Development perspectives: views from rural Lebanon

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This paper explores development issues from the perspective of two villages in rural Lebanon. Educated male villagers see themselves as initiators of development and use the same language as NGO officials. Client–patron relationships and wasṭa (the act of accessing material favours, such as development projects, from the powerful) are means for these men to achieve their political ends. Women and the less powerful men, who are not part of the wasṭa network, tend to be disregarded in decision making, but nonetheless have strong views about the needs of the villages. The Islamic view emphasises the moral life.

Introduction

There have always been disparities in development between the urban areas of Lebanon, on the coastal fringe, and the rural hinterland. Before the civil war (1975–1990), many of the coastal cities, centres of trade, and commerce were prosperous and thriving. In the hinterland, however, large areas remained underdeveloped and lacking in basic infrastructure. The ending of the war has not changed this situation. For example, Akkar, a rural area of North Lebanon, remains one of the least developed parts of the country, with the lowest income rates: 16 per cent of families and 22.7 per cent of individuals earn less than 60,000 liras (LL) (US$40) per month, compared with a national rate of 4.5 and 6.3 per cent, respectively (Nehme 2001). This is unlikely to change in the short term. The government’s reconstruction plan, which emerged following the end of the war, has been criticised for stressing physical infrastructure over human capital, privileging the capital Beirut at the expense of the rural sector (Kubursi 1999). While agriculture and fishing now represent the main sources of income for less than 10 per cent of the national population, in Akkar the percentage depending on these occupations is much higher at 28 per cent (Nehme 2001).

It might be assumed, then, that the need for development assistance for regions such as Akkar is obvious, but little is known about people’s experiences with development projects and their views about development in general, including what it means to them and its desirability. This study explores such issues from the perspective of two villages in Akkar.

The study found that the life chances and expectations of the villagers vary according to a number of socio-economic factors, including size of landholdings, access to education, the ability to mobilise resources, and the availability of paid employment. Not surprisingly, there
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are diverse perspectives on development. Educated male villagers see themselves as initiators of projects and use the same language as development agency officials. The more powerful of the local men compete for access to available funds, often using wasta (the act of accessing material favours, such as development projects, from the powerful). The religious leaders espouse an Islamic view, which sees economic development as important, but emphasises the moral and spiritual life even more. Women, as well as the less powerful men, tend to be disregarded in decision making about development. In their experience, the rhetoric of community participation has yet to be translated into action.

Study approach

The aim of this ethnographic research was to understand the villagers' perceptions of the world by acquiring close familiarity with everyday practice and by exploring the meanings of social action. Participant observation, together with formal and informal interviewing, were the main methods of data collection, which took place over 12 months. Villagers were asked about their views of development, about what they valued about their village, and about their experience with development projects. This was supplemented with demographic and other statistical information, especially on the size of landholdings and income.

The study sites

Two villages were chosen as study sites. One village was given the pseudonym Dar el Lawz (House of Almonds) and the other Ain Zeitoun (Olive Spring), in reference to their principal crops. Although some development projects have taken place in these villages, none could be said to have been successfully completed. Dar el Lawz was the recipient of a water project which was funded by a local agency owned by a parliamentary candidate. But, because of internal conflicts, the project was not completed and people continue to collect rainwater from their roof tops or from a spring in the neighbouring town. Ain Zeitoun has had several projects, funded by both governmental organisations and NGOs, including some which aimed to improve access to water and sewerage. None of these projects, however, has been completed. The electricity and water supplies, internal roads, and waste disposal remain poor in both villages.

