Baalbeck stands up to COVID-19

Measures developed by cities for migrants and refugees during the COVID-19.
Abir el Khoury Jbeily

As a Consultant in International Relations for several Lebanese municipalities, I work as an International Affairs Advisor to the municipality of Baalbeck. I am speaking to your today on behalf of the Mayor Mr. Fouad Ballouk, as well as the Municipal Council of the Baalbeck.
Quick Introduction

Photo Source: Google Images
Baalbeck the City of the Sun

Baalbeck is a city located east of the Litani River in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. Baalbeck is home to around 200 thousand residents which include 60 thousand Syrian refugees and some 10 thousand Palestinian refugees. Baalbeck is proudly a member of the UNESCO Global Network of learning Cities.

Photo Source: Google Images
Baalbeck the City of the Sun

In Greek and Roman times Baalbek was also known as Heliopolis, the City of the Sun. It is home to the Baalbek temple complex which includes two of the largest and grandest Roman temple ruins: the Temple of Bacchus and the Temple of Jupiter. It was inscribed in 1984 as an UNESCO World Heritage site.
Municipal Responsibility amid the COVID-19 Threat

Similarly to any other country around the world, the Novel Coronavirus has been threatening Lebanon since mid-February 2020. As positive cases surfaced, the municipal authorities stepped up and showed a great sense of responsibility throughout the Lebanese territories. The municipalities did not hesitate to take the initiative and put in place the necessary measures aiming to limit the spread of the COVID-19.

Following the joint efforts of the Ministry of Health, represented by Minister Hassan Hamad, the Governor of Baalbeck – Hermel, Mr. Bashir Khodr, the Municipal Work Committee and the influential personalities; the Municipality of Baalbeck took safety measures specifically deployed to provide health security to all its residents equally, whether Lebanese or refugees.
Municipal Responsibility amid the COVID-19 Threat

As the first few cases of COVID-19 surfaced and before the full lockdown was implemented, Baalbeck Municipality embarked on a journey of rigorous work aiming to:

- Raise awareness through a social media campaign inciting people to stay home and safe.
- Working hand in hand with governmental authorities to ensure safety directives are followed to the letter, including wearing masks and gloves, following sanitization procedures...
- The municipality also ensured that high-risk places such as coffee shops, restaurants and other businesses remained closed to ensure safety.
A special message was written by the Mayor of Baalbeck asking people to abide by the lockdown accompanied with a prayer for this threat to subside.
A special campaign to urge people to be safe and stay physically distant in their homes.
Municipal Responsibility amid the COVID-19 Threat

In addition to what was previously mentioned, Municipalities undertook regular sanitization of public spaces such as the roads, the streets, the shops...

To illustrate this, in the following you can see some pictures of the endeavors undertaken by the Municipality of Baalbeck in collaboration with the Islamic Health Society and the Civil Defense.
Municipal Responsibility amid the COVID-19 Threat

Photo source: Social Media
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Mayor of Baalbeck, Mr. Fouad Ballouk, and Vice-Mayor Mostafa Chal during a field visit
Municipal Responsibility amid the COVID-19 Threat

Photo source: Social Media
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Municipal Responsibility amid the COVID-19 Threat

By mid-March, the Lebanese Government took the decision of putting the entire country in lockdown and declaring a state of health emergency.

The municipalities, including the municipality of Baalbeck, took it upon themselves to aid the Lebanese Government in implementing the lockdown, ensuring safety measures are followed, and curfew hours are observed.

Below are a few pictures to illustrate the measures taken to ensure the safety of all the residents of Baalbeck equally whether local or refugee.
Checkpoints were established at the entrances of the city, where health personnel ensured that all visitors who enter the city are both healthy and not showing symptoms.
Baalbeck Municipalities Union, in collaboration with the official authorities and the NGOs within the region established a Health Committee, tasked with visiting the Syrian refugee camps and implement safety measures.

Photo source: Social Media
Sanitization of tents in Syrian refugee camps
Educational Measures for Refugees and Migrants

As the COVID-19 threat emerged, the first sector to be put in lockdown was the educational sector. So currently, all schools in Lebanon are closed for the safety of the children. At this stage, education is limited to online teaching or broadcasting of the curriculum on the national TV.

Before the lockdown, the UNHCR in collaboration with local educational authorities were working hand in hand to provide proper education to all the residents in Lebanon equally. The main approach used was to open classrooms in the afternoon for the Syrian curriculum to be taught.
Economic Challenges

The COVID-19 was not only challenging on the level of public health, but also on the economic level. As the country went into lockdown, many people who live on daily wages lost their livelihoods; namely the Lebanese who do not receive regular financial aid as well as food and fuel donations from UN agencies such as the UNHCR similarly to the refugees in the region.

The UNHCR has played a pivotal role in ensuring safety and security to the refugees by providing financial aid, food, medical attention, educational enrollment and much more to the refugees especially in the Bekaa area.
Economic Challenges

This left the Lebanese residents to fend for themselves as there still isn’t a clear plan to dispatch aid to the most needy families.

The municipality as well as local organizations stepped up to provide food and basic necessities to the most needy, however, as municipalities lack funding and the economic situation in Lebanon worsens; these endeavors are not nearly enough to cater for a small portion of the needy throughout the country whether residents or refugees.
Economic Challenges

On this note I would like to highlight a few key figured about Lebanon:

- Around 40% of the population lives below poverty lines
- Unemployment rate are expected to hit 50% due to the economic situation
- The purchase power of the Lebanese has recently been cut in half due to the falling of the Lebanese Currency.

The picture after the Coronavirus threat subsides is quite grim, we count on the help of the International Community to persist as a country who never failed to step up and help when help was needed.
Thank you for your attention!