Donors in postwar Lebanon

Pre-packaged solutions

Following the civil war in Lebanon (1975–1989) various multilateral donors initiated an ambitious programme of administrative reform. But they made a mess of it, concludes Nisrine El Ghaziri.

By **Nada Mounzer**

Nisrine El Ghaziri, now a doctor of philosophy in development studies, completed her PhD journey with what her thesis committee described as a 'critical' and 'welcome' piece of work on administrative reform in postwar Lebanon. As a staff member of the Lebanese Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (OMSAR) from 1994 to 2000, El Ghaziri witnessed first-hand the power struggles among various international donor organizations, and their insensitivity to the Lebanese.

The discrepancies between the ambitious plans for reform and the concomitant sums of money on the one hand, and the lack of results on the other, prompted El Ghaziri to study the policy process of administrative reform. Focusing on the ten-year period 1992–2002, she examined the policies and politics of the various international donor organizations – including the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the European Union – which arrived in Lebanon in the early 1990s as part of the country's development and reconstruction plan. Ten years later, evaluations of their efforts have reported underperformance and little actual reform. Their promises to create a fully fledged, modern public administration were not fulfilled, resulting in disillusionment.

Dr El Ghaziri, were you surprised by the failure of the administrative reform in Lebanon?

As a staff member of the office of administrative reform, I experienced delays and interruptions as plans were reformulated and redirected. Different actors expected different things from the reform process. That the process was a failure came not so much as a surprise, but it was very puzzling. Why, after so much time, effort and money had been spent, had so little been achieved?

Originally, US$100 million had been budgeted for a three-year reform programme, although the period was extended because we could not achieve this in time. We Lebanese, who were implementing the reform programme, could not meet the objectives that were set for us. We did not set any of the objectives ourselves.

I witnessed situations where the donors introduced measures and enforced them from the top down. In the early 1990s they started to talk about the importance of the local context, and of local leadership and ownership. Of course nothing like that happened in practice. That is a pity, because if local contexts are not taken into account it means that money and effort will be wasted.

Did the donors intentionally disregard the local context?

In some cases the donors picked up on what they thought suited their own agendas, which is even worse than simply disregarding the local context – which they did because of what they considered time pressure. Most donors, especially the UNDP and the World Bank, have units that work on policies for development and good governance. So, when they come to a country they bring with them their own blueprints and pre-packaged solutions, and apply what they think is 'best practice'.

At the time, neo-liberalism was the dominant ideology within the World Bank. It therefore picked up on the fact that Lebanon has always had a free market economy, and concluded that the administrative reform should support a free market economy. It forgot that Lebanon is a segmented society that is hampered by many political problems. Even before the civil war, administrative reforms had hardly ever worked, and there was no organization capable of maintaining dialogue with donor agencies. The Bank disregarded all of that. It was a selective consideration of the local Lebanese context. The UNDP was little better, even though it was the only donor that claimed to consider local institutional contexts. In the initial stages, the UNDP was extremely busy competing for leadership with the World Bank, and in the meantime forgot all about the postwar context in Lebanon.

How strong was the competition between the World Bank and the UNDP?

I could give many examples at the level of the reform office. Its structure and staff, as well as its activities and procedures, were defined by the donors and their mutual struggles. The donors' dominance over the reform project meant that it became estranged from the public services. Moreover, the UNDP and the World Bank competed to win the loyalty of staff in the reform office. The Bank was even involved in recruiting people to the top positions. Both the Bank and the UNDP had to comment on important documents produced by the reform office, and in some cases they contradicted each other. We had to accept this as we were dependent on their money. >

Nada Mounzer studied anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, where she specialized in political anthropology and development studies. Since 2004 she has worked as a researcher and journalist for the Dutch public television (NPS).

Photo: Nada Mounzer

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in February 2005 plunged Lebanon once more into political turmoil.

What is your main criticism of the role of donors in a post-conflict context such as Lebanon in the 1990s?

My main criticism of the donors is that they didn't approach it as a postwar context. The World Bank in particular had a tendency not to want to learn from the local people. They stuck to their own list of projects even though implementing many of them was simply impossible. Subsequently, they put the reform office under pressure and regarded all public service organizations as totally incapable. The Bank thought only about deadlines and disbursements.

We are talking here about a public service administration with a complex, traditional institutional setup. The staff of national agencies such as the Civil Service Commission, the Central Inspection Board and the Court of Audit had authority and were mandated by the government. They were not sitting waiting for the World Bank to give them orders to change. Yet these agencies were among the main targets of the reforms, which were to be really drastic. But because their mandates gave these bodies a certain prestige, they were able simply to refuse the World Bank's projects and to obstruct the reform process in the rest of the public service administration.

What constraints did the postwar context pose on administrative reform?

In postwar Lebanon there was a vacuum that could easily be filled by stronger actors. At the level of policy making, politicians were still sorting out the mess after the war, attempting to form a government and trying to divide the cake. Therefore, when the donors arrived at that stage, the ministers were little concerned. This policy vacuum facilitated the entrance of the international donors allowing them to define for Lebanon its reconstruction policy and administrative reform policy.

Administrative reform was a policy decision made by the Lebanese government. Isn't the government equally responsible for the lack of results?

Definitely, although the donors, at least in theory, should have had a better idea of how to conduct a such a reform process than the Lebanese politicians who were involved in the initial stages of the process. Prime Minister Hariri was a businessman who knew how to bring money into the country, but he had no understanding whatsoever of public administration. The first minister of administrative reform, Anwar El Khalil, was also a businessman. Because of the postwar optimism and the need for reconstruction, these ministers believed that now was the chance to get money from outside, reasoning they would solve the policy problems later. Yes, that was also a part of the problem.

The donors were aware that their recommendations were experimental, and that there was no such thing as 'best practice'. They knew from their research departments that the various managerial reforms were just approaches they were trying out in different countries all over the world. Even though they were well aware of the experimental nature of the reforms, the World Bank and the UNDP nonetheless imported them and tried to introduce them in Lebanon. This is what I call unethical.

In any postwar situation there is likely to be a political vacuum that international donors will attempt to fill and 'own' with their policies and projects.

That is correct, and is exactly why a code of conduct is needed to prevent donors exploiting postwar situations. Donors are there to inform locals and offer knowledge, and not to market themselves, which is what you see happening especially with donors that provide loans.

After your study of administrative reform, what do you propose as the next step for academics and for Lebanon?

My thesis is one of the few documents that have been written on a postwar situation. Hence, there are many lessons to be learned by both researchers and practitioners. I suggest they consider it, and learn from it. I feel very sorry that my contribution comes at a time when Lebanon is not able to reflect on such matters. More urgent issues now have priority over an exercise in administrative reform. That is unfortunate because it means yet another break in the process that has been started, and in the capacity that has already been developed. My research was part of and is rooted in a very optimistic phase of reconstruction. That optimism has now faded, and the Lebanese are having to restart their lives all over again. ■

- Nisrine El Ghaziri (2007) *Administritive Reform in Post-War Lebanon: Donor Prescriptions and Local Realities*, PhD thesis, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, the Netherlands.

A longer version of this interview can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu