



Deprived Childhoods

Child poverty in crisis-wracked Lebanon

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Children denied their basic rights

New UNICEF data and findings reveal just how profoundly children's lives have been devastated by Lebanon's massive crisis that plunged children across the country into poverty, affecting their health, welfare and education, shattering their hopes and breaking down family relationships.

Three years of economic crisis, compounded by COVID-19, the 2020 Beirut Port explosions and political instability have left all families living in Lebanon struggling to survive, with severe consequences for children.

Soaring prices and widespread unemployment have plunged numerous families into multidimensional poverty – a concept that considers not simply income levels but a wide range of deprivations – limiting their ability to provide for their children's basic needs.

“The crisis is affecting every aspect of children's lives. Children are growing up without enough food, without proper access to healthcare, and, in some cases, working to support their families. Besides the immediate impact on children's well-being, child poverty can have lifelong consequences, affecting children's ability to reach their full potential and perpetuating a cycle of poverty and disadvantage.”

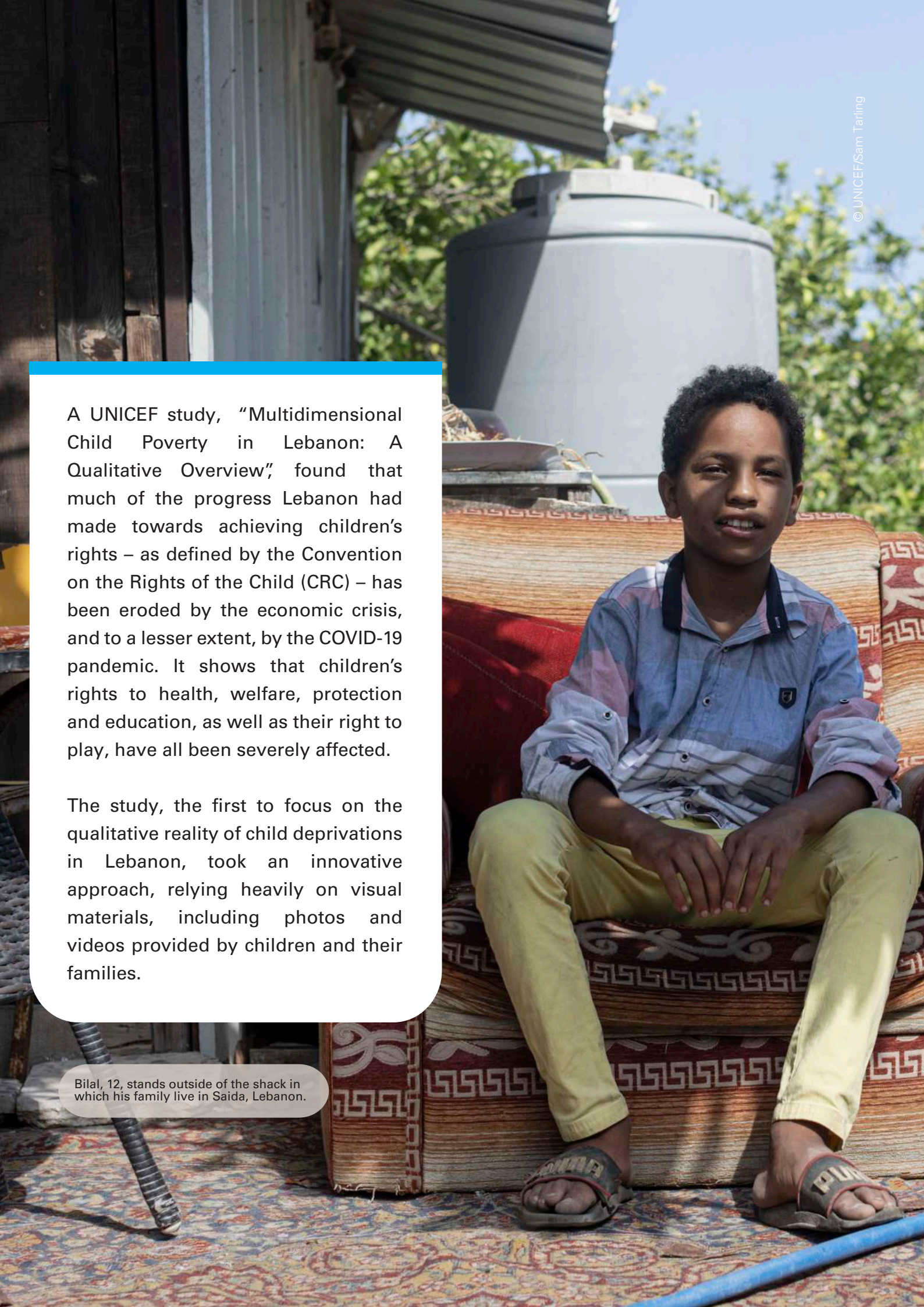
Edouard Beigbeder, UNICEF Representative in Lebanon.

A young girl cleaning car windows on the streets in Salda. Children work from morning till sunset to support their families.

A UNICEF study, “Multidimensional Child Poverty in Lebanon: A Qualitative Overview”, found that much of the progress Lebanon had made towards achieving children’s rights – as defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – has been eroded by the economic crisis, and to a lesser extent, by the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows that children’s rights to health, welfare, protection and education, as well as their right to play, have all been severely affected.

The study, the first to focus on the qualitative reality of child deprivations in Lebanon, took an innovative approach, relying heavily on visual materials, including photos and videos provided by children and their families.

Bilal, 12, stands outside of the shack in which his family live in Saïda, Lebanon.



Cutting down on the basics

Many families are forced to cut down on essential expenses to survive. In some cases, it means their children will not get the nutrition, health care or education they need.

