

I am, as you can see, the local government, the electricity company and much more.

*Building Committees as Spaces
of Social Organizing in Beirut*



Ebla Research Collective
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Contents

Authorship

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Photos

Beirut buildings and scenes taken by the researchers in 2023.

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Disclaimer

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I. Introduction

Living in Lebanon in the past few years (or decades) has been like running an obstacle course; a continuous struggle to adapt to changing and increasingly difficult challenges, from power outages and water shortages affecting everyday life to economic and political instability a constant threat to a prosperity the people have always longed for. Since the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1991), Lebanon's residents have adopted various coping strategies and found different solutions to deal with the unfolding crises. Crucially, these strategies have often gone beyond the household to involve wider communities in small towns and villages. In cities and larger urban areas, where housing is chiefly apartments in buildings, the self-organizing that occurs on the building level is a space and dynamic that deserves attention.

This research is the first phase of an ethnographic collective study that aims at documenting and analysing the crisis-ridden daily lives of residents in the city of Beirut, and how they individually and collectively negotiate, manage and resist the challenges of a city collapsing. It takes the building as the primary unit of analysis and in light of the recent (and ongoing) electricity crisis, focuses on the city's building-level responses and the organising around it. The research has the following objectives:

1. Document the lived experience of the crisis on the texture of the everyday life of residents in Beirut, and their access to basic rights and services.
2. Capture the different life-making, coping and resistance strategies, specifically looking for what strategies and collaborations emerge from the cracks of those daily difficulties.
3. Probe the possibility that building committees could inform other forms of collective organizing that are broader in scope.

I.A. Urban living and the building as a primary unit of analysis

Our focus on Beirut and urban living in the country is because around 89% of people in Lebanon live in cities, mostly in dense agglomerations in Beirut and Tripoli¹. Though this trend¹ might be reversing in light of the economic crisis and the changes in work patterns from the Covid-19 pandemic², the overall population continues to be mainly urban dwellers residing in apartment blocks, or multistorey buildings. Beirut is estimated to have around 18 thousand buildings that are vertical residential structures with the majority having more than six floors³. We thus put forward that the building is the primary unit around which residents of Beirut and its suburbs organize collectively. It is literally and figuratively the space (a vertical space) in between the

private (our homes, our personal spaces) and the public (the street, the shops, and the accumulated garbage). It is the site of intimate collective organizing, defining what the commons constitute and how we choose as city residents to deal with them. Buildings are also the centre around which a multiplicity of stakeholders come together. Typically, most buildings in Beirut have formal or informal building committees that are more of a collective of residents that decide on building repairs, energy use, sanitation and hygiene, safety and security, and 'conciierge' management, among others. Most buildings in Beirut are also laden with history; taking shelter together during the war, the different infringements on shared space, but also a site of long-lasting relationships.

This research considers the building and the building committee – the formal or informal – as a space that portrays the everyday challenges of living in Beirut today, but also the space to witness the many ways in which people come together in community and solidarity, and attempt to innovate in the face of crises. The assumption is that the process of seeking collaborative solutions for the city's challenges of everyday living is a form of resistance to the neoliberal imagining of residence in Beirut, and to the precarity that the corrupt regime imposes.

¹ Aaron O'Neill, "Lebanon – Urbanization 2012–2022," Statista, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/455864/urbanization-in-lebanon/>.

² Amer Shikhani, "From Cities to Villages: Reverse Migration on the Rise in Lebanon – Beirut Today," *Beirut Today* (blog), September 22, 2021, <https://beirut-today.com/2021/09/22/from-cities-to-villages-reverse-migration-on-the-rise-in-lebanon/>.

³ Alaa Krayem et al., "Machine Learning for Buildings' Characterization and Power-Law Recovery of Urban Metrics," ed. Celine Rozenblat, *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 1 (January 28, 2021): e0246096, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246096>.

I.B. The salience and persistence of Lebanon's electricity crisis

Since the onset of the economic crisis in Lebanon in 2019, the impact it has had on people's everyday lives has exceeded the worst projections. Chiefly, the country was plunged into darkness, as the government could not fund the needed fuel imports to keep the lights on. An electricity crisis ensued, where households were getting one hour – if at all – of electricity provided by the national utility company, Electricité du Liban. This was compounded by a currency collapse and an economic crisis leading to a shortage of fuel, including diesel.

Nevertheless, one cannot talk of the electricity crisis that culminated in 2021 in Lebanon as a distinct event – after all the country had always lived through a protracted electricity crisis. We see the period from 2019, not as an exceptional moment or a “mere temporary injunction”⁴ but as an “intensification of a larger, protracted critical order”⁵. Since the war, people in Lebanon have learned to live with electricity shortages, finding myriad ways to cope with scheduled power cuts and to be prepared for sudden power loss, whether resulting from technical problems, war or strife. During the civil war, people adopted various solutions such as small petrol-run generators and car batteries for lighting during extensive power outages that resulted from the violence. Since the end of the war, a new normal was set in place whereby scheduled power outages and power shedding became a typical feature of everyday life, resulting in solutions and augmentation strategies that have become entrenched in the fabric of the country's built environment. Large diesel generators were installed in new and existing buildings and residential compounds, providing continuous electricity provision to those who could afford it and dividing cities along socio-economic lines⁶.

Power augmentation using diesel generators had also developed into an informal system of provision, where an informal power supplier using a large diesel generator would sell monthly subscription services to households⁷. These solutions come with implications for equality of access to basic services depending on where one lives in the country⁸.



Over the years, subscription service providers flourished across the country, prompting the need for the Ministry of Energy to regulate the price for amperes, enforced by the municipalities⁹, and impose the installation of metering for customers, although both actions have effectively legitimised this largely informal sector.

A heterogeneous infrastructure¹⁰ for electricity best describes the networks of provision across the country. While before 2019, the informal network provided at least three hours a day in Beirut rising to six or nine hours outside the capital, by 2021, Lebanon reached a complete blackout. This led to diesel generators providing at least 12 hours a day to households and businesses, with some operating around the clock. This infrastructure has also placed Lebanon amongst the highest in the MENA region in death rates and economic costs from air pollution¹¹. Though no recent scientific studies exist yet, experts predict a substantial deterioration in health because of increased reliance on electricity production from diesel generators. Furthermore, the management, or rather the juggling, of those various sources to provide for the everyday needs of city dwellers is now largely done by residents and their representatives in building committees.

⁴ Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen et al., “Crisis: Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives,” *Global Discourse* 12, no. 3–4 (September 2022): 457, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378921X16391801343500>.

⁵ Henrik Vigh, “Slow Crisis in Bissau and Beyond,” *Global Discourse* 12, no. 3–4 (September 2022): 522–36, <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378921X16348942683000>.

⁶ Eric Verdeil, “Water and electricity networks between stress and reform: from post-civil war reconstruction to the new Lebanese wars,” in *The Politics and Planning of Destruction and Re-construction in Lebanon Conference Proceedings*, June 2009. Oxford, United Kingdom.

⁷ Dana Abi Ghanem, “Energy, the City and Everyday Life: Living with Power Outages in Post-War Lebanon,” *Energy Research & Social Science* 36 (2018): 36–43, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.11.012>.

⁸ Verdeil (n 6).

⁹ Pauline Gabillet, “Le commerce des abonnements aux générateurs électriques au Liban,” *Géocarrefour* 85, no.2 (2010): 153–163, <https://doi.org/10.4000/geocarrefour.7861>.

¹⁰ Mary Lawhon et al., “Thinking through Heterogeneous Infrastructure Configurations,” *Urban Studies* 55, no. 4 (March 1, 2018): 720–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017720149>.

¹¹ <https://www.greenpeace.org/mena/en/appr/>

Profile of buildings covered by this research

participating researcher

1. Electricity

- 1. Number of hours of supply
- 2. Source of energy supply whether building owned or reliant on subscription to a neighborhood provider
- 3. Pricing, fixed based on number of amps or according to metered consumption.

2. Building committee

- 1. Registration status
- 2. Number and compositions of members.

1. Kantari / 1960

1. 19/24 Subscription Metered

2. Not Registered 1 woman 2 men

Reema

2. Sanayeh / 2011

1. 18/24 Owned Metered

2. Registered 9 men

Yasmin

3. Mar Elias / 2008

1. 14/24 Owned Fixed

2. Registered 4 men 1 woman

Imad

4. Haret Hreik / 2011

1. 24/24 Subscription Metered

2. Registered 1 woman 2 men

Farid

5. Batrakieh / 1960

1. 19/24 Subscription Metered

2. Not Registered 1 woman 2 men

Fadia

6. Antelias / 2019

1. 24/24 Subscription Metered

2. No committee

Sami

7. Badaro / 1960

1. N/A Subscription Metered

2. Registered 9 men

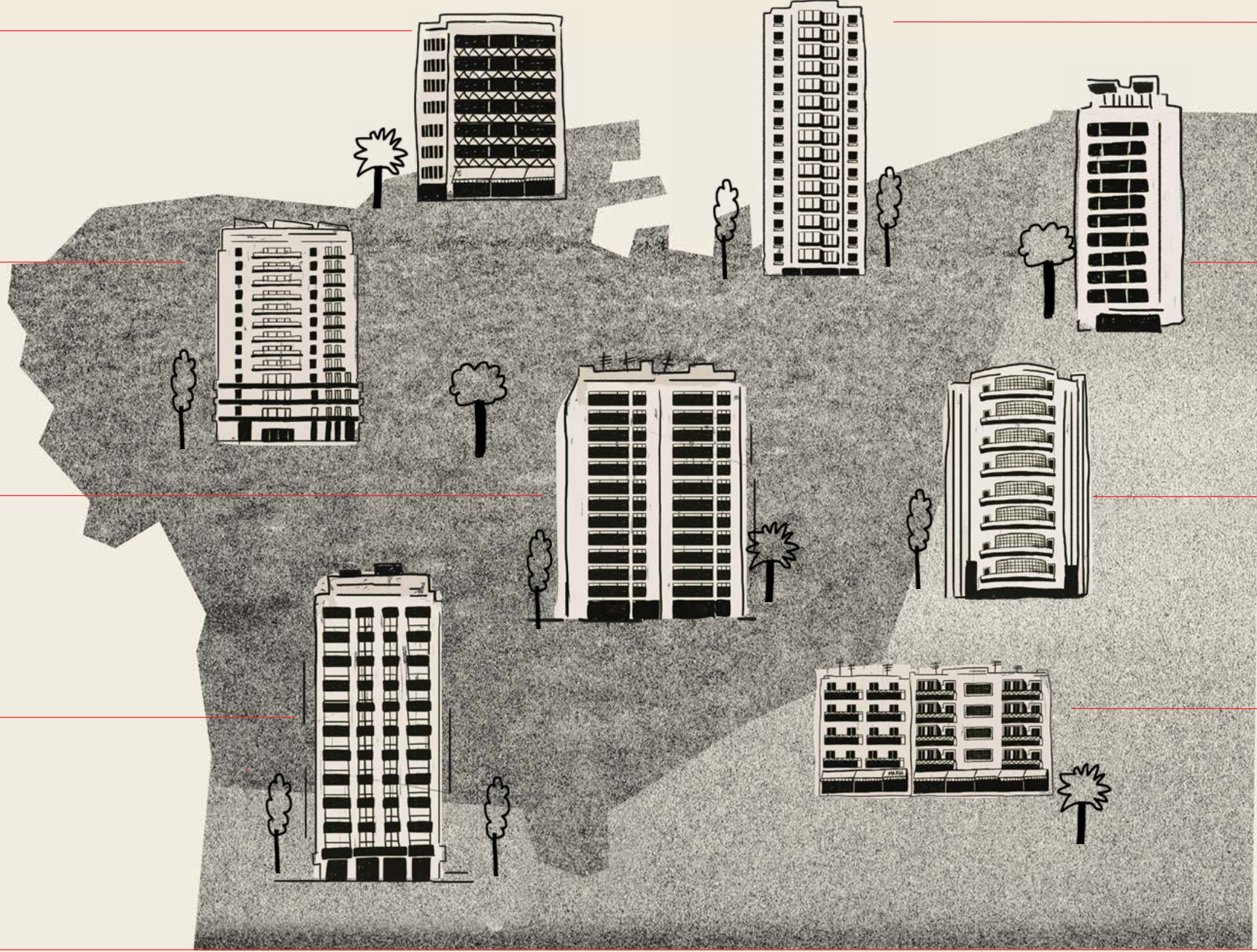
Rami

8. Furn El Shebak / 1950

1. 24/24 Subscription Metered

2. No committee

Maysa



II. Methodology

“I thought that if we were trying to understand daily life in Lebanon, we cannot do so without one of the most populated areas in Beirut—“dahye”. I simply wanted to give a voice to the lovely people who live in the building with me, and wanted them to think, complain, and talk alongside the building dwellers in other areas of Beirut. [...] I wanted the chance to speak about them not as the “segregated Hezbollah stronghold”, but as active members of Beirut who are also trying to navigate the difficult circumstances—I wanted them to be part of this research in particular.”

————— Farid, participating researcher

Eleven researchers (7 women, 4 men) collected the data for this research report between April and October 2023, using collaborative ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews in Beirut and its suburbs. In addition, one anthropology PhD researcher joined our meetings and contributed field notes, though her contribution does not feature in this report.

Each researcher provided perspectives and insights from the daily life of the buildings they reside in, met regularly, read each other's field notes and analysed their findings. *For an overview of the buildings included in the research, refer to the following map (page 8-9).* Above all, they shared the many ways in which a lifelong grappling with electricity cuts and their search for various energy solutions shaped their lives.

II.A. Collaborative ethnographic research

Collaborative research seeks to advance ways of knowing beyond the western and neoliberal academy¹² and balance this through the intersubjective discussion of research¹³. The individual ethnographer's narrative is included along with the collective experience and the multiple voices of other researchers and research participants¹⁴.

In practice, the duties of the researchers varied slightly. While six researchers wrote regular field notes about the buildings they lived in, two others wrote case studies that highlighted only a specific aspect of the building's life. In addition, three other senior researchers supported the process through training, commentary and field observations from the selected - and other - buildings. All researchers started by writing a profile of the building they cover, including physical characteristics and infrastructure, resident profiles, and the process of building management, before moving to field notes and observations as regular residents. The field notes were supplemented by 18 interviews (11 men, 7 women) with members of the different building committees covered by participating researchers.

All researchers took part in an orientation and training sessions on research ethics, ethnographic research, taking field notes and interviewing, as well as attending regular meetings with all other researchers or with one of the senior researchers. Research ethics were discussed at length, not only in terms of the details about informed consent and protection of research subjects, but also in positioning this research within the broader knowledge production in and about the region. All researchers also partook in two analysis meetings that highlighted preliminary learning from the data gathered. The participating researchers are credited in the authorship of this report, but reference to their contribution in the text is anonymised and their real names are not used. Likewise, and in all field and interview notes shared by researchers, the names of neighbours and committee members are anonymized to preserve the privacy of research participants.

Soon after the start of the project, the need to narrow down the thematic scope was evident, and all researchers focused their observations and interviews on energy and infrastructure concerns. This was decided both as a response to the ongoing energy crisis in Lebanon and the salience in the preliminary data of energy management-related concerns in buildings.

¹²Claudio Moreira and Marcelo Diversi, “The Coin Will Continue to Fly: Dismantling the Myth of the Lone Expert,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 14, no. 4 (August 2014): 298–302, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708614530300>.

¹³Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez, Heewon Chang, and Faith W. Ngunjiri, “Collaborative Autoethnography as Multivocal, Relational, and Democratic Research: Opportunities, Challenges, and Aspirations,” *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32, no. 2 (May 4, 2017): 251–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1288892>.

¹⁴A. Emiko Blalock and Meg Akehi, “Collaborative Autoethnography as a Pathway for Transformative Learning,” *Journal of Transformative Education* 16, no. 2 (April 2018): 89–107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344617715711>.

II.B. Limitations



We outline the following as limitations resulting from and affecting the design, scope and the results of our work:

The interdependence between the selection of participating researchers and the buildings they covered affected the scope of buildings in this research. In selecting researchers, the building characteristics (location, age, governance & management, etc.) were taken into consideration alongside the skills of the researcher. Yet as the design of the research assumed we would only cover buildings that a researcher lives/has lived in, the research could not be inclusive of many types of buildings well worth being researched, including for example lower-income households, completely incapable of accessing additional energy services or high-end buildings managed by private companies.

The limited duration of the fieldwork, predominantly due to financial constraints, deprived us of observing the development of relations and building management over a prolonged period, and forced a narrowing down of the research themes. This research applied and tested the methodology and is preparation for long-term study once further funding is secured.

The change in the living conditions of some of the researchers, with two of them moving out of rented accommodation in the buildings they were researching, hence at some point limiting their access to the everyday life of the building.

III. A brief review of the literature on building committees

An important driver for further research on building committees is the growth in apartment dwellings globally. Increased population levels, urbanisation and higher land prices have meant more people living in dense, high-rise or multi-storied apartment blocks, raising different questions about exclusion and social harmony¹⁵. In light of that, the role of residents has been examined in relation to sustainability¹⁶, their potential for driving self-organising in cities¹⁷, and their importance in building sociality¹⁸.

The majority of buildings in Lebanon have owners or renters responsible for their apartments, but share responsibility for the common areas (stairwells, facades, rooftops). The multiplicity of owners and decision-makers indicates a higher likelihood of self-organising. Self-organising as described in the literature aligns with several aspects of urban life in Lebanon, particularly in the densely populated areas in Beirut and its suburbs. However, whilst observed, it is not well researched or clearly understood. Furthermore, in Lebanon, apartment blocks are localities where the co-management of service delivery of electricity and water occurs, services that are in principle the duty of governments, which raises important questions on urban living more generally.



¹⁵ Edward Blakely and Mary Snyder, *Fortress America*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: Brookings Institute, 1999); Llerena Guiu Searle, "Constructing Prestige and Elaborating the 'Professional': Elite Residential Complexes in the National Capital Region, India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 47, no. 2 (June 2013): 271–302, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966713482998>.

¹⁶ Erika Altmann, "Apartments, Co-Ownership and Sustainability: Implementation Barriers for Retrofitting the Built Environment," *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 16, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 437–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2013.858593>.

¹⁷ Stefano Cozzolino and Stefano Moroni, "Multiple Agents and Self-Organisation in Complex Cities: The Crucial Role of Several Property," *Land Use Policy* 103 (April 2021): 105297, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2021.105297>.

¹⁸ Mateusz Laszczkowski, "Scraps, Neighbors, and Committees: Material Things, Place-Making, and the State in an Astana Apartment Block," *City & Society* 27, no. 2 (2015): 36–159, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12057>.