Ain Zeitoun is less affluent than Dar el Lawz because the average landholdings are smaller in area, and selling olives is less profitable than selling almonds. However, even those villagers who have access to sufficient land to derive an income are facing difficulties because of competition from cheaper foreign produce:

A kilo of almonds is sold at 1500 LL (US$1), but when the Syrian and Jordanian [almonds] hit the market, the price goes down to 500 (US$0.35). (Fifty-year-old farmer in Dar el Lawz)

Many men have turned to unskilled labouring work for a living, but, here too, they face competition from cheaper foreign labour:

Work is scant. There is no money. An Egyptian, a Syrian is paid 12,000 LL (US$8). So they have done without us. I used to get paid $20 a day as a furniture painter in Beirut. The moallem [foreman] brought in Syrians and Egyptians and paid them $8. (Twenty-eight-year-old man in Dar el Lawz)

Despite these difficulties, men go to Beirut as often as they can to look for work. They stay one or more weeks at a time and then come back to their villages for a few days to visit their
families. Only two very affluent families have been able to move permanently to Beirut and Tripoli.2

Rural–urban migration is not a new phenomenon in Lebanon. Though official statistics are scant, estimates point to an urban growth in the 1960s and early 1970s, just before the war. The urban population increased from 50 per cent in 1959 to 70 per cent in 1970. The population of Beirut alone rose from 28 per cent to 45 per cent of the total national population in this period (MOSA 2000a). According to Eken and Helbling (1999), the urban areas of Lebanon now contain 87.2 per cent of the population and they are growing at a rate of 2.7 per cent per year.3

Health

Services in public hospitals deteriorated during the war as buildings were destroyed. The government was forced to rely more on the private sector to provide tertiary healthcare to people covered by public insurance schemes (Arbid 1997). The Central Directorate for Statistics (CDS) (1998) estimates that 42 per cent of the population is covered by a health insurance plan which is part of the social security system. This covers employees of the public sector, as well as those employed in the private sector who are registered with the national security fund for healthcare, family allowances, and pensions (Ne’meh 1996). The rest of the population pay their own expenses or are covered by more costly private insurance. The poor, who include most residents of Dar el Lawz and Ain Zeitoun, rely on low-cost medical services offered by health centres subsidised by NGOs.

During the war, when the Ministry of Health (MOH) was ineffective, public health programmes such as immunisation schemes were kept running through international NGOs. NGOs also provided emergency outpatient services through health centres distributed throughout the country. Their services decreased as funding declined after the war and the public sector was expected to resume its services (Mhanna 1997a). However, the MOH faced considerable debt for wartime private hospital expenses and this debt continues to grow as more costly medical procedures have become available to public patients in the private system (Van Lerberghe et al. 1997a, b). Given the debt burden and the priority given to hi-tech medical services, few funds are currently available for basic health services, including prevention and promotion activities.

Despite this, Lebanon’s health status indicators are reasonable. Average life expectancy at birth is 71.2 years for women and 67.5 for men. According to Eken and Helbling (1999), the infant mortality rate (IMR) is 31.5 per 1000 live births and the immunisation rate is high: 92 per cent for DPT and 88 per cent for measles. UNICEF (2001) recently reported slightly different figures; an IMR of 28 per 1000, with immunisation rates of 94 per cent for DTP and polio and 81 per cent for measles.

However, there are regional discrepancies in infant mortality rates within the country. In 1996, the Lebanese Survey of Maternal and Child Indicators (cited in Nehme 2001) showed the highest IMR rate to be 48.1 per 1000 in North Lebanon, which includes Akkar, and 39.8 in Beqaa, compared with 19.6 in Beirut. These figures reflect the continuing inequitable access to basic services, such as healthcare: only 35 per cent of the people in Akkar are covered by some kind of health insurance plan compared to the national figure of 58 per cent (Nehme 2001). Most doctors are concentrated in Beirut and nearby Mount Lebanon.

For the women and children of Ain Zeitoun and Dar el Lawz, access to health centres in nearby villages is difficult, given the lack of public transport. In both cases, the nearest functional health centre for women and children is almost 4 km away. Men control the family disposable income and access to cars.
Mobile clinics visit the villages once a fortnight, but both they and the health centres tend to be relatively costly and provide a limited range of services. A further drawback of the mobile clinics is that they provide little privacy for physical examinations. This is particularly problematic for women and renders these services inaccessible to some. The sex of the attending doctor is not the issue. From the point of view of the women, doctors can be male or female, but they must be properly qualified, communicate clearly, prescribe effective medications, and heal a patient in a short time. However, the women frequently criticise the quality of doctors: as one woman in Ain Zeitoun said, ‘The centres get doctors who are not qualified enough and they ruin the patient’.

