

*Interview by LCPS Senior Researcher Fadi Nicholas Nassar with **Sylvana Lakkis**, the acting President of the Lebanese Union for People with Physical Disabilities and Chairperson of the Regional Arab Bureau of Disabled People's International (DPI). She is also the second vice president of DPI. The interview below highlights the gaps in Lebanon's approach to social protection and the particular exclusion of people with disabilities in a time of accentuated crisis. In doing so, it underscores the urgency and necessity of centering people with disabilities in the formulation, organization, and implementation of any approach to social protection and social assistance in the country.*

Lebanon is facing an unprecedented economic and financial crisis. Within this context of fragility and a rapidly declining purchasing power, does the existing subsidy model offer sufficient or sustainable social protection to the country's most vulnerable, especially to people living with disabilities?

Of course not. First, the challenges of corruption have weakened the public sector, not to mention the absence of good governance. Second, the issue of inclusion is not yet systemized in the public sector. Segregation and exclusion from the public sector have been the only official experience of people living with disabilities. There is no clear strategy for social protection, only initiatives. These initiatives do not cover all aspects of social protection. For us, social protection means a package of rights. What they have been doing is very limited and does not cover in an equal way people with disabilities. Actually, most of these people are suffering.

What impact would lifting subsidies have in this crisis context on people living with disabilities?

A big impact. Due to the limited traditional approach of policy towards people with disabilities, this group is already marginalized and has limited access to public services or employment. Since the country is not inclusive, disability costs more. Without the subsidies, it will have a huge impact on people with disabilities making them more at risk. For example, since we do not have public transportation or an accessible transportation system, people living with disabilities have to rely on their personal social and familial networks. As prices rise and with it the cost of transportation, it will be an added strain on them. It will affect all aspects of life. There has to be a strategy and an alternative to transition into a safe and inclusive approach to social protection. When people are left out without anything, how can they live? 83% of people with disabilities are unemployed, because they are discriminated against. Not because they cannot work.

What measures can be taken to ensure the development of an inclusive approach to social protection and social assistance in Lebanon?

First, we need to find a way to stop corruption. Because no matter what you do, if we continue to have such a management, nothing is guaranteed. For people with disabilities, we need to make sure that social protection policies are issued. We need to see how social insurance and social security is being provided. How education is going to be inclusive and welcoming to people with disabilities. Even now, as it is, education is closed to people with disabilities. If we do not have a chance to get an education, we do not have a chance to get decent work, and without the two of these, how can we make a living?

The Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF), for example, put forward by the UN, the World Bank, and the EU, must have criteria that follows international standards to include people with disabilities in their framework in whatever recovery plan the state is going to advance. For example, regarding the victims of the Beirut blast, there are around 1,000 people who became disabled because of the explosion. These people have not had a chance to get the treatment they need. The state did not cover their treatment. Those who lost their houses, their businesses, they too were not supported sufficiently. We need a comprehensive and inclusive strategy. This starts when these rights are taken into account in planning.

Do you have any additional comments or reflections you would like to share?

The real problem is in respecting diversity, not in having a disability. The state should operate in a way that welcomes everyone and respects all needs: migrant workers with disabilities, refugees with disabilities, citizens with disabilities, elderly people with disabilities. There is no justice if people with disabilities are not included in the agenda. There is no eradication of poverty if people with disabilities are left behind. There is no path to development if people with disabilities are not included. They must be included in formulating, in planning, in monitoring, and in implementing.