Looking further into self-organising in cities of the global South, examples include neighbourhood associations in India¹⁹ and ‘Residents Committees’ in China, which were set up as a unit of urban community building and cohesion by the Communist Party in the 1950s²⁰. Research on these have focused on their value as grassroots democratic forms of self-organising²¹. More recent studies on new urban developments in Beijing and the mobilisation of residents in the face of large developers reveal situated activism based on neighbourly connections and shared interests, underscoring the notion of locality and place-making for the country’s new emerging middle classes²² that can transcend the country’s established residential committees. These examples indicate that for residents in Lebanon’s cities, the shared experiences resulting from the crisis could have the potential to drive collective action. However, the work required to make these communities, or their respective committees, function effectively lies in their reliance on “volunteers mobilized by their sense of moral duty [and] commitment to neighbourliness”²³, much of what has been observed in Lebanon, but that leads us to further questions on how might these dynamics work.

Whilst a lot of that research appears to be focused on middle-income groups, self-organising has also been observed in slum areas²⁴ and in low-income parts of cities²⁵. These highlighted notable examples of bottom-up efforts that have brought to the fore everyday problems that residents face in urban settings, whilst being reliant on volunteer organisations and influenced by different factors such as social capital – deep-rooted in relationships that committee members had within the community – in driving successful community action.

So far, these examples explicate several aspects of the management and impacts of self-organising, whether by committees, associations or management cooperatives. One is the question of democratisation as raised by Lama-Rewal²⁶ and Zérah²⁷, who find them to be vehicles for democracy even if they run the risk of elite capture or gender bias²⁸. These associations can be bottom-up efforts effective in bringing to the fore residents’ demands, with the intensity of their actions ebbing and flowing depending on needs; making them dynamic and responsive to their members’ concerns.

What these studies point to is the importance of considering the nature of social relations within the associations (including trust) and their political connections, as well as the matter of income levels since, as the examples from India show, they can be predominantly middle-class and therefore delimited in relation to collective service delivery provision²⁹. For the purposes of this research, we take note of the work on urban governance and income that has critiqued the binary of middle-class or elites, who on the one hand are typically presented as capturing participatory structures, whilst the poor are “conceptualised as excluded from formal governance mechanisms but active in more politicised forms of mobilisation”³⁰. In Lemanski and Lama-Rewal’s view, this is a simplification that fails to understand adequately the multiplicity of middle-classes or general higher income levels in society. This argument resonates in the case of Beirut, where buildings can have a mix of different income groups, with varying social and political capital³¹. We underscore this here as an aspect that has become more pronounced since the financial crisis, where disparities increased with those earning in ‘fresh’ dollars compared to those continuing to be paid in the devalued Lebanese Lira. Hence, in our research, and by focusing on the everyday dynamics of buildings and building committees, the ethnographic approach can reveal the power imbalance related to income and help us better understand how this plays out in relation to service provision and general well-being.



¹⁹ Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, “Neighbourhood Associations and Local Democracy: Delhi Municipal Elections 2007,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 47 (2007): 51–60.

²⁰ Gui, Yong, Joseph Y.S. Cheng, and Ma, Weihong, “Cultivation of Grassroots Democracy A Study of Direct Elections of Residents Committees in Shanghai,” *China Information* 20, no. 1 (2006): 7–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X06062386>.

²¹ Benjamin L. Read, “Revitalizing the State’s Urban ‘Nerve Tips,’” *The China Quarterly* 163 (2000): 806–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000014673>; David Bray, *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); David Bray, “Building ‘Community’: New Strategies of Governance in Urban China,” *Economy and Society* 35, no. 4 (November 2006): 530–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140600960799>; Gui, Yong, Cheng, and Ma, Weihong, “Cultivation of Grassroots Democracy A Study of Direct Elections of Residents Committees in Shanghai.”

²² Luigi Tomba, “Residential Space and Collective Interest Formation in Beijing’s Housing Disputes,” *The China Quarterly* 184 (December 2005): 934–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741005000573>.

²³ Bray, “Building ‘Community,’” 546.

²⁴ Adam Michael Auerbach, “Neighborhood Associations and the Urban Poor: India’s Slum Development Committees,” *World Development* 96 (August 1, 2017): 119–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.03.002>.

²⁵ Yok-Shiu F. Lee, “Intermediary Institutions, Community Organizations, and Urban Environmental Management: The Case of Three Bangkok Slums,” *World Development* 26, no. 6 (June 1, 1998): 993–1011, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(98\)00034-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(98)00034-5); Jeffrey P. Carpenter, Amrita G. Danieri, and Lois M. Takahashi, “Social Capital and Trust in South-East Asian Cities,” *Urban Studies* 41, no. 4 (2004): 853–74.

²⁶ Stephanie Lama-Rewal, “Neighbourhood Associations and Local Democracy: Delhi Municipal Elections 2007,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(47), pp. 51–60.

²⁷ Marie-Hélène Zérah, “Middle Class Neighbourhood Associations as Political Players in Mumbai,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 47 (2007): 61–68; and Marie-Hélène Zérah, “Participatory Governance in Urban Management and the Shifting Geometry of Power in Mumbai,” *Development and Change* 40, no. 5 (September 2009): 853–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2009.01586.x>.

²⁸ Lalitha Kamath and M. Vijayabaskar, “Limits and Possibilities of Middle Class Associations as Urban Collective Actors,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 26/27 (2009): 368–76.

²⁹ Kamath and Vijayabaskar.

³⁰ Charlotte Lemanski and Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, “The ‘Missing Middle’: Class and Urban Governance in Delhi’s Unauthorised Colonies,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38, no. 1 (2013): 91–105, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2012.00514.x>.

³¹ Nadia Alaily-Mattar, “Beyond Gated Communities? Detachment and Concentration in Networked Nodes of Affluence in the City of Beirut,” *URBAN DESIGN International* 13, no. 4 (November 1, 2008): 263–71, <https://doi.org/10.1057/udi.2008.30>; Kristin V. Monroe, “Being Mobile in Beirut,” *City & Society* 23, no. 1 (2011): 91–111, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-744X.2011.01050.x>.

IV. Findings: Building committees, an entry point into collective living?

Residents of buildings in Beirut have to come together to manage, even if to a minimum and even when relations are fraught with conflict, common areas in their buildings. In our research and the findings outlined below, we looked specifically at the areas of building commons that are of relevance to energy needs, and – in doing so – traced the impact of the crisis on this shared infrastructure, the challenges faced and the neighbours' relationships. The extent to which these areas remain "common" in the sense that they continue to be accessible to and beneficial for all residents, is largely dependent on how the building committee manages them, both historically and in light of the current crisis.

Underlying this research is the premise that neighbours' joint efforts to manage the building commons are one of the many coping and resistance strategies that Beirut's residents resort to. Neglected buildings are common in Beirut, often as part of "institutionalised neglect" that allows for urban renewal³², and as such, the process of keeping up a building can be seen as more of a resistance to that structural push for change in the city's fabric. We explored the different models of collective organizing in the buildings we researched in search of everyday practices that have contributed to those attempts of "survival" that Rami mentions in the quote above. We do not claim to have a clear definition of what survival in this sense means, but our search is for possible models and practices of building management that responded positively to residents' energy needs and allowed for improved relationships and collaboration. We also delve deeper into the texture of these practices; the process of decision-making about electricity, the organizational models the committees take, and the individuals that take on the building committee responsibilities. We conclude our findings with an exploration of the extent to which building committees are managing to contribute to an improved everyday energy provision and their ambivalent relation with energy providers and the state.

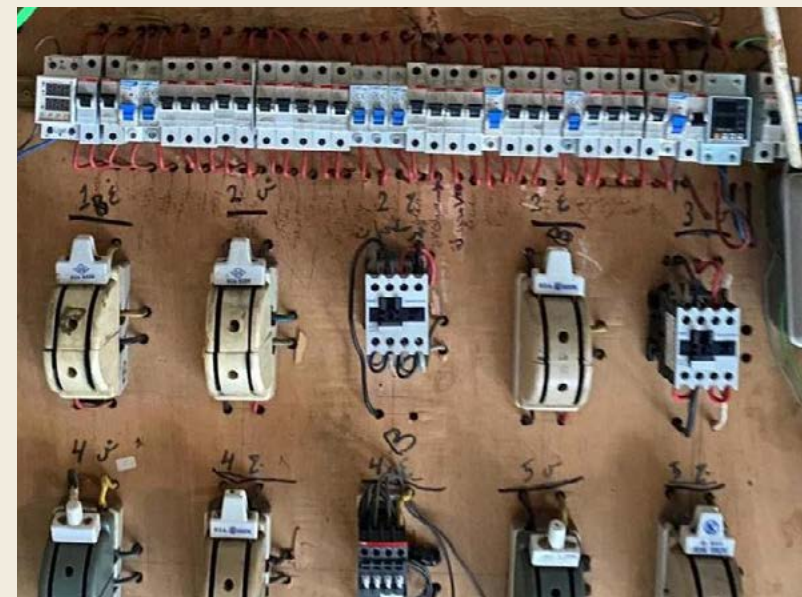
"I believe that those networks of solidarity are what allow the residents of this country attempts for survival"

— Rami, participating researcher

IV. A. Impact of an electricity crisis intensified

"We began to plan our lives around these cuts: what time we woke up, what time we got back home, our shower and meal schedule"

— Yasmin, participating researcher



The electricity crisis dictates the daily rhythms of household life. At the start of the crisis, people generally perceived the impact as temporary, but as the months passed, came to realise that this too was going to become a chronic situation. Residents organized everyday chores in accordance with the electricity supply schedule set by either the neighbourhood's private provider or the building's generator – after all, these were the more reliable options, as EDL's schedule was in the early days of the crisis non-existent and remains erratic to this day. Daily life became harder - a constant struggle to secure necessities: water access required electricity for pumps to drive water into apartments. Electricity and water supply interruptions feed onto each other in a never-ending swirl, something Sami notes; that "eventually the laundry waits and piles up, summertime turns to sleepless nights with no air conditioning". People cope by rationing their use, turning everything off to use the water heater. Now their daily life is being rationed, "lights go off at 11 pm, at 12 am or even 1 am... time to go to bed, all of us at the same time", Sami adds. Normal things become small challenges, such as trying to catch a flight at night and getting the suitcases down the stairs only to realise the building gate does not open because it is electric.

