

# **An Ethnographic Study of the Consequences of Social and Structural Forces on Children : the Case of Two Suburbs in Beirut.**

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## **Abstract:**

An ethnographic study of two low-income suburban communities in Beirut reveals that changes in family dynamics as an outcome of structural circumstances have negative impacts on the young. The two communities of interest include a Palestinian refugee camp and another community in the suburbs of Beirut where displaced families and daily laborers reside. Using observations and in-depth interviews with residents and key informants in these communities over a period of four months, a research team obtained an inside view of the residents' experiences within these communities. Findings point to overcrowding, unhealthy environmental conditions, and restrictions on work opportunities and inadequate social services as examples of circumstances in the Palestinian refugee camp. Similarly, in the other community, displacement, cohabitation, ethnic diversity, and social instability were found to be recurrent themes. Simultaneously, national political and economic state policies place restrictions on work and mobility for the Palestinians in Lebanon. The same laws leave the regulation of civil life for the Lebanese to the religious sects which follow their own laws for marriage, inheritance and divorce proceedings. The paper will discuss how as a result of these and other difficult conditions, children and youth face dire consequences including one or more of illegal status, school dropouts, child abuse, child labor and substance abuse. Policies to alleviate these outcomes on youth need to address the root causes situated within these structural forces, as pointed out in the study.

## **Introduction**

In the Middle East, the child is seen as the crucial link between generations. Until very recently, marriage, child rearing and the concept of childhood were based on widely accepted assumptions of society and individuals of all ages. In the patriarchal societies of the Middle East, children and particularly sons have always been valued. They are socialized into gender roles and subsequent division of labor at an early age. However, there is little evidence of carefree childhood or of childhood as an important stage in itself (Fernea, 1995).

Studies focusing on children's health and well-being cover basic social development and health indicators, such as mortality rates, school enrolment, access to drinking water and sanitation and child labor among others (see UNICEF, 2001; ILO, 2002). In addition to these, reports about children in the Middle East emphasize the effects of exposure to armed conflicts, economic sanctions and economic abuse on children (see Odibat, 2001; UNICEF 2001; Ashagrie, 1998). Improving children's conditions is portrayed as a community and family responsibility. Solutions by interventions rarely address root causes of problems, the underlying conditions related to or influenced by socio-political and economic structures. What these are and how they interact are seldom studied. Consequently, they are seldom addressed (Navarro, 2000).

Social and structural forces have been associated with dire consequences on children's health and health outcomes. For example, low income and socially-deprived communities have higher infant mortality rates, lower life expectancies, and higher young adult mortalities. They also have a higher rate of violence, accidents and nutritional deficiencies, growth & development problems in children, and psychological effects of deprivation over the years (Davey Smith, 1996; Wilkinson, 1994). When these forces are structural and deeply rooted in

the complex political organization of the country they often are not directly controlled by individuals and affect the health of the poorest people in the society in question.

An ethnographic study of low-income suburbs of Beirut, part of which is discussed in this paper, reveals that children are strongly affected by wider structural conditions. This paper presents an analysis of what these conditions are and how they interact to affect the lives of children in two suburban communities of Beirut. It also discusses how political and economic state policies, as well as regional and international influences, have repercussions on children's lives either directly by influencing reinforcement of children's rights and child labor laws, or indirectly by limiting employment opportunities for parents, restricting mobility and allowing sectarian laws to govern personal status codes. The urban areas under study in a larger Urban Health Research project carried out by researchers at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut were chosen after a number of field visits to several sites. The final choice was guided by criteria set by the researchers, namely previous history of displacement and/or migration, poverty and diversity of residents, among others. The current paper concentrates on Nabaa in the eastern suburbs of Beirut and Borj El Barajneh Palestinian Camp in the southern suburbs.