**Education**

The decline in the quality of education in public schools and institutions during the war years, coupled with continuing economic hardship and the need for children to enter the labour market, has resulted in large dropout rates. These are estimated by the Central Directorate for Statistics (CDS 1998) to be approximately 30 per cent, and it is highest among boys aged 15 to 19 years, who leave school to look for work. The dropout rate is 12 times higher for students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds than it is for the more affluent (MOSA 2000b). If there are financial problems, girls are usually taken out of school first, but boys also drop out to be taught a trade at an early age:

*People are preoccupied with earning a living. . . . This concept is forcing people to take their children out of school and teach them a craft at a young age. The moallem [trade master] is giving him a wage and, at the same time, he is learning a skill to work with.*

(Man in Ain Zeitoun)

Education is compulsory only to the age of 12 in Lebanon. Unemployment is high, particularly among high school and university graduates, and, as a result, parents do not see the value of completing school. The result is often functional illiteracy and low expectations, especially for girls. The official illiteracy rate is a low 7.6 per cent (Eken and Helbling 1999).

The CDS estimates that 35 per cent of elementary-level students are enrolled in the public sector compared with 44 per cent in the private sector, although in Akkar, with its lower income levels, there is a 55 per cent enrolment rate in public schools at elementary level. Lebanese who have a regular income of some sort have been opting for private education, despite its relatively higher cost. After the war, tuition fees in private schools reached an annual average of 1,328,000 LL (US$867) for elementary classes, compared with 111,000 LL (US$72) in public schools (CDS 1998). However, enrolment in public schools increased in the secondary levels to 42.5 per cent, despite a perceived lower level of quality, and this may be an indicator of financial hardship. Indeed, there are indications that increasingly difficult economic conditions are now attracting students away from the private sector (CDS 1998).

Public education in the study villages is limited to elementary levels and only some families can afford to send their children away from their village so that they can continue their education. Even the modest registration fee is unaffordable for many:

*I would like to complete my school education and then enrol in the army, but my parents don’t agree. I’m afraid that because we are many [siblings] in my family, my parents will make me leave school.* (14–year-old girl in Ain Zeitoun)
Generally, girls marry at an early age and, with few exceptions, do not work after marriage outside the family home and fields. This can result in some girls losing their interest in education:

*The girl here prefers to sit, because anyway she will stay at home. Even though she goes to school, she isn't getting anything. With [some education] she can teach her son . . . till the fifth grade. I mean, if she wants to read something, she can; to write something, she can; sign her name . . .* (Newly married 18-year-old woman in Dar el Lawz)

The expression used here, ‘sit’ (to ‘od), means to stay at home. From the perspective of young women, it is used to mean lack of activity or boredom, as well as a lack of cash. They are not literally sitting, in the sense of having nothing to do. They assist their mothers in household activities and in child rearing, and their work in the fields at certain times of the year is an economic necessity for their family. But these activities do not bring them a personal income which could be traded for enhanced status within the family or increased capacity for decision making. Family life in Lebanon is strongly patriarchal (Joseph 1997).

A few younger women are challenging this position. They have had better access to school than their predecessors; Dar el Lawz, for example, built its school in 1965, handing it to the control of the government in 1974, and Ain Zeitoun villagers built theirs in the early 1970s. Some girls have begun to seek further education in high schools outside the village because of the financial and social benefits they perceive will follow, but finding suitable employment can be difficult. Some women have started earning a small income in Ain Zeitoun by giving private lessons. Other women whose husbands are unemployed have begun to earn some income by selling home-made goods. Whether out of choice or necessity, these women have moved away from the traditional view which sees their roles as housekeeping and child rearing. Their changed status in the household economy may be reflected in the future in changed relationships between men and women, leading to an increased role for women in decision making and control over the household budget. This may affect the way women see themselves and how they view development (discussed below).