³² Samar Kanafani, "Made to Fall Apart: An Ethnography of Old Houses and Urban Renewal in Beirut" (PhD, The University of Manchester, 2017), <https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/made-to-fall-apart-an-ethnography-of-old-houses-and-urban-renewal>.

“Oh neighbours, the whole country is going through a crisis, people can barely pay for food and you can’t bear to sleep without the AC on? I am shocked, as if you are living in Lala land... come back to reality, talk to other people... I personally cannot pay any more than what I am paying and money does not grow on trees... I prefer to save it for my household’s needs and for my son, and not to spend it on three extra hours of electricity every night... and I have no shame in saying I don’t even own an AC and I go to bed very early”,

— a female neighbour in Fadia’s building

The impact of the crisis intersected with gender, income and age and – given the differences across Lebanon regarding power outages – geography. In relation to Beirut vs. outside-Beirut, since the end of the civil war, regions outside Beirut had lengthy daily power outages, whereas Beirut, in normal circumstances, witnessed a three-hour outage a day. In the wake of the energy crisis, households in the city were not equipped for such lengthy outages whereas other parts of the country might have been used to extended power cuts, which might have prepared some of them to some extent. For example, when Fadia was furnishing her newly purchased apartment in Beirut, her friends advised her to purchase an electrical hob and oven, because in Beirut ‘you don’t feel the cuts’.

Some neighbourhoods in the city did not have private generator subscription services since it was only a few hours a day, whereas other buildings did not feel the need to invest in a diesel generator.

The everyday experience of the crisis also differs across age groups. For the older generation, the long hours of darkness retold the war years’ experiences, where battles in different parts of the country would cut-off the electricity in homes for days. The lack of access for EDL maintenance engineers also meant that when areas were out of reach, any repair work required resulted in days on end without electricity³³. As such, the power cuts after 2019 was an acute reminder of those days – evenings spent in the dark, on candlelight, bringing to mind the prolonged power outages when people relied on petrol generators, battery-charged lights, etc.³⁴. Throughout that period, people gradually normalised various solutions that allowed them an (almost) seamless delivery of electricity to their homes³⁵. All that time, they were hopeful this would end at some point, and the country would be serviced with 24-hour electricity from EDL. Furthermore, the political instability of the region and in the country also had impacts on the electricity service. Several air-raid bombings by Israel sometimes targeted power stations or sometimes inadvertently affected crucial infrastructure, whilst violent seditions in other areas – if they happened to be in the vicinity of a power station – meant neighbourhoods of Beirut would be plunged into darkness for not insignificant periods. This archive of memories; of coping strategies, objects, contraptions and connections that no home in Lebanon is left without, was put to use when that latest crisis began.

The everyday life of the crisis is felt more severely by those with health or care needs. For example, getting elderly parents (or any person with special physical needs) to/from their higher-floor apartments is another intricate toil because they cannot climb stairs. Their trips should be carefully planned according to the generator’s schedule or they could try their luck with the unpredictable EDL electricity. This applies not only to necessary outings but also to leisure and visitations deemed necessary for mental health and well-being. Reema, whose building elevator relies on EDL electricity, describes how her parents have to wait for those hours to visit her. Even when they arrange their time in line with the power supply, they keep hoping that no breakage to generators’ supply happens unexpectedly and that EDL lasts a couple of hours, barely enough for the visit. We should add that stairwells are not only challenging for older people. For younger people, stairs in tower buildings are also challenging. Yasmin described it saying: ‘I had never realised how high twelve flights of stairs were until I had to climb up them almost every night, being particularly bad at keeping track of time [for when the elevator is still on]. Going up the stairs, again and again, I started to feel like I was outside of time, as if the staircase stretched infinitely and held me in a loop that would never end. That feeling of the un-ending – the swirl, the infinite loop – speaks of the exacerbation endured daily. A feeling of tiredness pervades, placing at its centre the bodies of those living through the crisis every day. Those everyday exposures to the crisis (or junctions within the crisis) embody the electricity crisis for the majority of those living in Beirut.

Stress and nervousness feature in people’s everyday life in relation to electricity and power outages. Reema feels her stress levels rise as she realises that what she thought was EDL electricity had been the generator, so her connection cuts off because her 5 amperes are not enough to run all the appliances that she mistakenly but “merrily switched-on”. Finally, another affect that we note is the hesitation and indecision when it comes to “investing in solutions to rid oneself of power rationing”.

³³ Dana Abi Ghanem, “Informality and Survival in Times of Crises: The Role of the Quadripartite Security Committee in Wartime Beirut,” *Third World Quarterly*, August 9, 2023, 20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2243226>.

³⁴ Fouad Awada, “La gestion des services urbains à Beyrouth pendant la guerre: 1975–1985”, *CNRS, CEGET*, 1988, 5.

³⁵ Abi Ghanem, “Energy, the City and Everyday Life: Living with Power Outages in Post-War Lebanon.”

Sami recalls on several occasions how difficult it was to purchase finally a lithium battery system with an inverter for his apartment given the myriad options available, such as purchasing a small petrol generator, or a battery with an inverter or solar panels. These all come with varying costs, advantages and disadvantages, as well as unsuitability if the resident is not an owner. Hesitation is intensified by a feeling of uncertainty mainly around how long will this crisis last and whether – if one is perhaps patient – one can endure this situation a little bit longer. A further issue is also the hefty cost implications of solutions in the context of an extremely high cost of living.

The economic crisis also led to socio-economic disparity among neighbours who previously would have belonged to a more or less similar income group. This was particularly evident among what was generally considered the middle-class demographic. One would expect to have within the same building households of similar income levels, but the crises segregated the neighbours between those who could pay their way out of the crisis (at least to some extent) and those who could not and consequently became differentiated in their access to electricity and its services. The disparity brought about by the devaluation of the Lebanese Lira still stings and has led to heightened tensions, particularly when negotiating generator hours or the elevator.

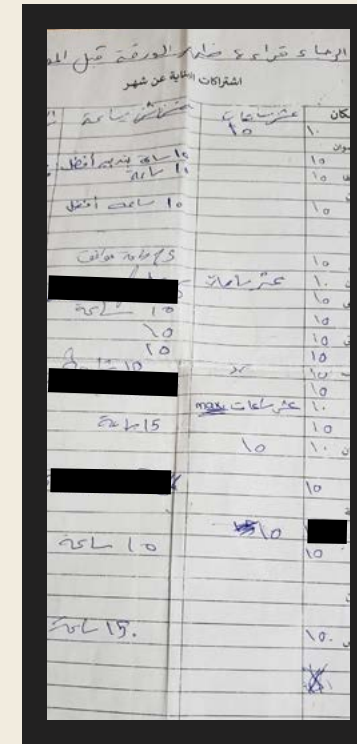
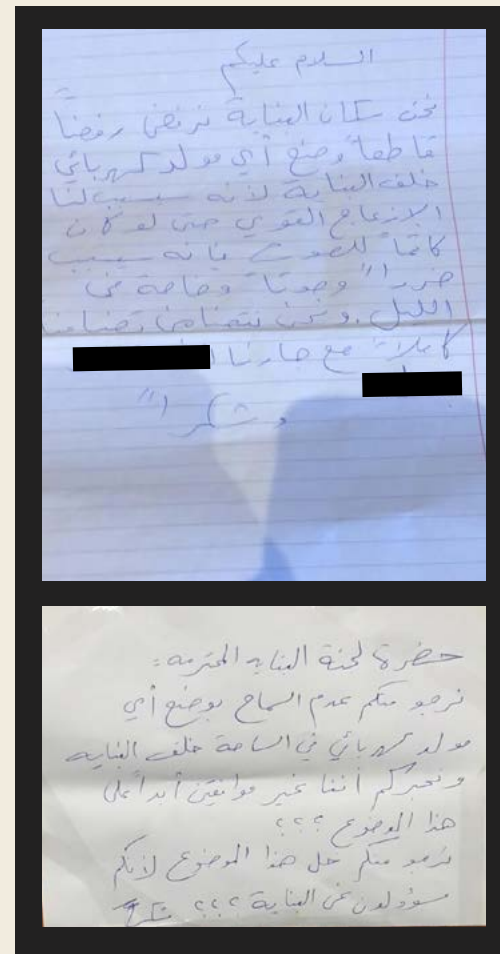
IV. B. A management burden: Building generator or private energy provider

One important aspect of buildings in Lebanon is whether it has a shared generator. Out of the eight buildings we studied, only three had generators owned and managed by their residents. The others relied on a subscription with a neighbourhood private provider for their households and/or the shared services in the building (lights for the staircase, electricity for the generator). Both cases exemplify the many difficulties residents face in providing services that the state would (or should) otherwise provide. In all cases, both technical and logistical expertise were needed for installation and maintenance, as well as management and communication to ensure

“I think of the many ways that ‘the generator’ controls the whole country and its people”

— Sami, participating researcher

agreed-upon hours of operation and fair payments by all residents. In buildings that do not own a generator, residents predominantly resort to the neighbourhood private providers who sell subscriptions for their homes and often for building shared services. These informal providers offer a costly individualised alternative: a fixed schedule of electricity, often with uncontrolled and high pricing. Residents who relied solely on these private providers often felt trapped in a dependency relationship. Quite often, there is only one provider in a neighbourhood and if there is a choice, changing providers is a costly and burdensome job, requiring “changing all the power lines, installing new ones, and probable fights with the private provider” as Farid explains.