## **Research Design**

A research team of six, including the author, adopted an ethnographic research design for this study. Ethnography allows the researcher to obtain an insider's view and to understand people's perceptions of their living conditions by studying their contexts (Kellehear, 1993). It requires the investigator to rely on informants for information about their lives: what goes on and what it all means to them (Gold, 1997). We collected and analyzed data from these two communities of interest over a period of four months. Methods such as participant observation, interviews and the review of relevant documents were used. The collection and the analysis of data were concurrent. Further data collection continued until the data collected reached saturation, or until explanations for emerging themes became complete. The process was led by the development of explanations to the data we collected on the participants' lives and their perceptions of their communities.

### **1. Access**

To access the communities, we first approached key persons, such as two mayors (*mokhtars*) in Nabaa and other community leaders in the Camp. We met with them and presented introductory letters written in Arabic describing the purpose of the research, its procedures and the details of our study. Before commencing any formal interviews with participants at professional and lay levels, we made sure that the informants fully understood the purpose and the nature of the study and how the findings would be used. Most of the formal interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. Ethical considerations such as anonymity and confidentiality were explained to the participants before the interview. We continuously attempted to empathize with the participants and avoid any forms of unethical behavior. For example, when people declined to tape their interviews, we took mental notes and asked permission for actual note-taking.

### **2. Data Collection**

For our data collection we used in-depth methods of participant observation and individual and group interviews, both formal and informal, to obtain views on the community in general and participants' lives in particular. These included social and economic conditions as well as changes they experienced over time. Combining methods such as interviews and observations allowed us to cross-validate the findings and to add to the emerging descriptions. According to Khan and Manderson (1992), the use of more than one method decreases the possibility of shortfalls from relying solely on one technique. In the Palestinian Camp, we held 11

individual interviews and six focus groups discussions; in Nabaa, there were 16 individual interviews, one focus group, and numerous informal interviews. Participants included professionals, such as employees in the municipality, local governmental employees, community leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and volunteer groups, in addition to lay men and women.

All communication was in colloquial Arabic, which members of the research team speak fluently. Questions about how the participants value their community, what problems and difficulties they face, what needs to be changed and how they see the future for themselves and their children were adapted to their educational background. Translating from one language into another involves difficulties, however, and care has been taken in translating the Arabic concepts into their equivalents in English. Where appropriate, the original Arabic terms appear in italics.

### **3. Sampling Strategy**

The strategy used in the research was 'theoretical sampling', concepts that are of theoretical relevance and contribute to the emerging categories and explanations. The term 'theory' here refers to statements about necessary relationships among the categories of the phenomena researched (Silverman, 2000; Hammersley, 1992).

At the beginning of the research, when we were walking around in each of the communities to get acquainted with the physical and social settings, we selected participants based on their theoretical attributes, such as having a particular role in the community. For example, we interviewed key persons in the local municipality and from the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA), two mayors of Nabaa, the superintendent at the local police station, religious figures and several NGOs and voluntary organizations. In the Camp, we interviewed representatives of NGOs which offer services to the Palestinians and MOSA representatives who work in Borj El Barajneh suburb.

### **4. Analysis**

Analysis of the data occurred throughout the data collection to link, interpret and generate theory. Analysis in ethnography is done at all stages of the research. Reviewing daily field notes and other data collected at the end of each day helped set the plan for the next. We used thematic analysis to analyze the interviews and field journal data. Analysis is guided by the richness of the data, rather than predetermined codes, and the researchers' interest (Kellehear, 1993). At the end of daily fieldwork, all recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and rechecked against the recordings by listening to the interviews and comparing the transcriptions. Sets of data emerging from the transcriptions were grouped into categories, themes and sub-themes within spread sheets, and other data sets, such as note cards which showed summaries and highlighted categories according to areas of interest. The categories we chose were guided by the discussions triggered by the interview questions, namely things valued most, problems in the community, things that need changing, and visions of the future, as well as the salient recurring themes that appeared across data sets. We also used flow charts, which helped in creating visual presentations of particular processes and events, such as the relation between regional, national, community and family conditions.

### **Background**

The two communities discussed in this paper include a low-income ethnically diverse community, Nabaa, in an eastern suburb of Beirut and a Palestinian refugee Camp in a southern suburb, Borj El Barajneh, also in Beirut. The findings indicate salient similarities and differences between these communities (see Table 1).