**The language of development**

One of the interesting findings of this study was the different ideas people have about the development status of their village and the language they use to express this. Rather than using abstract definitions, they tend to define development by comparing their village with others. Those with more exposure to the outside world, generally the men, tend to view their own level of development less positively. The most common word used by the men to describe their village is ‘deprived’ (mahroumeh). Only a few elderly men describe their village as ‘developed’ (mittawrah) or ‘advanced’ (mit’admeh) in comparison to what it was like when they were younger.

The more educated men, such as the school principal in Ain Zeitoun and the sheikhs (religious leaders) in Dar el Lawz, see both the people and their villages as backward (fi takhallouf) and in need of improvement. They use the term tanmiyeh, a word taken from formal Arabic and not commonly used in the colloquial language. Tanmiyeh, which is also used by development professionals, means a development process requiring an effort or an agent. The noun tanmiyeh is derived from the Arabic verb yinamiyyu, which translates as ‘to bring about development’, originally used in formal Arabic to describe the act of increasing a fire by adding fuel or wood (nammaytu ennar). Those who use this term perceive development as requiring initiators and are more likely to see themselves as the vanguard. In these men’s discussions, there are descriptions of planning efforts, contacts with funders, implementation,
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and the search for hardware repairs in projects. These technical expressions as well as others, such as ‘local community committee’ (lijni mahaliyyeh), are also used by development professionals and are all adapted from their English meaning. This means that the educated male villagers are able to communicate effectively with NGO officials, who are also men and use the same development language.

Like the men, women tend to use comparisons in their definitions of development. The women in Dar el Lawz have less frequent contact with the outside world than do the women in Ain Zeitoun. They describe their village as developed (mittawrah), derived from development (tatawwor), which means progress from one stage to another, and advanced (mit'admeh), from advancement (ta'addom). These terms suggest the absence of an external agent to lead the process and therefore imply that the act takes place by itself. For the women in Dar el Lawz, manifestations of this development (tatawwor) include modern schools and educated children, good jobs for their husbands, and trucks to transport water. At present, people collect rainwater in tanks for household use and fetch drinking water by car or donkey from another village in the area.

Most of the women in Ain Zeitoun, on the other hand, describe their village like the men, using the word ‘deprived’ (mahroumeh) to refer to its level of development. This may be because they are in a better position to compare it with life in the city, which they visit regularly. The women in Ain Zeitoun express their need in particular for the services that are available in the city, such as healthcare facilities, and for greater work opportunities.

Since they generally have less access to education than the men, women use colloquial Arabic, rather than the development language men tend to use. At the moment, women see themselves as recipients of development rather than as active participants or initiators. The changes which have taken place in the village are presented as influenced by God who, according to the women, has already helped them in many ways. There is an element of fatalism in their perspective: ‘We will live as God has written for us to live’ (45-year-old woman in Ain Zeitoun).

For many women, practising religion is equivalent to socialising, especially in Dar el Lawz. Religion gives them autonomy, connectivity, and a sense of protection, which shows in their description of their village life as serene (arwa min ghaira). Women share social support networks which help them deal with difficult situations. Through social gatherings and activities, the women cope with financial problems through collective activities such as producing home-made goods both for local consumption and for sale. They also share information on medical problems and seek each others’ support in childcare. Morning visits and religious meetings have become a way to escape the restrictions of family life.

Patron–client relationships

Patron–client relationships are an integral part of Lebanese political life at all levels. Historically, the Lebanese state has been weak and power has been dispersed among the various confessional groups, 18 of which are recognised by the constitution. These groups support, and in turn are supported by, different external powers. As a result, the balance of power between them has often been precarious at best, leading to instability in national life, which ultimately culminated in the civil war. The cessation of hostilities, however, did not resolve the underlying problem of factionalism (Hudson 1999).

In this environment, there is a widespread expectation that needs will be met more quickly through the exercise of personal relations than through the state (Joseph 1997). The act of accessing material favours such as employment permits or funds for development projects

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from a leader or zaim (pl. zu’ama) is called wasta and enjoys a long history in Middle Eastern societies (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993, 1994).

