

DIASPORA FOR RESEARCH (D4R): LEBANON

Convening and collaborating for humanitarian impact

LESSONS GLEANED

BACKGROUND

Throughout its tumultuous recent history that includes civil strife, wars, domestic and regional political instability, the 2020 Beirut Port explosion, and massive economic collapse and currency devaluation, the Lebanese diaspora has long rallied and provided financial, practical, and logistical support during times of crisis. Similar to diaspora communities from many other settings, Lebanon's diaspora has played an important role during and in the aftermath of the country's many humanitarian emergencies.

The 2024 war in Lebanon exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation due to the sudden and massive displacement of around one fifth of the total population, widespread damage and destruction to many critical infrastructures, and disruption of many essential services.

In response to this rapidly unfolding crisis, the initial concept of a diaspora humanitarian research network was conceived to support colleagues in-country, help amplify voices and raise awareness, and provide an avenue for diaspora to contribute. Following outreach to colleagues in Beirut with whom a longstanding strong relationship existed, initial co-conceptualisation of the initiative commenced. This included identification of immediate urgent policy advocacy needs and related awareness-raising activities. Seeking to mobilise diaspora expertise and support, a call for Lebanese diaspora experts working on research relevant to humanitarian crises was issued. Seed funding to establish the network was secured from the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub, and the network has now been fully conceptualised and established, with governance structures implemented, a network strategy agreed upon and action plan drafted, promotional materials developed, and outreach commenced.

D4R: Lebanon is an initiative of the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL), Deakin University, Australia, in partnership with the Office of Research, American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanon. This is the first of a suite of *Diaspora for Research* networks being established by CHL to convene and facilitate connections for and among diaspora and in-country research communities in response to a range of crises. Tailored to each crisis-affected setting, the networks are an innovative approach to collaboration, convening and drawing on multidisciplinary diaspora expertise from across the globe to support the local research community during and in the aftermath of humanitarian emergencies. The networks also provide an avenue for diaspora to contribute, and in turn to benefit from engagement with and the expertise and experience of colleagues in the crisis-affected setting.

Reflecting on our experience of conceptualising and establishing *D4R: Lebanon* initially during the war and subsequently in the midst of an ongoing humanitarian crisis, this short commentary discusses lessons gleaned and insights that may help support establishment of other *Diaspora for Research* networks in future.

KEY CHALLENGES

Establishing this network and the context of war underpinning it presented numerous challenges, including the following:



REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS GLEANED

1. Existing relationships help facilitate trust, collaboration and timely action

This network emerged during an active and evolving crisis when the security situation in Lebanon was rapidly deteriorating, with casualties mounting, widespread damage and destruction intensifying, and humanitarian needs soaring. The immediate intention behind the network was to mobilise relevant diaspora research expertise from across the globe to support in-country colleagues as required, including to help amplify voices, provide surge research and advocacy support, and support local leadership during and in the aftermath of this crisis. In this fast-changing context and with an urgent sense of a need to do something, timeliness was key. An existing relationship meant that outreach to the in-country partner could proceed quickly, with initial brainstorming discussions and preliminary conceptualisation rapidly leading to announcement of the network and a call for engagement. Existing working relationships also meant that there was existing trust. This trust enabled timeliness and a true partnership and co-creation approach between CHL and AUB.

In addition to facilitating the initial outreach, existing relationships and collaborative ways of working enabled the successful conceptualisation and establishment of *D4R: Lebanon* in a very short three-month period. The relationship between both partners was centred on

mutual understanding and trust, and a strong shared objective to ensure the success of the network. Both organizations agreed on a clear structure for the collaboration, including parallel representation in the network Secretariat. This resulted in strong communications, facilitating the joint decision-making efforts during the Secretariat's productive weekly meetings, and allowed for the rapid tackling of both administrative and conceptual substantive issues.

2. Defining and clearly communicating the network scope is important to ensure that the right people engage

In conceptualising the network, the scope of what it would do, what was within thematic remit and therefore who the network would look to convene, were extensively discussed. Establishment of clear parameters regarding eligibility and scope were essential. This included detailed consideration of any thematic restrictions and the implications thereof. For example, the Secretariat considered whether issues such as the underlying political aetiology of the crisis, and therefore disciplines such as political studies, were relevant to the work of the network, which was primarily intended to focus on the humanitarian situation and humanitarian response.