Some caregivers have had to sell their furniture in order to feed their families or pay rent. One Syrian caregiver shared a video of his unfurnished house and the household's few remaining possessions stored in plastic bags.

A UNICEF child-focused rapid assessment (CFRA) conducted in June 2022 shows that:



84 per cent of households did not have enough money to cover the necessities;



38 per cent of households reduced expenses on education, as compared with 26 per cent in April 2021;



23 per cent of children had gone to bed hungry in the three months prior to the survey;



60 per cent cut spending on health treatment, up from 42 per cent in April 2021;



70 per cent of households now borrow money to buy food or purchase it on credit.

Children are being sent out to work so they can bring home some money, and girls are married off at a young age to reduce their economic burden.

“I used to work at a carwash, but I quit work to go to school. Then the owner of the house increased the rent for the house, so I had to leave school in order to work and support my family.” Syrian boy (15-17 age group).

Childhoods lost

Increasing deprivations are effectively robbing children of their childhoods and taking away their dreams. The study reveals that children are keenly aware of the impact of the crisis on their lives and their aspirations. Many feel that Lebanon offers few opportunities and that emigration is their only hope for a better future. The combination of the numerous deprivations, high levels of awareness and the loss of hope is severely affecting the mental health of children, who, in many cases, cannot access the care they need.

The CFRA shows that over two-thirds of caregivers felt their children's psychological status got worse over the past year.

A breakdown in trust

Several children participating in the study said they avoid asking for small things and try to help their family cut down on spending.

Children are feeling let down and losing trust in their parents for being unable to meet their basic needs.

Parents in turn, feel guilty about not being able to provide properly for their children. They perceive their children no longer respect them for failing in their roles as caregivers and providers. As a result, the relationship between parent and child is breaking down.

The collapse of relationships between children and their parents is even stronger in families where children engage in child labour, leading to a partial reversal of roles, particularly when children are the sole income earners.

“Children need psychological support. They are mentally and psychologically stressed. My grandson might have psychological problems because of all these circumstances.”
Lebanese caregiver.

“We need to pay more money now because of the increase in costs and the fuel. It is affecting everything in our lives. We are adapting. We try to save some money and we try to reduce the weight of the situation on our parents. We try as much as we can.”

Lebanese boy (15-17 age group)

“This is the social situation we have reached, where the child does not trust his father anymore – when the child asks his father to get him something and the father refuses because he cannot afford it.”

Lebanese father of two children aged 4 and 5

A vicious circle

Caregivers are frustrated by the financial hardships that prevent them from providing adequately for their children. The study indicates that parents prioritize spending on food for their children, followed by education. Other needs, including clothes and school materials, are lower down the list of priorities. One mother showed a picture of the tattered shorts her son has to wear.

The deprivations, the breakdown of relationships and the growing frustrations are causing increased tensions within families.

The CFRD indicates that 36 per cent of caregivers felt less tolerant with their children and treated them more harshly.



A rise in violence

Rising tensions – further fuelled by polarization within and between communities – have led to an increase in violence, including within homes and schools. Many Syrian children spoke of witnessing armed violence, and some reported acts of violence against themselves or their families. The rise in violent behaviour means that many streets and neighbourhoods where children used to play are no longer safe, further limiting children’s right to play, which already had been affected by COVID-19 lockdowns. Girls are the most affected, being increasingly restricted from leaving their homes for fear they will be harassed.

“Before, I used to go out to the streets and my mother didn’t worry about me. Now, she worries a lot when I go down because people fight a lot here and suddenly, they start shooting at each other. The other day, I was walking in the street and they started shooting in front of me, so I was very scared.”

Syrian Boy (12-14 age group).


Perceptions of unfairness

Many families – regardless of nationality – felt that a person needs to have the right connections in order to obtain aid and services. While this patronage system – known as *wasta* – has been around for a long time, there is evidence of increased reliance on personal connections.

The study also revealed disenchantment with NGOs' and international organizations' aid programmes, which participants felt were often biased, too short and only distributed aid sporadically or in limited quantities.

“I am trying to register my daughter in school and I can't. The school says that the capacity is 60 [Syrian] students, but they raise it to 65 for those with connections or *wasta*.”

Syrian father



Ritach, 5 years old.
Increasing deprivations are robbing children of their childhoods and taking away their dreams.

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REFERENCES

- 1 The study was conducted for UNICEF by Connecting Research to Development (CRD)
- 2 UNICEF CFRAs are carried out twice a year in Lebanon. The latest was conducted by telephone 13-27 June 2022 among some 1,500 households with at least one child (700 Lebanese, 300 Syrian refugees and 400 Palestinian refugees).

What needs to be done

“Multidimensional child poverty requires a multidimensional response grounded in a major strengthening of Lebanon’s social protection system that will ensure the fundamental rights of vulnerable children are protected.”

Edouard Beigbeder, UNICEF Representative in Lebanon

Economic and financial reforms will be a critical first step in addressing child deprivation in Lebanon. It will also be crucial to promote a subsequent inclusive economic recovery that can support the creation of equitable and decent employment. These steps must be rapidly accompanied by a massive expansion of access to quality services. This means increasing financial access to social services, significantly scaling up social assistance for households living in extreme poverty and providing social grants to households with specific vulnerabilities, including disability, childhood and old age.

At the same time, extensive communication and advocacy are needed to draw attention to the impacts of multidimensional child poverty that deprive children of their basic rights and put their lives and futures at risk.

Research plays an important role in understanding the scope of the issue and designing strategies to address it. As such, multidimensional poverty and child poverty should be measured officially and regularly in Lebanon.



United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
Lebanon Country Office
www.unicef.org/lebanon