Table 1 : Overview of the Two Urban Communities

Characteristics	<u>Nabaa</u>	<u>Borj El Baraj. Camp</u>
Economic Conditions	Unemployment	Unemployment
Physical Set-up	Overcrowding	Overcrowding
Population	Ethnically diverse	Similar ethnic background
Social Setting	Weak communal ties	Strong communal ties
State Restrictions	Personal status codes	Work and ownership

They are similar in that residents in both communities in suburban Beirut live in difficult economic conditions and face scarce work opportunities and a lack of social services. These suburbs have increased in size as a result of the war and subsequent slack urban development policies. The unequal distribution of growth in the country has led many rural residents to migrate to urban areas, such as Beirut, in search of work. Urban sprawl in these areas creates shantytowns that are characterized by overcrowding, lack of basic infrastructure and the lack of adequate social and health services. During the civil strife in Lebanon (1975-1990), the economic situation in these areas worsened with displacement and further illegal construction.

The two communities differ in a number of aspects significant to this paper. These include legislative restrictions imposed on the Palestinians by the Lebanese state as well as the structural reduction of UNRWA funds, the sole provider of social and health services. For Nabaa, the interest is in the ethnic diversity of the residents and the social restrictions posed by the state on personal status codes. However, despite economic difficulty commonly prevalent in these communities as in many areas in the country, communal social support is strong in the Camp but absent in Nabaa, a feature which has safeguarded children in the Palestinian Camp and reduced the coping strategies of the families in Nabaa.

There is little research literature available in the area of urban health in Lebanon. Studies conducted on these urban communities have been based on the interests of governmental and non-governmental agencies. Indicators for children's health and developmental needs are limited to countrywide estimates. For example, infant mortality decreased from 48 per thousand before the Lebanese war to 34 per thousand in 1992, indicating a decrease in infectious diseases. The infant mortality rate in Lebanon is 28 per thousand (UNICEF, 2001) in comparison to 33 per thousand in 1996 (UNICEF and Higher Council for Children [HCC], 1998), but this is not the same in all areas because of internal differences among the provinces. For example, in 1996 the IMR in Beirut was 19.6 per thousand; however, this masks the differences in social status within larger Beirut.

Unfortunately, prevailing economic conditions in Lebanon have not been conducive to social development. Unemployment, poverty and weak education and health care services are among the pressing problems. The Lebanese labor market is open to non-Lebanese workers, especially in construction and informal services (Haddad, 1996). The labor force grew from approximately 900,000 in 1987 to 1.01 million in 1993 (MOSA, 1995). All the casual workers, except the Palestinians who live in refugee camps, do not live permanently in Lebanon. They send their wages to their families abroad. The increasing number of cheap, foreign labor force competes with local labor. An estimated 55 to 60 per cent of the labor force in Lebanon are casual or low wage earners. They are exposed to the risk of poverty because of the decreasing number of available jobs and the rising cost of living (Central Directorate for Statistics, 1998), as is the case with the residents of the two urban communities in question.

After the war, in the 1990s, the Lebanese State faced a damaged infrastructure, internal debt and countrywide unemployment. The State priority has been economic development and the reconstruction of Beirut to bring it back to the financial and tourism center stage of the Levant. However, the plan has been criticized for overlooking social development and the needs of the various sectors of the population (Shammas, 1995).

Though official statistics are scarce, estimates point to an urban growth in the 1960s and early 1970s just before the 1975-1990 war. The change is explained by constant internal migration from the countryside to the city for work. This started towards the beginning of the French mandate in 1919 (Salibi, 1988). From 1959 to 1970 the population of Beirut alone rose from 28 per cent to 45 per cent of the total population of Lebanon (MOSA, 2000). It is estimated that the capital, Beirut, and its suburbs, hold 32.5 per cent of the Lebanese population (CDS, 1998).

The crowding in Nabaa is characteristic of low-income suburbs of Beirut, a consequence of displacement and internal migration as well as the influx of foreign laborers. As a result, Nabaa has become ethnically diverse and has a reputation for being a place where people come to escape social and financial pressures. As will be discussed later, this situation has implications for the children of these families where cohabitation and illegitimate children are not uncommon.

For the Palestinians residing in Lebanon, the living conditions are no better. More than half of the Palestinians who have taken refuge in Lebanon since 1948 currently reside in refugee camps (Abbas, 1996). Their employment and economic conditions are similar to those mentioned above in terms of competition with foreigners for work and the reduction of work opportunities because of economic decline in Lebanon. However, since the entry of the Palestinians in 1948, the Lebanese government considered them refugees and issued identity cards carrying this status. By law, the Lebanese State considers the Palestinians a special type of foreigner. Palestinians were limited to menial jobs after being prohibited from practicing 77 jobs (Al-Natour, 1996). The barrier to travel (imposed by the state and by travel restrictions from foreign countries) has blocked any hope of emigration or work. During and after the 1991 Gulf War, the Arab Gulf countries expelled many Palestinians and restricted their entry because the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) supported Iraq. Additionally, after the Oslo Accords, the PLO blocked relief and financial aid to Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon and concentrated on the refugees inside Palestine (Majed, 1995).

## **Discussion of Findings**

The following is an overview of the conditions of the children in the two communities and a description of links to structural and community-wide influences as taken from the research findings. I begin discussing the conditions of children in Nabaa and the structural conditions that have harmful ramifications for them and then discuss relevant issues in the Camp. To illustrate findings, relevant quotes and cases appear.

### **I. The Conditions of Children in Nabaa**

Nabaa is situated in the eastern suburbs of Beirut. It extends over three square kilometers and has an estimated population of 12,000 according to World Vision (2000). Shiite Muslims came into this community before 1975, together with Armenians escaping prosecution. Muslim residents were displaced from the community when an influx of Christians from Mount Lebanon settled there during the civil war (1975+) during which many people were displaced from residential areas. Throughout the 1990s, foreign workers came from surrounding Arab countries, such as Syria and Egypt, as well as from Asia and Africa.

Today, and as a consequence of these population movements, this community is ethnically diverse and overcrowded. The houses are mostly 2-3 stories high, built wall to wall and with

balconies hanging low above the streets. There are numerous side roads and alleys between the buildings. On some occasions, the roads are so narrow that cars are forced to park on the pavements in front of residences, thus obstructing the pedestrian walkway.

It is common in Nabaa that children do not carry Lebanese citizenship. Instead, they carry their parents' citizenship. The parents often have multinational backgrounds and have come to Nabaa in search of work, taking residence there. It is common to find that at least one parent in Nabaa is of non-Lebanese background. The Lebanese State does not permit a Lebanese woman to pass citizenship to her children or to her husband. Lebanese citizenship may only be transferred through males. In its constitution, the State allows religious sects to define members' personal status codes, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance. This is highly controversial and attempts to change it have been resisted by most religious leaders (Abu-Saba, 1999).

Another common feature is the illegitimate status of many children in Nabaa. If the father is not Lebanese, the children have a double burden when they grow up: illegitimate with an unknown citizenship. This becomes increasingly problematic for children when they need hospitalization, when they marry, or indeed any procedure requiring official papers. This cycle may continue throughout future generations.

Official papers are required for registration in schools. Thus, a considerable number of children have never attended school either because of the inability of their parents to pay for tuition fees or because the children do not have official registration papers. As of 1998, the Lebanese State requires elementary education for all children up to the age of 12 but this has not been fully reinforced because the schools are not equipped to hold the entire body of students (Ministry of Social Affairs and Higher Council for Children, 1998). Public schools in Beirut are expensive for families with multiple children and which have little or no income, such as those in Nabaa. Consequently, school dropouts are common. Among those who do attend, some drop out voluntarily due to their unwillingness to study or to non-conducive study environments at home.