“The generator with whom we had a subscription does not abide by the official pricing and he prices as he wishes, and ‘if you don’t like it, you can leave’ but there is no other option in the neighbourhood, he has complete monopoly. There is nothing you can do; you can’t complain to the ministry, they are in Lala land ... no one is monitoring.”

— Sami, participating researcher

The electricity crisis entrenched the dominance of the private providers in determining the provision of essential services. Neighbourhood generator owners wielded their authority, providing electricity at their discretion, exponentially increasing their prices and demanding their fees in US dollars. To manage their assets, they would dictate the number of hours the generator is providing, as well as the schedule. With the supply from EDL iterant, researchers noted their reliance on streetlights or such to be able to tell whom are they supplied by. For example, Reema looked for a billboard’s lighting near her house, and Sami checked the coloured municipal light of a lamp on his street. A household may have up to three distinct electricity systems that require careful management, with each of these systems generating varying electricity flows at different times. This is not an easy task for those not technically savvy, or for older people, not to mention the safety risks this entails.

In buildings that own a generator, the burden on the committee is substantial. One challenge is ensuring timely and adequate fuel supply and generator maintenance. The former is entangled with the dynamics of the national fuel supply chain, not least dealing with the fuel shortage in 2021, or the clientelist and political control over the fuel market. The second challenge is strategic and financial management, including figuring out if a smaller or bigger generator is needed to better cater for the building’s needs, or if an inverter with batteries would help, and the financial viability of either option. The third is managing the collective decision-making process, ensuring the needs of all residents are met, particularly when the cost and hours of operating the generator had to increase in light of the crisis. This made the timely collection of residents’ contributions to ensure cash flow an even bigger challenge, given the income issues noted earlier.

Indeed, managing a shared generator is no simple task, and it is often easier to resort to a neighbourhood provider. One of the buildings that now depends on a generator subscription owns a generator, but its residents decided collectively not to operate it and, in a way, outsource the management of needed energy supply. In another building, the residents attempted to collaborate with residents of a neighbouring building to purchase a shared generator, but owning and running a generator “was too complicated” as one of the residents recalls, citing the difficulty of finding an appropriate location, maintenance and financing. The two buildings were located in a relatively low-density neighbourhood so private generator providers were scarce. To supply additional power, one of the better-connected residents facilitated the provision of a space for a neighbourhood private provider, who then sold subscriptions in the area. After a period, as demand increased due to blackouts and fuel became scarce and more expensive, that provider ceased their operations and handed it to one of the building residents, who in his turn wanted out after three months and opted instead for a subscription from a newly expanding generator provider. This rather complicated case shows that owning and operating a generator service is no easy task, particularly when considering diesel price increases, longer operating hours, and the technical challenges that come with that.



From the above, we can see that there is no clear winner when comparing the building-owned generator with a subscription from a private provider. While two researchers appreciated feeling in control that operating their generator allows, such as being able to turn it on for emergencies, others felt that a subscription is “less of a headache” as the control and negotiations regarding operating hours are taken off their plate. In terms of cost, it is difficult to conduct an accurate cost comparison between buildings that own a generator and those that do not due to differences in energy usage, operating hours, number of apartments and their size. However, it is clear that buildings that own their generators do not necessarily pay less for their energy, nor does this make it easier (as we discuss later) for them to manage their electricity needs.

IV.C. Energy for shared services and amenities

“Like all of Lebanon, our building faced the same difficulties concerning electricity rationing (te’nin), scheduling the elevators, raising prices, and the whole lot. However, the problems were navigated without many issues, and no major controversies, fights, or hierarchies were formed throughout this process. This owes much to the fact that there is no generator (mwaled) in our building, and instead, the electricity is provided by a private company”.

— Sami, participating researcher

A key and analytically productive issue is the process of building management, which is mainly the maintenance and provision of energy for the elevator, the water pump, the intercom system, and the lighting in shared spaces; these being the concern for the majority of buildings in Lebanon. For example, the water pump, while important, did not feature prominently in the researchers’ field notes because occasional energy supply from EDL might suffice to operate the pump and the cost of running and maintaining it is not as significant. By contrast, the elevator was materially and symbolically a fascinating space that either created connections between neighbours or became a daily reminder of the divisions and subsequent stratification between residents. Its mere existence necessitates some form of cooperation (even before the crises) to ensure its electricity bill is paid and regular maintenance is implemented. Indeed, the elevator is one of the few features in a building that cannot be run by individual apartments if there is disagreement between residents³⁶.

The elevator, this moving box, is de facto the backbone of any building; it allows - when operational - awkward moments of socialization between neighbours or a few minutes for small talk with the concierge and his family. The electricity cuts and limited elevator operation as a result of the crisis, on the one hand opened up the opportunity for a rediscovery of the liminal spaces at the resident’s doorsteps as one climbs up the stairs and observes the decorated placards of family names on the front doors, the religious artefacts, plants, garbage bags, and shoes left at the doorstep. Fadia described this first encounter after having to take the stairs: ‘I found myself climbing up the stairs several times a week when I failed to adjust my personal schedule with that of the generator.

³⁶ In the one older building without an elevator that our research included, there was no clear mechanism of cooperation at all. This of course does not assume a causal relation between having an elevator and residents’ cooperation - the many examples of buildings who have idle elevators because neighbours cannot agree is clear proof. Nevertheless, the drive to cooperate in those buildings will be weaker, especially as the same buildings will be older and smaller with less floors, and possibly with peculiarities in terms of tenancy and residents demographic that all play a role in the drive to and potential for collaboration.

“When the building first got the generator subscription, I would arrive to find the elevator working and assume there was electricity. I would check the time to be sure that I will not be stuck if the electricity goes off. I rush to turn on everything that the 5-ampere generator subscription does not allow me: the water boiler, the air conditioning, the vacuum cleaner. Then I hear a tick, then darkness. I get nervous. I call Abou Asaad [the concierge], and he informs me this was not EDL electricity, it was the generator. I rush to turn off all the machines. I was misled by the elevator who somebody forgot on”.

— Reema, participating researcher

As I ascended the stairs, I couldn't help but observe the different staircases and apartment doors, their decoration, and the type of steel doors in place. In some buildings, the heavier use of the stairwell revealed the otherwise hidden connections between the separate apartments, these uncanny “webs of wires and water pipes, stairwells, the elevator, the leaks from one house onto the one beneath it, like the veins of a living breathing human being”. The elevator can nevertheless also be the marker of division and distinction in buildings. In the taller and newer buildings, there exist at least two elevators; in one higher-income building, the elevators “are programmed in such a way that you rarely find yourself sharing an elevator ride with a neighbour: there is always one of each block's two elevators waiting at the ground floor, so there is never any wait in the lobby”. In this case, the abundance of elevators meant



chances of ever meeting others were limited. As Yasmin explain “if I am going down from the 12th floor and someone calls the elevator to, say, the 6th floor, mine will not stop; the other elevator will go up to them, and we will not meet.”

Besides boundaries between residents that are built in by design, the financial crisis and the electricity cuts created additional divisions. The cost of energy to operate the generator became prohibitive for many, especially with the increase in hours of electricity outages and the price of fuel. Coupled with the drastic change in people's income, the discussion of the generators' hours of operation generally, and the management of elevator electricity specifically, proved an especially difficult topic; one that is divisive given the wide spectrum of needs that exist as well as the ability of the various residents to pay.

IV. D. Communally owned though not communally used: Shared spaces of energy infrastructure

“You need to take your precautions, naturally you need your ‘independent’ water, your ‘independent’ electricity. You can't rely on funding agencies or the state, there is always an obstacle there.”

— Nadim, Building committee member interviewed by Sami

Apartment dwellers also have rights to or co-own the communal space, entrance, stairwells, rooftop, parking and shared ground floor spaces or gardens. In many of the older buildings, those spaces have slowly been encroached upon, or used for individual water tanks that became necessary with increased water cuts since the civil war. There are often also affective elements related to these areas, where some residents were nostalgically attached to an imagined mode of communal life that existed in pre-war Beirut; one of neighbourly relations and shared living that has now disappeared. As a resident of an old building with no elevator in Furn el Chebak, Rita describes a general feeling of alienation in the building as current residents completely ne-

glect the common areas, where ‘they see dirt [on the stairs but] pass by it unconcerned’. The roof in particular is a building common that attained higher status because of the crisis. For some, it strengthened relations as a meeting space, by coincidence - as neighbours managed mostly empty water tanks on the roof, or deliberately during building committee meetings. Nevertheless, as the potential site for the installation of solar panels for energy production, it has become more of a divisive space. Of the eight buildings we studied, only three had residents who installed solar energy panels on the roof. In all three cases, a few residents rushed to exploit the roof for their personal use, without consultation with others following the saying that “the early bird catches the worm” as committee member, Um Rami asserts. We note that those who installed solar panels are mostly with the financial means and who held the assumption that other residents will not need the roof since they cannot afford solar energy. Thus, the much-celebrated increase in solar energy generation by individual and small collective initiatives³⁷ needs to be reevaluated with a view of the extent to which it further deepens division along financial lines.

³⁷ Adam Rasmi, “Why Lebanon Is Having a Surprising Solar Power Boom,” *Time*, March 2, 2023, <https://time.com/6257557/lebanon-solar-power-boom/>; Rodayna Raydan, “How Lebanon's Crisis Sparked a Solar Power Revolution,” <https://www.newarab.com/> (*The New Arab*, September 30, 2022), <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-lebanons-crisis-sparked-solar-power-revolution>.