A zaim sought for wasta tends to be wealthy. Frequently he is a member of one of the prominent landed families that have had economic and political influence since the days of the Ottoman Empire. He may be a politician, an official, or a businessman. A local leader has more contact with his followers than a national one and can take advantage of the needs of those around him to distribute jobs or to intervene in transactions on their behalf. One zaim can be the client of another zaim, exchanging support for services. The continuation of the system depends on the ability of the zu’ama to meet their clients’ expectations and hence to create dependency through favours.

These struggles are played out at the village level. The most powerful men in a village are those who are politically affiliated and are known to have contacts with a powerful outside zaim. These linkages appear to be especially important in Ain Zeitoun. The power of these local men resides in their ability to access funds from their respective zu’ama for infrastructure initiatives such as roads, clinics, water projects, waste disposal, and mosque renovations. For these men, using wasta is the most efficient way of getting access to development funds.

It is not in the interest of the zu’ama to have the expectations of their followers met except through them, and it is useful for them to be able to blame the government for neglect and to cast themselves as protectors of the people (Ofeish 1999). Structural reforms, such as the regulation of employment and land reform, could deprive the zu’ama of their influence over the communities they control. They may, however, favour small-scale change that can be linked to them, such as a development project carrying their name and funded or initiated by them.

Attitudes in the two study villages towards wasta are ambivalent. Even though this practice solves some problems it can create conflict among the men who compete for access to available funds. The outcome of projects may be compromised as a result. It also creates dependency, requiring client loyalty to patrons, especially in election campaigns. Some men, generally those less able to access wasta and wishing to limit its use, express the need for the government (eddawleh) to take over development efforts from individual politicians. They blame the government for neglecting the rural areas.

Women do not have direct access to wasta. Together with the less powerful men in the villages, they lack access to those places and situations where contacts with zu’ama occur, typically government employment and political parties. Those villagers who are not part of the wasta network tend to be ignored by the village leaders in decision making, including decisions about development projects.

The women’s position in the private sphere has meant that their opinions on public issues such as development projects are not customarily sought by the men, nor indeed by the NGOs that have been involved in these villages. The rhetoric of recipient participation and gender sensitivity may be found in NGO documents in Lebanon, but evidence suggests that these principles are not adhered to in practice. Women were not required to be included in any of the development projects received by Ain Zeitoun or Dar el Lawz, nor were their views sought by the development professionals involved. Given the apparent lack of gender awareness among professional agencies in Lebanon, as Husseini (1997) points out, development has been a male concept and activity.

Despite their exclusion from formal consultation, women hold strong views on what they think ought to be done in the village. They are well aware of the power structures which frame their lives and they are familiar with how the wasta system works. They understand the larger agendas of some of the politicians, as shown by this woman’s statement (about getting a permanent health centre in the village):
Instead of getting these [mobile clinics] sent by this politician and that . . . instead of paying for its fuel and the doctor and a nurse and so on, they can build a clinic for this village carrying [someone’s] name and it benefits the people at the same time. (Woman in Ain Zeitoun)

Development and the Islamic perspective

Islam defines development in a comprehensive way to incorporate spiritual as well as material elements. Although economic development is important, so are cultural and moral development. Society should strive towards human resource development, equitable availability of useful products, and the evolution of indigenous technology (Sardar 1997).

The Islamic theory of development includes elements from both modernisation and dependency theory. As in modernisation theory, there is an emphasis on economic production and the use of (indigenous) technology. However, while modernisation theory focuses on nation-states, Islamic theory includes a concern for individual human welfare and the moral life. A call for the integration of the Muslim community (Ummah) and the reduction of dependence on the non-Muslim world reflects the dependency theory view of achieving development by cutting ties with the exploiting West. Islamic theory presents these borrowed elements in a religious context, which may be seen as culturally appropriate for Muslim societies.