The state budget deficit due to the war has led to a decline in the quality of education in public schools and institutions in Lebanon. This resulted in large drop-out rates, estimated by the Central Directorate for Statistics (1998) to be approximately 30 per cent, highest among boys aged 15-19 years who leave school to look for work (CDS, 1998). A reduction in enrolment in public schools and universities is also reported (Haddad, 1996; MOSA, 1995).

A lack of education for parents further limits employment opportunities and has often led to children of Nabaa working at a young age or spending time on the streets. Quite a few NGOs in Nabaa claim that domestic violence against children is prevalent in this community. Such violence may be in the form of physical or sexual abuse. It tends to be common when the father/stepfather is a substance abuser and is unemployed.

In an attempt to reduce the phenomenon of children on the streets, a community development organization, located in the vicinity of Nabaa (Nursing Care and Community Development Organization), has developed a Street Prevention Program that consists of health awareness programs relating to drugs and prostitution. The organization also assists children with their studies. However, it does not and cannot address the root causes of this phenomenon.

“We designed our Street Prevention Program for the 8-13- year-old children because we saw that they have no space to study at home. The houses are small and unhygienic. Also because of large family sizes, parents do not follow up on their children's studies nor do they attend to them properly. Given such, many children end up on the streets. We are seeing more and more children who are dropping out of school to work.”

(Director at Nursing Care and Community Development Organization).

The following cases illustrate the above-mentioned familial conditions. Farid, 4 years, and Murshid, 13 years, are bothers from an internationally married couple. The father is a Syrian who constantly drinks and the mother is a Lebanese who works part-time as a sales representative selling products from Syria to Lebanon. As the father is absent, Murshid started working in several places to support his mother ever since the family came to Lebanon two years ago. He dropped out of school a year ago, although he personally wants to attend school and is interested in becoming an actor. First, he worked at an amusement park until 2 am. Then, he worked at a barbershop, where he faced problems with the gay shop owner sexually abused him. Afterwards, he was forced by his mother to roam the streets and sell towels. When he did not bring in money with him, the mother would not let him sleep in the house. Murshid was also expected to look after his four-year-old brother and accompany him to the nursery, although at the time of the visit, the small brother was ill and was not attending the nursery.

Similarly, Sarah, a 17-year old teenager, was not receiving any direct help by her parents to divorce her husband, a 45-year-old friend of her father's. The father sold his daughter to this friend to pay his debts.

### **Family Conditions in Nabaa**

To explain these problems that the children in Nabaa are facing, it is worth shedding further light on their families and the conditions in which they live. Families in Nabaa are multi-structured and consist of nuclear, single parent, or extended families. Diversity in a family unit is not uncommon, with a mixture of both nationalities and religions. This is due to sexual relations between cohabitants of varying nationalities and religions, who may not intend or are unable to marry because civil marriage is not allowed in Lebanon. Their illegitimate status creates instability within the household and reflects negatively on the children: some are officially unregistered, many of whom are born out of wedlock. Parents are blamed by NGOs for not registering their children either due to the lack of awareness of the necessity for such legalities, their inability to pay for the whole procedure, or because they themselves are unregistered. However, a deeper look reveals that had civil marriage been allowed by the State, and had economic conditions been better and public health services available, the possibility of illegitimate children and cohabitation would decline.

“There is no stability in the family. Sometimes, the family breaks down. Each of the parents goes his/her separate way or resides with other people. As such, the children are either born out of wedlock or are unregistered”.

(Local NGO in Nabaa)

“My neighbor's wife walked out on her husband and left her 7- month-old daughter with him. I'm looking after her because he works all day. I barely have enough money to support my own family – we are trying to find a place for the girl at the orphanage”.

(30 year-old mother of 6 in Nabaa)

Economic necessity has created variations in the distribution of economic power within the family. Having little or no education, men are often employed in semi- or unskilled part-time jobs. Women seek employment as house cleaners or shop attendants to augment the household income. Children also assist in generating income when women are the sole breadwinners or children live in single parent, broken, or problematic households.