IV.E. The people: Committee membership, selection and motivations

The law on building committees in Lebanon provides very little by way of guidance for managing shared dwellings. By law, registered building committees manage residential buildings that typically consist of privately owned parts (the apartments) and common areas (entrance, roof, stairwells and other spaces that are not apartments). A building committee is a legal entity (association) that owners of apartments should form after a building's construction and its legal registration are completed. As such, it represents the interests of the apartments' owners (and not those renting) and is mandated to manage all matters related to safeguarding and undertaking maintenance of the building's common parts and operation, as well as resolving conflicts between different owners should these arise. The law was first drafted in 1962, within a historical frame that has seen a shift from individual or family ownership of larger dwelling spaces, to groups of nuclear families who strangers to each other liv-

ing in that same building. When the law was updated in 1986, committees existed in many buildings as management bodies with an institutional structure and legal identity. Their function was a limited task of ensuring cleanliness, maintenance and smooth operation of shared spaces and services. However, over the years, the waves of electricity crises, infrastructure decline and the most recent financial crisis, increased the burden on them, where committees found themselves managing the infrastructural services into the building.

In practice, six of the eight buildings we studied have some sort of collective management system that research participants called "the building committee" (lajnet el-binayah), entrusted with managing the shared spaces, with only four of them being legally registered entities. The number of committee members ranged from three to nine, though more often than not, two - or at best three - members did the majority of the work. In total, the six committees had 25 members (20 men, 5 women), with two committees having no female representation, two with women present but sidelined, and two others where women were active and took on organizational duties. Most of the members were between 30 and 60, though a couple were older and often had held that role for many years.

The process of selection of committee members involves consideration of their capacity to lead, in terms of both social skills and positioning, their technical knowledge, and their time availability. Only two of the six buildings had the committee formed through elections, although these elections do not necessarily reflect democratic representation. In one buildings, for example, the committee

was formed and officially registered by some of the early buyers to manage the remaining work in the shared spaces before the building was even occupied. That committee remained more or less unchanged, and has not had a single meeting with the current residents nor another election for at least eight years. In another, the committee was only registered and elections conducted after minor fraud was exposed by one of the residents.

In terms of motivation, often, the committee members are those residents who respond to an obligation towards the neighbours especially amidst crises. Indeed, forming a building committee starts with those who take the initiative and volunteer the effort, often interested in some aspect of the building's shared spaces, services and general appearance. The general sense in most buildings however is that committee members are undertaking a moral or public duty (wajeb), serving their neighbours' community, albeit a demanding and tiring duty. We find that the operation of committees is rooted in existing cultural practices and influenced by what is perceived as neighbourly norms. The social and financial capital that residents have was instrumental in the selection of building committee members and the building committees' operation on three levels.

For one, members are perceived to have both, the willingness and time to support the building. As such, residents with greater social capital are the ones most often selected for a committee role. By social capital here, we follow Bourdieu's (1986) explanation that social capital is: "the size of the network of connections" that they can mobilize and "the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed" by members of that network. We observe that to be a successful committee member, you need to be perceived in favourable social standing, to be able to communicate effectively with other neighbours, and in possession of knowledge on how to manage relations with service providers and suppliers. In some buildings, committee members are professionals with man-

agement skills. For example, in Yasmin's building, the members were businessmen and the committee operated along a business hierarchy mentality, making quick decisions without consultations. Technical and legal knowledge were also important sources of capital, particularly in relation to construction or even knowledge of the building's history. Increasingly, technical knowledge about electricity, particularly renewables, appears to be increasingly valued in the current context.

To be successful, members also benefited from social connections to influential political parties and elites. In Reema, Fadia and Imad's buildings, some committee members are politically connected and we observe in Fadia's building how one member was able to provide the building with cheaper diesel for the generator through a (political) contact they knew at work. By contrast, in Imad's building, the committee leader's connections to a political party further enhanced his power, as more households struggled or scrambled to keep their lights on

“A committee should not take on the responsibility of a building for too long, there needs to be change, but for a long time I was alone because not one wants to take on the responsibility.”

— Habib, interviewed by Sami



IV.F. Negotiating justice amid competing needs

whilst their livelihoods came under threat. An important, but less explicitly pronounced source of capital is the ability to communicate with other residents and resolve conflicts as they arise. This explains to some extent why older women, long residents in these buildings, who have the time and enjoy good relations with neighbours, were key in two of the building committees we studied. Um Rami has to resort to friendly neighbourly phone calls and visits to ensure the collection of monthly contributions to building expenses. Salwa resolves another conflict with a neighbour by inviting her to her home and “talking to her like a daughter”.

It is needless to say that gender is key in the perception and possession of social capital, and the labour of women in this collective seemed to follow the gendered division of labour in the country more generally. Where present on the committee, women took on the secretarial, administrative and relational labour or in the words of Salwa’s male colleague in the same committee “I run the committee” and “Salwa executes”. Yet serving on the committee is also a source of social capital and explains the motivation of some, particularly men, to continue to serve on it. The trust given to committee members was a source of pride for many and a source of improved social status. Shadi for example proudly explains that residents have “blind faith in him”.

Nadim elaborates in detail on all the things he has done on behalf of the building, taking pride in how he was able to cover expenses and use his connections to resolve electricity related costs in the building. That possession of social capital is featured in the difference between (and not only within) buildings. Higher-income buildings with financial resources and well-networked affluent residents were able to shelter themselves from the everyday experience of the crises. They secured diesel more easily and thus insulated themselves, even if this came at a high cost or at the expense of others. Yasmin described her building as “a fortress that at once protects and distinguishes its residents from what is outside”, her mother reconfirming how they did not feel the impact of electricity cuts before the crisis intensified and even then, they found solutions no matter how expensive or detrimental it was to their surroundings. It was because of the constant disruptions to water and electricity provision since 2015 that prompted Yasmin’s mother to move into that building. In that sense, the powerful, high-income elites prevail in crises and normal everyday life carries on as usual for them. These gains by the higher-income households are not without costs borne by the less fortunate. For this upscale building, the noisy 24-hour generator running during the night had ruinous mental health and well-being impacts on the residents of neighbouring buildings.

The seemingly middle-income buildings could tap into networks of advantage and benefit, and accumulate social capital in ways that are more implicit. In this regard, we find that privilege and prestige in Beirut’s buildings is no longer the showy entrance, electric gate or gleaming façade, but rather the near-constant hum of a diesel generator providing ample hours of convenience and coolth to their residents.

“It doesn’t make sense for the children and housewives to be home all day without electricity, so men can have the AC from 6 pm till 3 am. To start with Rajab (the caretaker) doesn’t have to stay up until 3 am to turn off the generator for you to sleep with the AC on.”

“We are all brothers and sisters and one family, and we all want the building’s best interest above all”.

“Whoever has not paid their subscriptions this month, does not have the rights to object”

“My children return from school at 4:00 pm, you can’t just turn off the generator at 3:30”

“Whoever pays can benefit, and whoever doesn’t just needs to deal with it”

“I am paying for a subscription like everyone else, but not benefitting from the generator operating hours”

“I am an owner in this building, no a renter, and I have a right to the generator and its operating hours”

— Several of Fadia’s neighbours in WhatsApp conversations

Managing the competing needs of residents as well as the technical infrastructure that allows these needs to be met is no easy task, particularly as priorities conflicted. In buildings that ran their generators for example, the scheduling of the generator hours sometimes led to conflict. This rationing had to balance between diesel costs, households' budgets, their needs and desires. Some housewives preferred a day supply, working men and women wanted to follow their job schedules, while well-off households wanted to increase the supply no matter what, as they could afford it. In one building, there were calls for the generator to be on in time when young women would be coming back from school, as they should not be made to wait outside on the street until the elevator is powered. All these timetables had to be accommodated and demands were voiced in meetings, on WhatsApp groups and amongst neighbours. All in the stranded hope that requirements are met while limiting generator hours to prolong its life and keep costs down.



The financial crises had a significant impact on these conflicts and schisms within the same building. While some residents who had income in US dollars wanted solutions to improve their living conditions at any cost, others still had their monthly income remunerated in the devalued Lebanese lira so faced financial strain making additional electricity hours no longer a priority. As one resident put it: "It is as if you are living in la-la land", calling on them to "come down to earth" adding that she "cannot pay and I would rather use my money to buy necessities for my family and children and not pay them for three extra hours of electricity during the night". This cry of pain is not from a citizen to their ruling elite, but is directed at their own neighbours. We find that these emerging income disparities have now taken shape within the single building affecting shared spaces (which we elaborate on later in the report), and we foresee that more

buildings will have this problem. Suffice it to say that in this building, there were households able to pay 3000 USD to purchase an inverter to power the elevator, whilst other families struggled to provide the 100 USD a month to pay for the monthly generator subscription at only 5 amperes. It should be noted that 100 USD is quite a lot to pay for only 5 amperes and this is an exponential escalation in the cost of electricity within a couple of years resulting from the lifting of fuel subsidies. Unfortunately, during that time, global oil prices also rose and were volatile, and the informal sector in Beirut thrived with private providers charging high prices to ensure they remain profitable and hedge against upcoming risks. One researcher notes for example that the amount she pays now for the monthly generator subscription used to – a few years ago – cover the electricity bill for an average household for 24 months.

A significant portion of our field notes indicated that questions of fairness and justice could not be escaped as residents struggled to meet their electricity needs, their access to services and their financial budgets. Indeed, whether decisions made were fair to the various households is a question we do not pretend to be able to answer, except to say that the concern itself raises important challenges in the management of buildings and the role of building committees.