Similarly, in determining eligibility there was detailed consideration of the definition of diaspora, and whether the network should be restricted to Lebanese or also be open to non-diaspora who have extensive experience or expertise on Lebanon. Recognising the enormous contribution that many non-Lebanese living and working outside Lebanon have made to the field, maintaining the focus on diaspora was agreed because of the unique contribution that this group can make, bringing both content knowledge and the soft skills and attributes that facilitate timely and culturally and contextually appropriate engagement. Additionally, through the simple act of facilitating connections between diaspora communities who are living the shared experience of watching a crisis unfold in their country of origin, it is anticipated that the networks may also informally and indirectly facilitate peer support functions for diaspora.

Whilst initial calls for engagement requested that diaspora experts have an existing focus on Lebanon, this criterion was subsequently removed so that the network could also serve as an opportunity to forge new connections and utilise the expertise of diaspora researchers who have a geographic focus elsewhere.

Clarifying what was meant by 'humanitarian research' was also necessary as this would have considerable implications on the target audience, eligibility and membership. For instance, inviting those involved with *humanitarian research vs research relevant to the humanitarian context vs research in humanitarian settings vs research on humanitarian issues* would each attract slightly different groups.

Agreeing and setting definitions and parameters was critical to enable clear and consistent messaging and help ensure that those with the required profiles were aware of the initiative and encouraged to engage.

3. A solid communication strategy supports broad reach

Broad outreach was essential to ensure that this emerging initiative is widely disseminated and reaches relevant groups. An active social media campaign and communications plan were developed by both institutions, and a suite of different outputs announcing the network and tailored to different platforms and audiences were also produced. These included a news announcement, series of social media posts, development of network webpages, bilingual promotional videos and a package of other promotional and branding materials. As a rapidly evolving work in progress that is coming to life during a humanitarian crisis and funding crunch, the network websites are being progressively developed as the network progresses and as resourcing permits.

To ensure that membership and outreach is not restricted to English speakers, some materials and sections of the websites will also be available in Arabic.

4. Consideration of politics, the multidisciplinary nature of the humanitarian space, and power dynamics are integral to ensuring an inclusive approach

War is inherently political, and Lebanon also has many sectarian divisions. In order to ensure inclusivity and that those of any political persuasion feel able to engage, it was important to ensure that the Secretariat and Ambassadors were not political persona or personnel strongly politically affiliated in any direction.

Awareness of local political considerations and sensitivities and the potential impact on inclusivity was also integral in developing network brand guidelines and activity plans. For example, in Lebanon some colours are associated with specific political factions. In design of the network logo and associated promotional materials, care was taken to ensure that no politically sensitive colours were used to avoid any potential misinterpretation of the network being politically aligned, and instead that outputs carry contextually appropriate and contextually neutral branding. Similarly, local contextual awareness informed development of the network strategy and action plan, enabling an understanding of the types of activities that are appropriate and will likely be of interest and uptake, and those which might present challenges in a context like Lebanon which is characterized by both political and sectarian divisions as well as a recent history mired by successive wars.

Acknowledgement of the multi-disciplinary nature of the humanitarian space was important in establishing the network and ensuring inclusivity. For instance, in considering where to headquarter the initiative within each of the two partner organisations, it was deemed

essential that the initiative be housed in a multidisciplinary team or centre rather than in a highly specialised and tightly focussed disciplinary or thematic area, which may discourage those with other expertise from engaging.

Whilst not our own experience, cognisant of broader systemic issues of Global North – Global South sensitivities and power dynamics in collaborative relationships¹, within the Secretariat itself we adopted a co-creation model which reflects our values and existing standard ways of working. Key roles were assigned equally, with a co-lead and co-ordinator from each institution; decisions were made jointly and by consensus; all colleagues have an equal voice; and engagement, outreach and the network branding all clearly communicated a co-led and equitable partnership.

5. Rapidly establishing governance structures and engaging high profile champions supports rapid and widespread outreach

Engaging the right teams, including content experts, senior and executive personnel, communications specialists and administrative support was essential to allow rapid decision-making and progress, secure high-level support from within the convening organisations, and to ensure outreach to broad networks.

A panel of high-profile Ambassadors have also been assembled to champion the network and help support its dissemination and engagement activities. Ambassadors bring diverse sectoral and disciplinary expertise from within and outside the research and humanitarian communities, a range of skill sets, and are based both within the diaspora and in Lebanon. Whilst initially the intention was to assemble a formal Advisory Board, it was felt that the engagement load of sitting on such a board would be a deterrent, and individuals were instead invited to serve as Ambassadors. In lieu of the Advisory Board, the Secretariat decided that ad hoc advice may be sought from individual Ambassadors as required on specific issues, without the need for periodic formal meetings and heavy time commitments. Other efforts were also adopted to reduce the time commitment and load on Ambassadors from being a deterrent to engagement, including preparation of talking points and individual briefings.