According to the sheikhs (religious leaders) in Dar el Lawz, development requires planned efforts from within (min al dakhel) to be beneficial and compatible with Muslim values, as well as to protect the village from urban and Western ideologies, described as ‘opposing currents’ (tayyarat mouakisi). In their view these reach individuals through mass media such as television with the blessing of the state:

Lebanon is influenced by Europe. Instead of acquiring roads, refined economic methods, electricity, water projects, and health insurance . . . we are getting worshippers of the devil and such things. When you look at the television today, you do not get an hour of education. There is no awareness . . . You find corruptive programmes, corruptive advertisements, dance, music . . . all this leads to madness. (Sheikh in Dar el Lawz)

The sheikhs desire a holistic spiritual reform of society beginning with individuals, especially the young men (shabab). This can be achieved only through planned change in educational and moral standing. They use terms such as ‘uplifting’ (nohood) and ‘reform’ (islah). Development initiatives must be independent of external assistance, including that of the state, because the state represents a disappointing and corrupting influence. Individual politicians are seen to be interested only in personal gain.

This may appear to suggest that religious men are unworldly, but that is far from the truth. The sheikhs in Dar el Lawz have been able to use their business contacts to access funds for projects in their village. In this way, they have helped to meet medical expenses for villagers and have obtained funds to build the village mosque. These sheikhs usually condemn the resort to wasta from outside the village, but they skilfully describe their initiatives as being from within the community and hence not wasta. This explanation appears to have been accepted by the villagers, perhaps because the sheikhs’ projects have been successful.

Development projects and NGOs

During the recent civil war, when government was largely absent, many local and international NGOs were active in Lebanon. Their work included providing emergency assistance such as
food distribution, the repair of schools and infrastructure, the provision of medical supplies to the hospitals in war-affected areas, as well as some development activities in other parts of the country. The number of NGOs has continued to increase since the end of the war, though their role has changed from relief work to development.

The term ‘NGO’ covers a wide range of organisations and movements of diverse sizes, functions, and purposes. However, a general understanding remains that, regardless of the terminology, NGOs provide assistance to others for reasons other than profit or political interest. In general, the NGOs in Lebanon fit this description. However, some are more politically motivated than others and serve particular confessional or political groups. The purpose of these is to gain popularity and electoral advantage for their patrons, usually politicians, through the implementation of welfare projects by ‘their’ organisation (Mhanna 1997b).

Over a period of about 20 years, both Dar el Lawz and Ain Zeitoun have been the recipients of various development projects funded and implemented by both government and private donors. None can be said to have been successfully completed and some have had adverse environmental effects. One example from Ain Zeitoun will suffice. The sewer lines collecting waste water from two neighbourhoods consist of those installed by the state and those installed by the villagers themselves with the help of some funds from a local politician and an NGO. The network initiated by the Ministry of Social Works is not complete as only 400 m out of a planned 2000 m have been fully built. Before that, Save the Children (SCF) helped with 700 m in another part of the village, also not completed, and these two projects are not connected. They have become breeding places for rodents. The main aim behind digging the sewer network was to gather the openly dumped sewage water and to dispose of it in the valley, but it now gathers in an open area behind several houses. Ad hoc development projects such as these predominate in rural Lebanon.

The experiences of the two study villages point to the need for better planning and for training in participatory approaches and gender awareness. There also needs to be an awareness that village power-brokers consider NGOs to be part of the washta network, in that these men are more likely to access funds through their personal contacts in the agencies, in the same way that they access funds through their zaim. The water project in Ain Zeitoun is an example of how this works.

A man who styled himself as the ‘village representative’, although he had not been elected by the villagers to speak on their behalf, met a UNICEF representative through his personal contacts. At that time, UNICEF was providing assistance for water and sanitation projects in Lebanon. Following the instructions of the UNICEF officer, this man prepared a written request and UNICEF agreed to assist with the cost of building a catchment tank at the village spring (ain), together with the necessary pipes which would carry the water from the tank to an existing reservoir at the top of the village.