In summary, the key issues that emerge in the buildings we studied when considering how costs are distributed between apartments or building units depend on:

1. Whether the residents are owners or renters; whereby in theory, costs that can be considered long-term investments for an owner should not befall the renter. Whereas the law indicates only owners are members of the building committee, the decision in relation to who is responsible for expenses depends on the type of rental contract in place and the amount of rent paid.
2. The floor where the apartment is, pertaining to the use of the elevator as mentioned earlier.
3. Whether the apartment is occupied or vacant, specifically in relation to the consumption of shared services, such as water and energy from a co-owned generator.
4. Whether the unit is a shop or a residential apartment. At times, it could be that a business has higher electricity requirements whilst they do not peruse all the building services. In buildings that have shop fronts the dynamic is different, as they are, physically and figuratively, outside the shop.
5. The size of the household occupancy the apartment as it impacts elevator use and water consumption.
6. The resident's financial capacity emerged (as noted in the previous chapter) in the early stages of the crisis.
7. The willingness of residents with better financial means to cover expenses of common services on behalf of neighbors who cannot afford to pay, as a gesture of neighborly solidarity and/or to ensure services continue to function.

IV.G. Between individual and collaborative solutions

In tackling all the above variables, residents did not have an agreed procedure to follow. While many committee members and residents used the discourse of “following the law”, the law in practice did not provide guidance, and many residents rejected the assumption that the law requires all residents to contribute equally as one resident proclaimed, “This is all nonsense, I have no idea where they dug up that building law”.

In practice, when bargaining and negotiating, residents used gender dynamics and cultural values, or sometimes their social clout, financial ability, employment status, as well as their advantage as owners (with more rights) compared to renters to influence the decisions made. Above all, whether residents have or have not paid their monthly contribution to the building expense were paramount, and those who did not pay were not allowed to object, much like the neighbours of Fadia and Sami above express.



Fairness and justice thus were dynamic and constantly subject to agreed social norms and existing systems of power and hierarchy within the building. Examples are, for one, the processes of decision-making that was mainly controlled by men, such as in Yasmin’s building. If women’s needs are being sidelined, such as in the case of the generator hours in Fadia’s building, is there a corrective measure that can be taken before a new schedule is set? Many examples pinpoint to the gendering of decision-making as described earlier in relation to Salwa and Um Rami. Whilst the gender elements in building committees deserve further research, we are satisfied to highlight in this research our findings relating to the clash of priorities for electricity in households and buildings across gender and income, and the care responsibilities for women that sometimes prevent them from being able to have a voice and effectively participate in decision-making.

Yet in parallel, that same set of social norms that gave fluidity to what is considered just also afforded opportunities for neighbourly solidarity. Some residents would informally pay extra expenses, or give the building shared money pot a “loan” by paying their expenses early when neighbours were going through financial difficulty and could not pay their share.

A key objective of this research was identifying models or practices of building management that respond positively to residents’ energy needs and allow for improved relationships and collaboration. In most buildings, we notice an inclination to collaborate, and it is only as this collaboration fails are individual solutions pursued. Yet collaboration does often fail, and individual solutions, even if adopted for tackling part of the problem, are prevalent. We can loosely identify four approaches to solutions that lie on a rough spectrum of collaboration, as the table below details. Several of these approaches can be found in any one building to deal with different issues.

Individual

An arrangement that satisfies the needs of the individual household, independent of the building’s collective system (ex: install a UPS at home)

Exclusionary

An arrangement that satisfies the needs of some of the households, using at least in part the communal resources, but gives selective access to those capable of paying the expenses (ex: access to elevator services controlled by an elevator key to individuals who pay)

Collective

An arrangement that all households have to take part in and pay for, but only a minority decides to without consultation and possibly without acceptance of the solution (ex: a mandatory monthly payment to ensure 24/7 electricity is offered to the whole building)

Collaborative

An arrangement that all households contribute to and receive the benefits of, but is based on a collective decision making process and the lowest common denominator in payment between neighbours (ex: a low monthly payment that everyone can afford, even if it means shorter hours of generator operation)

“With the proliferation of problems for which the state cannot find solutions, and those are many, we have become specialists in solving them. Yet what is good and bad at the same time are those individual solutions that only resolve the problem for one household, but what about the rest? There is no answer. Three of our neighbours chose to solve the problem of continuous water outages and the repeated disputes over the issue of filling the tank, by separating their water tanks from the shared system and now have a tank on the ground floor and a tank on the roof, which protects them from water outages (most of the time). As for solving the problem of rationing the generator, there are also those who chose to install a battery for their household, like mine for example”.

— Sami, participating researcher

The drivers that encourage each of these solutions are numerous and dynamic. The intensification of the energy and financial crisis has driven residents to react in a multiplicity of ways, and the approach adopted depended on the nature of the problem, the economic composition of building residents, and the management approach of the building committee.

In terms of the nature of the problem, residents resorted to individual solutions when the problem was easy and not costly to manage at the household level, as in buying a low-cost UPS to guarantee uninterrupted internet. When costly, households that could afford individual solutions also adopted them from the beginning of the crisis. Yet some problems like guaranteeing adequate water supply in shared water tanks or energy for the elevator need to be discussed and resolved collectively as these are linked to shared spaces and are usually more costly. It is in these spaces that the crisis intensification

pushed the building committees to take on a bigger role and necessitated greater collaboration. At the beginning, a sense of solidarity and altruism translated into those with the means to cover the costs of those who cannot. In some cases, collaboration ignited relations and that gradually translated into a collective sense. In others, and as the crisis aggravated, the collective sense did not pick up. Collaboration was either transactional or failed and led residents to search for individual solutions instead.

The economic composition of building residents and the extent of economic disparity between the residents is another key variable. The financial crisis as we mentioned earlier created new stratifications, and while some members could afford to pay substantial amounts to cover

the costs of running the elevator for example, others could not. This caused exclusionary practices, with some buildings instating methods for selective access to services based on pay. An elevator key/remote control was installed to limit access for residents who have paid, thus making it a privilege and leading to a schism in neighbourly relations.

A third and particularly important driver are the management practices in the building. While we do not have “models” of best practices, it appears like an open, consultative and needs-conscious approach to building management seems to go the longest. This model, described by a building committee member as the “good enough approach” is agile in the solutions proposed, allows ample space for consultation and adopts the lowest common denominator that all residents can accept. This includes the agreement on the amount of the monthly contribution. If, as we discussed above, payment of the monthly contribution to the building expenses afforded the residents the opportunity to take part in collective decision making, increasing that contribution creates an exclusionary dynamic, not only in terms of access to services but also in terms of participation in building decisions. Adopting the lowest common denominator meant that all residents can pay and thus are all afforded the opportunity to take part in the decision making process.

Such management style is facilitated by open communication and a process of trust building. Only a few of the buildings held meetings for the residents, and the meetings themselves were not an indicator of a collective governance. By contrast, WhatsApp groups where all households were represented, issues discussed and decisions voted on, appeared as an appropriate vehicle for transparent building

governance. All but one of the building studied had a WhatsApp group, but in some cases, those groups are only for a select number of residents, for committee members only, or for building committees to share top-down decisions with little space for dialogue. Inclusive and transparent communication channels appear to have reinforced trust and solidarity between neighbours and contributed to more collaborative solutions.

While the building is our unit of analysis, buildings operate within an urban ecosystem of other neighbouring buildings and service providers (generator, water supplier, cable and internet provider, etc.). Some buildings can be described as “sister buildings” bound together by the shared history of/and since their construction, intersection in ownership, and networks of service providers. Collaboration was noted across some buildings, either in trying to find joint technical solutions, collective purchasing of supplies and water, negotiating pricing with service providers, or even joint learning, be it of risks or opportunities.



IV.H. Affects, aspirations and the state

“[As a committee member] I am, as you can see, the local government, the electricity company, a social mediator, and much more”,

— a female committee member interviewed by Fadia

Despite their best intentions and tremendous efforts, building committee members are struggling to keep up with the demands of providing for their households' and buildings' services needs, as well as managing the complex social and technical relations around that heterogeneous infrastructure. An inescapable feeling that beleaguered building residents was that of tiredness. Salwa, a building committee member complained plenty about the labour she endures, including the emotional labour of having to hear about the problems of the inhabitants. Um-Rami, a 78-year-old grandmother who has been in charge of the committee and book-keeping in her building for two decades echoes a similar sentiment; of how, in her late seventies she is still responsible for this task and fears making calculation errors. It is no surprise then that, despite the status that building committee membership provides, only few residents are willing to do it. In Um Rami's building, many are the times the old copybooks where the expenses are recorded, the material representation of responsibility of the building committee, were pushed from one pair of hands to another before they were sent back to Um Rami; everyone having rejected the responsibility.

Beyond the building committee, residents are exhausted by the endless preoccupation with securing energy supply and their spiralling costs. As mentioned earlier, stress and nervousness arise in relation to electricity and power outages, compounded by hesitation and indecision which is the result of the complexity, lack of expertise and the absence of reliable, independent advice, juxtaposed onto a feeling of uncertainty in a context that residents have little power over. The increased dependence on diesel generator since the crisis produced a more intimate co-existence with it. We observe the mundane; sleeping, housework, recreation become political.



In our search for practices of collaboration and survival amid Lebanon's crises, we are made aware of the salient, though rarely contested, burden that residents and building committees are forced to bear. Beyond the impact of electricity cuts on individuals, committee members need to endure the challenges of having to manage services that otherwise should be provided by the state, but without having the luxury of strategic planning or predictability of what lies behind nor the technical expertise. The difficulty in responding to that challenge is not a product of the inability to collaborate, but rather the failure of state institutions in providing such services centrally or on a large scale.