The implications of this on the children are yet to be studied. However, several NGOs argue that employers often exploit the working children by paying minimal wages for heavy work

loads. Children may also be given responsibilities that completely differ from the type of work that was originally agreed upon. It is worth mentioning that, as children are often encouraged by their parents to work, child labor usually is not reported, making it difficult to take legal action against those responsible. Additionally, most of the children are of foreign origin, rendering it impossible to enforce local child protection laws.

“We can’t do much about children working. You don’t see them that often. It’s up to the parents. If they do not complain, we can’t do anything”. (Police station superintendent in Nabaa)

To make things worse for the families, social support and communal ties that exist elsewhere in Lebanon are missing in this community. This reduces the residents’ capacity to cope with difficult circumstances. People continuously move within and into Nabaa in search of cheaper rent. They therefore do not have the time to establish social networks. Also, there are many foreign workers who have taken residence as individuals and groups and have no social contact with the families that have been there longer. They actually prefer to stay away from these workers.

“I don’t let my children out of the house so they don’t mix with the strangers living around us. We don’t know where they are coming from. We hear many stories (of problems).(45 year old mother in Nabaa)

Consequently, people tend to turn to themselves and those with whom they share dwellings, rather than those outside their household. This affects the children who are seen to have a limited number of friends and contacts outside the house either because they have dropped out of school or are not allowed to mingle with strangers in the streets (see Makhoul et al 2002).

## **II. Conditions of Children in Borj El Barajneh Camp**

The original structure of the camp is tribal. Residents came to the Camp in groups from Palestinian villages and settled in neighborhoods which currently carry their names. With a population size of around 14,000 to 18,000 in an area of 1.6 square kilometers, the camp is densely populated. The average home consists of three multi-purpose rooms. The physical space is severely limited, particularly since the average Palestinian family consists of five to six children. The houses are poorly built, with little or no ventilation. Many of the homes we visited suffer from humidity and a lack of sunlight. When it rains, many houses leak. As a result of these conditions, many children suffer from respiratory problems such as asthma. Other health problems mentioned by participants include diarrhea, fever and a relatively high incidence of infectious diseases. This is to be expected, given the crowded living conditions and lack of sanitary environmental conditions.

Inside the house, the children do not have a place to play; the only places available to them are roof tops, many of which are unfenced. The relatively small open spaces are made hazardous by wires, pipes and unused items that children may easily trip on. An interview with the medical staff at the local hospital indicated that a high incidence of accidents occurs in the Camp due to its unregulated physical structure (narrow roads that are only fit for one person to walk through, holes in the ground). In one instance, a ten-year-old boy walked in with a bandage on his forehead during an interview with his grandfather. He explained that he was injured that morning by a window being flung open as he walked on the narrow road in front of it.

Unlike the children of Nabaa, who have limited access to schools because of difficult financial situations, Palestinian children in the Camp are not encouraged to complete their schooling or to seek higher education because an education is no guarantee for employment. Moreover, the schools run by UNRWA are the only free schools available to the Palestinians. Located outside the camp, the school buildings are poorly built and hold overcrowded classes

consisting of more than 50 students in each section. Due to the large numbers of students and the lack of facilities, the UNRWA runs two shifts, each comprising four hours of learning for the children. Because of budget cuts, UNRWA employs unqualified teachers. As a consequence, teaching quality has been affected significantly. This situation presents many reasons for children to leave school and join the labor market. The fact that UNRWA does not have secondary schools in any Arab country leads to many dropouts after the preparatory level (Sirhan, 1996). College level education is a privilege to a certain few who do not have family responsibilities and can meet educational expenses. Two kindergarten teachers from separate NGOs mention differences regarding the financial abilities of children's families. This is reflected in what the child brings to school in his/her lunchbox or what he/she wears. "In our organization, we distribute clothes to children on the occasion of Fitr and Adha holidays. This year, many children were overjoyed when they received shoes to wear for the occasion. Imagine, overjoyed by a pair of shoes!" (Teacher at a Palestinian NGO).