The UNICEF officer contracted the building of the tank to the village representative, paying him US$600 in instalments out of the total US$1600 allocated to that part of the project by UNICEF. For reasons that are not known, the UNICEF engineer left and never came back to complete the payments. Other influential men in the village claimed that the village representative had stolen the money and put pressure on the UNICEF officer, so he did not return to finalise the project. The tank was built, but the extra pipes to the households were not installed and the project remained without a pump.

Four years later, a group of three men intervened to get a pump for the ain. These three men shared the same political affiliation, which was opposed to that of the village representative. They contacted an SCF representative, whom they knew personally. The agency assisted them with a water pump worth US$1600 and more pipes. The group of three also contacted a local...
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member of parliament whom they knew personally, and he successfully obtained US$1900 for them from the Minister of Hydraulic and Electrical Resources. The project ended with the building of a room for a generator and a pump to push the water up to the main reservoir at the top of the village. From there, it was distributed to houses connected to existing public water pipes, although several new houses were not connected. The pump worked only for a year.

The NGO officials involved asked only for the requests to be in writing and did not assess the viability of the projects. In the case of the pump, SCF required the formation of a ‘community committee’ which was not responsible for maintenance and operational costs. The NGOs did not evaluate the projects on completion, either. Like any other zaim, their main function was to provide funds.

Conclusion

This paper has described the diverse perspectives about development held by villagers in rural Akkar, North Lebanon. Their views have some important lessons for NGOs operating in this strongly patriarchal environment, notably that community representation and participation are still not being achieved in practice, despite recognition of their importance by development agencies. Small-scale projects, such as those carried out in the study villages, will not be useful unless they are well planned and executed, and meet the perceived needs of those affected by including them in the decision making.

It cannot be assumed that the village leaders are true representatives of their communities, or that they are capable of acting on their behalf. In these villages, the views of less powerful men outside the wasta network, are frequently ignored, as are the views of women. This is a difficult issue. Involving the obvious leaders in projects will not always ensure that all the villagers’ perspectives are represented but, given their ability to manipulate funding and project outcomes, their support is also crucial. If development agents are not aware of these issues of power, and do not recognise that they are often considered to be part of the wasta network, their projects run the risk of increasing existing divisions and conflicts.

For the women in the study, their potential in development decision making remains unrealised. NGOs need to be more proactive in their involvement of women in development activities and in the way they assist women to articulate their needs in the public domain. A potential catalyst for change, which would facilitate this process, is increased access to education and employment opportunities for rural women. This may lead in the future to changes in gender relationships but, given the present economic situation and the high rates of male unemployment, this is not a solution for the short term. Above all, the demands of the political system, and its stability, will determine the direction and pace of development in Lebanon. Whatever their personal aspirations, people’s actions are constrained by wider social structures.

Notes

1 Over a 12-month period of fieldwork, researchers observed and, to the extent possible, participated in, the details of daily life in these villages. Countless small-scale interactions with villagers were recorded in field notes. As the research setting became more familiar, formal (tape-recorded) and informal (written notes) interviewing took place with individuals and with naturally occurring groups, such as women’s groups. In all, 22 group interviews and 26 individual interviews were carried out. Initially, participants were selected for their particular knowledge, position, or experience. Data were analysed as they were collected and, over time, the interviews and the selection of participants became more focused. For
example, women’s views in the neighbourhood of the spring, which had been the site of a
development project, were contrasted with the views of women in another neighbourhood
some distance away. The aim was to ensure that a comprehensive understanding of
villagers’ perspectives was achieved.

2 Some families from the study villages have left the country altogether, bound for Australia,
Venezuela, and Canada. They send some remittances now and then, but do not visit often
because of the cost. Two families have gone to Saudi Arabia, but they are able to visit Dar
el Lawz only once or twice a year. They spend money in the village on handicrafts which
they take back with them. A small number of young men, four or five, have travelled to
Russia and Egypt for tertiary education.

3 More recently, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA 2000a) has estimated the urban
population to be 81 per cent of the population (2.5 million from a total of 3.2 million).

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Dirasat al-Inmaiyyah wal Baladiyyah.


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