While dealing with the difficult and complex systems that Beirut's residents have to juggle, what vision emerges of energy systems they desire? In terms of popular aspirations, the discourse of our research participants oscillates between a desire for state regulation to relieve the burden of everyday management and to regulate generator service providers on one hand, and a desire to free themselves from a bureaucratic and non-functioning service. Thus, the failures of the state generate a mixture of contradictory feelings. The new hybrid infrastructure; the entanglement of the grid services, wires, diesel power, batteries and solar panels is also affective. Residents grapple with their feelings towards not just the loss of electricity and the impact this has on them, but these feelings extend towards their understanding of who they are as citizens or residents in this country.

The electricity supplied by the state-owned entity EDL, is informally referred to as 'Dawleh' in everyday language, symbolizing 'the State' in contrast to the electricity provided by private entities. This label serves as a convenient abbreviation, yet it also encapsulates the relationship between regular electricity provision and a functional state that has been gradually eroded³⁸. The heterogeneous provision of electricity in Lebanon is something that many of the researchers in this project have grown up with and have become accustomed to, shaping their lives and relationship to the state. Sami points out that by having to rely on the generator service, he is reminded that as a citizen of Lebanon, he has no rights, but instead more duties and hardships. The lack of reliable 24-hour provision congeals his sense of injustice as a citizen, diminishing his everyday life to watching out for the streetlight outside his home – if it is on, it means electricity is provided by EDL, otherwise it is the electricity from the diesel generator.

“This monster knows exactly how to occupy our days and years in endless, absurd battles, over the electricity subscription bill, the monthly rent, the dates and minutes of electricity supplied by the state, the water hours, and the endless calculations of our consumption of light and electricity amps.”

— Rami, participating researcher

³⁸ Ala'a Shehabi and Muzna Al-Masri, "Foregrounding Citizen Imaginaries: Exploring Just Energy Futures through a Citizens' Assembly in Lebanon," *Futures* 140 (June 2022): 102956, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.102956>.

As Sami continues, “electricity from EDL was the dream”, a panacea when many more electrical appliances in the home could be used simultaneously compared to the limited 10 amperes from the private generator subscription. Now, in light of the crisis, an affinity is felt towards the generator subscription, “who is with us and nothing is against us except our state and its ‘luminescent’ electricity company EDL”. These feelings betray an ambivalent relationship to the state and its institutions shaped by years of aspirations that have not been realised. As mentioned earlier, hopes that electricity services would become universal always existed alongside myriad other political and social demands, but in the current moment, those failures in service provision markedly shape the political imagination in the country.

The crisis led to increased informality in electricity provisioning and juggling between the services from EDL’s network and the private providers’ network, but reliance on this hybrid provision was coupled with a sense of revenge against a state abstaining from its responsibilities. Reema expressed it as a “small victory against the State” when she was able to reconfigure EDL electricity consumption.

While lacking rights was prompted by the power outages and having to rely on a generator service, for some, that network of informal suppliers sedimented the feeling of helplessness and dependence, instigated by the sense that the informal source of electricity and water leaves people completely reliant on the whims of unaccountable ‘businessmen’. Some exhibited hostility towards these providers; they are “thugs” (zu’ran) and “crooks” (nassabeen) according to Farid’s family members, as they railed over the spiralling cost of living caused by the financial crisis yet at the same time, they needed the power amidst almost blackouts. In contrast, the perception of the generator provider is different in Reema’s building, while she considers him as a businessman focused on profit-making and his business interest, the gener-



al perception held by her neighbours is of benevolence, “for lighting our darkness, when the government is absent”.

While the lack of reliable state-regulated power and adequate crisis response are the key causes for the increased burden on building committees, its role was aspired for and central to managing current solutions. In areas where the local authorities (often outside administrative Beirut) - such as the municipality in Furn el Chebak where Maysa’s building is - regulated the operation and pricing of the generators, residents had a more positive perception possibly due to a better service and a sense of fairness in dealing with them.

V. Recommendations

“ I feel that we truly need to recreate memories and a new social imaginary, and breathe a new life into the residents, to reimagine their past lives and understand what life we are truly living today.”

— Rami, participating researcher

From the analysis of our results and the insights gathered by our researchers, some recommendations can be arrived at, particularly when considering practical implications of our research. We have presented these below along the roles, which different actors – partners in collaborative solutions that could be imagined – can take.



V.A. Local authorities and municipalities

Cases from around the world³⁹ use the cooperative model to manage buildings (housing projects or apartment blocks) but most of the time this is either created, led or supported by an authority or a local development actor funded by international NGOs or Development Financial Institutions. Although some cases are led by local activists or community organisations, the latter cannot however sustain themselves in the long-term and become autonomous. Hence, support from local authorities and municipalities is imperative.

As our research has shown, where municipalities regulated the pricing of the private generator providers (according to the official pricing of the Ministry of Energy), residents were more satisfied with electricity provision as they did not need to manage a generator at the building level or argue with a private provider over pricing and hours of operation. The municipalities' role can go beyond enforcing the price cap, but can also map out optimal generator locations, and regulate and monitor the emission of particular matter by enforcing stricter environmental regulations (e.g. catalytic converters, filters, etc.). While enforcement so far in urban settings in Lebanon has not been very successful, further exploration of possibilities for a greater role by municipalities is needed given the potential benefits. Furthermore, health and safety to mitigate against the risks of local energy provision is needed, including: fire safety of generators, batteries and diesel storage; strength and sturdiness of panel brackets' installation for solar; and the protection of common areas that such installations often usurp.

Finally, municipalities can and should support building committees as entities that represent the interest of residents and help foster an atmosphere of cooperation by encouraging their formation, supporting committee practices such as elections and providing support in relation to any legal or administrative enquiries or requirements.

V.B. Resident/building committees

Whilst there is no ideal model for building management, we find that an agile, inclusive and transparent approach to managing a building can achieve fairer and more sustainable results. Agility in the sense that emerged from our research, the "good enough approach" is adopted since it aspires for optimal decision-making that seeks consensus and cooperation and yet is practical and feasible within the limiting circumstances. This is not to be perceived as a compromise however, since one of the strengths of resident associations noted in the literature⁴⁰ is their ability to respond to residents' needs that can vary over time and space. Therefore, an agile approach to management that is tailored to each building's needs and that changes depending on the circumstances, rather than a fixed model, is recommended. Transparent decision-making can be supported by providing resources on management tailored to associations such as building committees. These resources should be made freely available and provided in an accessible way (in all formats and free from jargon or technical terms). The legal aspects of committees can also be made more accessible to lay persons and provided to committees and residents to support transparency and achieve procedural justice.

Finally, we recognise that buildings are part of a local ecosystem and so supporting collaboration between different buildings on a street or in a neighbourhood is recommended. This can be achieved by creating cooperatives of different buildings, aiming in the long run for neighbourhood committees. These cooperatives can become forums for lobbying for neighbourhood improvements, responding to changes or arising needs, as well as become mechanisms that can support residents against the private generator providers.

³⁹Beirut Urban Lab, "Turning empty property into affordable housing" (forthcoming), American University of Beirut.

⁴⁰See Auerbach (no. 24) and Zerah (no. 27)

V.C. Civil society

Civil society can help support building committees, particularly in developing a toolkit and/or a resource platform for building management and the management of association-like committees. As mentioned earlier, these resources should be accessible and showcase best practices that align with the role of official entities, such as the municipalities and the law on building committees.

Given the existing electricity crisis and in the wider climate change related challenges, providing free or low-cost energy-related technical support tailored to buildings and building committees is recommended. This could be achieved with the collaboration of research and engineering institutes. In addition to the technical side, understanding the social and cultural aspects of community energy and building on that knowledge to help instigate and support collective solutions for local renewable energy should also be included in any local energy initiative. Where possible, civil society organisations should always seek opportunities for and financially support cooperative or community-based energy projects and interventions. Donor interventions should move away from ones that support individual initiatives, to ones that provide community with shared renewable energy⁴¹ that is actively engaged with local municipalities and community organisations.

⁴¹ Balkees Abdel-Rida, "Cooperatives, loans and renting out roofs in cities...and solar farms in rural areas", *Al-Modon*, 02/07/2022. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/afLZ6> (Accessed 11 December 2023)

VI. Further research

Research on residential associations is not novel or unique, yet we acknowledge that in Lebanon little has been conducted in a way that directly asks questions regarding their dynamics and their potential for collaborative local governance. The research we have conducted thus far is at a pilot stage, where the period of data collection was limited to three months. Given the current financial and energy crisis that the country is suffering from, the data and insights gathered by the researchers were naturally focused on the electricity problems, the various solutions that different committees and building residents opted for and the implications these had on justice, particularly energy justice.

However, several aspects of building committees have emerged that we could not delve deeper into, but that nonetheless present important questions that relate not only to the management of building committees but to wider questions on urban informality (including informal and/or migrant labour). We find that further research is indeed required regarding management models that exist for building committees, showcasing best practices and driving legal innovations.

In the case of Lebanon, further work could focus on the history of building committees, especially when archival material (paperwork, accounting books, etc.) are available, considering that alongside historical features of the urban built environment. This can be revealing of the history of city living in the country and the social history of cities like Beirut. Given the energy context in the country and the state of infrastructure services, further research on neighbourhood generator providers, including mapping their power dynamics, policies and practices, as well as their neighbourhood-level impacts, is overdue. Finally, research on building caretakers or concierges and the practices that govern their employment in Lebanon, raising questions on informal and migrant labour, are another area of research that should not be neglected.