### **Family Conditions in the Camp**

The poor conditions of the Camp may be attributed to the legal and political restrictions imposed on Palestinian refugees. The Lebanese State does not allow significant improvements in the Camp since it is viewed as a temporary residence, especially in view of the fact that the reconstruction plan for Beirut is still underway. Thus, overcrowding is substantial and carries with it serious repercussions on the quality of life for children in the Camp. In addition to health problems of an infectious nature, children are exposed to indoor air pollutants such as tobacco smoke. More than half of the houses and NGOs we visited had members or workers who smoked. Also young children imitate older children who smoke to pass time (mentioned in 7 interviews) : "...the *shabab* (young men)...wander around...*argileh*, stereo, cigarettes.. This is how they spend their time near their homes." (40 year old mother)

"...My nephew is 17 years old and smokes *argileh* while my son is 8 years old. He goes to his uncle's house. I discovered that he is smoking *argileh* with his cousin. So when he turns 14 or 15 this means he will start smoking cigarettes." (35 year old mother)

Similar to conditions in Nabaa, poverty is another major problem for the Palestinian families. It is a consequence of the general economic conditions in Lebanon. The limited aid from UNRWA, the expulsion of the PLO in 1982 and competition from foreign labor have exacerbated their financial toll even further. Unemployment is common because the State has restricted employment opportunities as mentioned above and because the only jobs available to them, such as construction workers, electricians and other menial jobs are subject to competition due to the unrestricted entrance of cheaper Syrian labor. As in Nabaa, many Palestinian children have left school and have entered the job market to help their families.

In general, financial support given to Palestinian NGOs is hardly sustainable. It is highly related to the global structural forces that shape international politics. This funding is affected by political decisions and is related to the fear of forced nationalization '*tawtin*' and the Palestinian cause and 'the right to return'. In the past, the main funding source was usually socialist northern European countries. The USA funded therapeutic operations for children for awhile. With the incidents of September 11<sup>th</sup>, many organizations have halted their support. Arab states were not major donors but after the Gulf War their funds decreased considerably. For the time being, the 15 centers that provide nursery, day care facilities and social activities for children and young women depend on individual support as well as private funding organizations dedicated to aid Palestinian refugees.

At the level of health services, the situation is not any better. The only two medical outlets available to the Palestinians within the Camp are the Haifa hospital and the UNRWA clinic.

Some hospitals and health centers run by NGOs in other camps are also available. Financial aid provided to Palestinians to cover these medical costs has decreased, as have the funds that financially nourish the health centers. Other hospitals in the area do not admit Palestinians because they cannot afford the high costs.

A nine-year-old girl had a heart problem. The parents could not pay for hospital fees. The girl died of complications. A woman living in a neighborhood of the Camp had many stories to tell us regarding children who died or who currently suffer morbidity because no hospital would admit them for treatment.

Despite these difficult conditions, we found that the Camp has strong social ties among its residents, unlike Nabaa. Neighbors are important to each other and the neighbor is a recurring concept in the interviews. The inhabitants of the Camp still live the rural way of life similar to that of their ancestors. As a result, it is not uncommon that the resolution of personal or family problems is delegated to the elderly in the family, usually the extended family (*aili*). Traditional Muslim families, such as those in the Camp, often include three or more generations where respect and esteem increases with age. The extended structure offers stability and physical and psychological support in times of need (Dhami and Sheikh, 2000). In the Camp, family ties and organizations prevail, forming a source of strong social support in times of need, celebration and raising the children.

*“The most important thing is that when someone gets sick, you find the family around him. I mean all the family does not leave him. And if there is a happy event, this also applies. Everyone shares happiness and grief”.*  
(35 year old married woman)

*“When someone falls into trouble, he is not alone. He finds someone who is with him and stays with him and thinks with him”.*  
(Worker in a Palestinian NGO)

Almost every family in the Camp has a ‘family organization’ or a family fund that is sometimes able to secure money for those in need. Even though people cannot return the money, still they lend each other because of strong family ties that they share ever since they came to Lebanon in 1948.

