites civil society actors concerned with transformation to consider the role of those involved in stabilizing SNOD, the spaces they inhabit, and the value of reflexively supporting them. Through disenchanted persistence, imaginaries that challenge prevailing mindsets, and organizing in the political margins, SNOD actors can make alternative futures toward environmentalism more real. By trusting the visions and problem frames of SNOD actors, civil society partnerships may gain capacity to both call environmentalization under SBHA into question and draw the state in to support translocal scaling of environmentalism. This is not just working with what we have; such partnerships are imaginative world-making that can counter the charge toward environmental destabilization and social precarity.

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160   Alison Hope Alkon, "Reflexivity and Environmental Justice Scholarship", *Organization & Environment*, Vol. 24 No. 2, 2011 [Alkon, 2011]; James Patterson et al., "Transformations Toward Sustainability: Emerging Approaches, Critical Reflections, and a Research Agenda", UEA Digital Repository, 2015 [Patterson et al., 2015]; Jifke Sol et al. "Reframing the Future: The Role of Reflexivity in Governance Networks in Sustainability Transitions", *Environmental Education Research*, Vol. 24 No. 9, 2017, [Sol et al. 2017]; Christoph Woiwode et al., "Inner Transformation to Sustainability as a Deep Leverage Point: Fostering New Avenues for Change Through Dialogue and Reflection", *Sustainability Science,* Vol. 16 No. 3, 2021, [Woiwode et al., 2021].

161   Alkon, 2011; Patterson et al., 2015; Sol et al. 2017; Woiwode et al., 2021.