

Lebanon

Wiebke Eden Fleig

Lebanon's devastating explosion that took place on the August 4th has left the country in a disastrous situation. People have lost their homes, businesses, many are still missing, and lives have been lost. Beirut is in ruins, burnt, filled with shattered glass and shattered hearts. Lebanon faces a new type of catastrophe while we were thinking before that the situation in the country could not become any worse.

How do you protect children amidst multiple crises? How do you try to sustain connections between children and educators and parents when you do not have means to meet? How do you do kindergarten during lockdown? How do you use media without throwing your idea of reducing media consumption to the minimum aboard? And even if you found a compromise – how do you stay connected with hardly any electricity supply and reliable internet availability for most households?

And how, and this is the most pressing question, can you sustain a project that depends on donations, while you are only working remotely? Do you risk opening the kindergarten considering the emotional need of the children and the fact that physical distancing and hygiene is hardly being applied in crowded place like a refugee camp? What is responsible to do?

We as Just.Childhood in Lebanon have been asking ourselves these questions since October 2019, which is almost for one year. Our work has never been easy given the environment we are working in, but unquestionable nothing compared to now. Five years ago, Just.Childhood started its first Waldorf kindergarten project, Bait al-Shams, in the Shatila Palestinian Refugee Camp in Beirut. Following this successful and ongoing initiative, and at the request of another organization, Inaash, it was decided in 2019 to take over their 220 children kindergarten in Baalbek and introduce Waldorf Education there as well.



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The socio-political situation in Lebanon was bad before the explosion and before the Corona virus but together they have resulted in massive job loss and salary cuts. Under these devastating circumstances the continuity of our programs becomes a major concern. As a result of dwindling funds, shifting priorities of international donor organizations as well as political decisions in regard to development aid, and extremely high inflation in Lebanon, the kindergartens are in dire need for support.

There are serious threats to the health of the children in the camps and the entire community, given the difficult economic, social and educational circumstances which have been exacerbated by the roadblocks following the demonstrations in Lebanon and the lockdown due to Covid-19. These threats may not diminish in the future as a result of the stressful realities and the lack of foreseeable change in the economic, educational, and other living conditions of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Our children may face the same challenges confronting the older generation today. But to avoid repercussions for the younger generation, interventions to improve the quality of education and reduce structural restrictions are now more necessary than ever.

Our kindergartens aim at providing a vital creative outlet, which often cannot be provided by parents, and is traditionally abandoned in favor of more academic subjects by chronically underfunded schools. With our work we aim at actively protecting childhood, by respecting age-appropriate life- and development conditions and making this the base of the pedagogic daily routine based on Waldorf Early Childhood Education. The competencies in language, movement, playing, learning, and social skills that need to be achieved by entering school are supported on a permanent basis through the composition of everyday life.

Besides providing the skills that are needed later at school, safe spaces like our kindergartens offer an opportunity for refugee children to begin recovering from the experience of their displacement, and to access support for their psychosocial and emotional wellbeing. With the emergency situation in Lebanon

and the concentration of direct emergency relief efforts by international donors, the importance of education must not be forgotten. Conflict imposes another significant cost on future generations and severely undermines the potential for peaceful, prosperous societies.

So, what do we do about the questions posed at the beginning? At this moment, we are preparing for different scenarios. The current plan of the Ministry of Education in Lebanon is to allow the kindergartens to resume their work at the end of October. However, we have been developing a plan to be suggested in order to possibly being able to open earlier. This includes a shift plan with smaller groups and reduced hours considering hygiene measures. We have also developed an online tool, where we will keep up our work with the preschool children in addition to providing all children with “learning bags” – the educators are sewing back and fill them with wax blocks and wool, a jumping rope for the preschoolers. But what we really wish for is to receive our children back as soon as possible after all these months.



Wiebke has a close relationship with Shatila Camp and its families for 18 years now. After completing her studies in political science, she worked for a German political foundation in Beirut. On the weekends she volunteered in Shatila Camp with young people, supporting English homework or organizing excursions. Wiebke believes that working with the local community is of utmost importance, because only in this way something is

created that becomes part of the community and is enduring. She wanted the children and parents in Shatila to experience Waldorf education, and was even more convinced after she saw a mission of the Emergency Pedagogy Team of the Friends of Waldorf Education working with Syrian refugee children in Shatila and their exceptionally healing impact on the children.