6. Acknowledge that emotions, empathy, positionality and expectations are all at play during times of crisis

This network emerged during an active conflict that resulted in profound and widespread damage and destruction and a heavy casualty toll. In such circumstances, emotions inevitably are at play - those in country living the crisis, with all the unimaginable attendant stressors and emotions of being in the war setting, in survival mode, and yet needing to maintain functions and respond; and (albeit a very different experience), the emotions of helplessly

¹ Sibai AM, Rizk A, Coutts AP, Monzer G, Daoud A, Sullivan R, Roberts B, Meho LI, Fouad FM, DeJong J. North-South inequities in research collaboration in humanitarian and conflict contexts. *Lancet*. 2019 Nov 2;394(10209):1597-1600. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(19)32482-1. PMID: 31690433.

watching the conflict from afar as diaspora. Recognising that all are living the experience differently, empathy and consideration of one's own positionality are essential.

Similarly, setting parameters for the network activity and managing expectations was crucial. This included ensuring that expectations of what the diaspora and this network can do and what is within scope are reasonable and feasible. Equally important was agreeing on what the network would not do. It was important to ensure that any misaligned early expectations were promptly addressed.

7. A myriad of logistic and practical issues warrant consideration

The need to minimise the administrative load and other burdens associated with establishing this network on colleagues living the crisis was paramount, and active and deliberate steps were adopted to this end. This included having the non-Lebanon partner serve as administering institution for the seed funding grant and similarly assigning the bulk of the legwork to the non-Lebanon organisation once parameters and required activities were agreed.

There were also numerous practical, logistic and privacy considerations around how best to administer and manage the network. Such issues included those pertaining to the mailing list; nature, security, maintenance and moderation of any online collaborative platform, including consideration of the need for an interactive function and the required level and nature of any direct connecting function; technological access considerations; and timeliness. Such deliberations were important to ensure the network adopts the right approach, is as simple and cost-effective as possible, and is accessible to those in a crisis-affected setting where infrastructures and amenities such as electricity supply may be strained.

8. Resourcing challenges amid a global funding crunch threatens the sustainability and viability of the network, and requires thinking outside the box

Having dedicated personnel time supported by dedicated funding was critical to the success of this early initiative. Availability of a responsive fund funding scheme which supported the seed phase was critical – without this support, the initiative would have remained a thought bubble and could not have come to life.

The network now faces an existential challenge due to the current global funding landscape – *D4R: Lebanon* comes to life at a time when the humanitarian sector has been severely impacted by funding cuts. D4R requires very modest but dedicated funding to establish and maintain operations. Securing the required resourcing requires thinking outside the box, and in addition to traditional funding pathways, a range of alternative options to mobilise and support person-time are being explored.

9. Context matters

D4R: Lebanon is the first of a proposed suite of diaspora research networks, and we are now also launching *D4R: Syria*. The institutional architecture, national research capacity and political landscape in Syria is very different to that in Lebanon, and so the approach to be adopted varies and will be tailored to the unique requirements and restrictions of each given setting – context matters. For example, in Lebanon, D4R is a partnership with a local academic organisation as the in-country lead. In Syria, the higher education and research infrastructures have been devastated by years of war, and there is no such strong organisational partner with whom there is an existing relationship. Additionally, the impact on partnerships of contextual political factors such as sanctions and the unstable political environment require consideration. As such, the organisational partner and convening models for Syria will differ from the Lebanon approach and will evolve as the context in Syria itself evolves.

Tailoring of the networks to context is also required for the thematic scope. In any conflict setting, political considerations and the humanitarian context will inevitably be intertwined. For some networks, we have decided to explicitly exclude the discipline of political studies, to ensure the focus remains specifically on the humanitarian crises and not the underlying political background of a crisis.

CONCLUSION

Despite considerable challenges and the need to navigate numerous practical and logistic considerations, *D4R: Lebanon* now comes to life. A collaborative initiative that was built on existing strong individual and institutional relationships to rapidly mobilise, *D4R: Lebanon* has adopted a true co-conceptualisation approach. This initiative demonstrates the impact and importance of existing relationships, trust, availability of dedicated funding and dedicated person-time, and an overwhelming determination to mobilise and support. Lessons gleaned from the process of conceptualising and establishing *D4R: Lebanon* in the midst of a humanitarian crisis may help inform establishment of diaspora networks for other communities and other crisis settings in future.

Now fully conceptualised and established, *D4R: Lebanon* embarks on its operationalisation phase. Together, we will work across a suite of functions, facilitating diaspora expertise from across the globe and engaging with the local research community, convening and collaborating for humanitarian impact.