*“Our family and two others have formed a savings box. Our family is the largest. Every month the head of the household who is working puts in 5,000LL. This remains in the box to be used in emergency situations. This gives them burial costs and contributes to medical expenses”.*(40 year old woman)

There seems to be reciprocity among neighbors as among family members.  
*“..here in the Camp, they sympathize with each other. There is sympathy and caring. There is no dishonesty...We are all alike. If I have two loaves, I eat one and give my neighbor the other. We, the Palestinians are like that. We like neighbors to give to each other”.*  
(elderly woman)

Another form of financial help is remittances sent by immigrant Palestinians to relatives and family members whenever their financial situations permit.  
*“There are people depending on their children abroad. These are a little better off than the others”.*(elderly woman)

*“My uncle in the Gulf sends me some money: one or two hundred or so dollars from time to time. It all depends on his family expenses. These are difficult times for them, too”.*(27 year old man)

For many, the camp feels like home, a place where family and friends live near each other, as a result residents relate feelings of security and belonging to the camp, a shared experience of a lost nationality and discrimination from what is perceived as a hostile outside society. That is why some Palestinians would rather stay in the Camp than live outside.

*“The Camp is better than a hundred Borj...If something happens to someone, everyone knows. We live in close proximity to each other, not like (name of an affluent suburb)...”*(young woman)

However, many told the researchers that they cannot afford to move out but that, even if they did, they would rather stay because they do not want to leave their family and friends behind. Supportive family and social networks contribute positively when it comes to raising children. Mothers who need to work can leave their children with relatives. Orphans whose parents have died are taken care of by their relatives. As toddlers they learn about their homeland, Palestine: the elderly narrate the story of the *Nakba* so that they know about the ‘cause’. This social support has lessened the impact of being orphans for children since it creates a sense of belonging and offers a social presence to cope with their hardships.

It is not surprising that given these strong social ties, children have been able to survive the above-mentioned difficult conditions, a support not available for children in Nabaa because of the diverse backgrounds and the lack of familiarity in that community. However, the future may witness a breakdown of such support in the Camp given the economic hardships which are imposing on the capacity of families to be supportive.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, I have attempted to describe the conditions of children in two urban low-income communities in Beirut. I have argued that the conditions they are living in are linked to wider local and regional structural forces that are political and economic in nature. As in other areas in Lebanon, children do not have access to basic education and services, not only because of their families’ financial problems, but also because of political restrictions, such as the case of the Palestinians; and political decisions affecting budgetary allocations for education and health for the Lebanese. State-level policies, regional constraints and global conditions are more overwhelming to the Palestinians in the Camp and more difficult to change than local policies governing personal status codes of the Lebanese, such as residents of Nabaa. The lack of social and economic policies which meet the needs of adults living in urban areas have adverse repercussions on children’s legal citizenship as well as on access to health and social services.

I have also attempted to dwell on the social support that exists in the Palestinian Camp but not in the ethnically-diverse community of Nabaa. This is important to counter the negative effects on children. The lack of support exhibited in Nabaa manifests in broken families and domestic abuse. This social support inherent in the social structure of the Camp may decline soon if the economic and political structural forces are not addressed.

This paper presents important policy implications from the findings. There are many children who are without citizenship and who have not been registered as Lebanese citizens by their parents as registration fees are expensive for them. To remedy this situation and to increase birth registration, the procedures for registration should become free of charge with registration transactions accessible to all.

The illegitimate status of children has dire implications for children’s access to social services and school enrollment. Civil marriage should become an option for those who do not and cannot marry under the sectarian personal status codes permitted by the State.

Quality education and social and health services are not readily available for children in these low-income communities. This finding points to a need for increasing state budgetary allocations for these services as well as supporting NGOs which provide similar services in poor communities that are not easily reached by public services.

The unrestricted foreign influx of laborers into the local market presents competition to Lebanese workers seeking employment. The state is urged to remedy the situation by considering restrictions, such as taxes on such laborers or their employers which could pay for social security benefits or increase revenues for public expenditures.

The Palestinians face restrictions on work because of state policies. There is a need to reduce these restrictions to accommodate at least some middle-income jobs which may lead to financial sustainability for families in the Camp.

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