

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN PROMOTING EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN LEBANON

POLICY PAPER MEDIA & ENVIRONMENT



Policy paper on the role of media in promoting effective environmental governance in Lebanon

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Introduction: Lebanon's Environmental Crisis

Lebanon faces **multidimensional environmental challenges**, including deforestation, air, water, and soil pollution, waste management failures, and excessive reliance on fossil fuels, which contribute to the degradation of natural resources.

This is further compounded by **the global phenomenon of climate change**, which has manifested in Lebanon in recent years as rising temperatures, shifts in precipitation patterns, droughts, wildfires, floods, and heatwaves [1].

More recently, **the 2024 Israeli War on Lebanon has placed additional strain on the environment**, causing catastrophic damage that surpasses the destruction of previous conflicts. Notably, **Israel's excessive use of white phosphorus** will cause severe long-term impacts, particularly to groundwater resources and agricultural productivity. Experts warn that these consequences significantly jeopardize long-term food security and ecological resilience [2].

Furthermore, **Lebanon faces the challenge of managing massive volumes of demolition debris from the recent war**. While the Ministry of Environment issued guidelines calling for sorting and recycling to reduce environmental risks, the government is also considering dumping the rubble into the sea, as was done after the 2006 war. This approach raises concerns about **repeating past environmental damage, with environmentalists** urging sustainable alternatives that prioritize sorting, recycling and reuse to minimize health risks and environmental harm while also reducing reconstruction costs [3].



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Why Does it Matter?

Environmental degradation and climate change pose a direct threat to Lebanon's natural environment, but their consequences also reach critical sectors like agriculture and tourism. For example, in agriculture, the productivity losses linked to climate change will have significant socio-economic impacts, as 20% of Lebanese households rely on the sector for primary or secondary income [4].

Furthermore, **the intertwined nature of environmental, social, and economic challenges cannot be overlooked**. For instance, **the overuse of generators contributes to air pollution**, as well as health degradation (due to fine particulate emissions) and economic strain (resulting in additional costs for businesses and households).

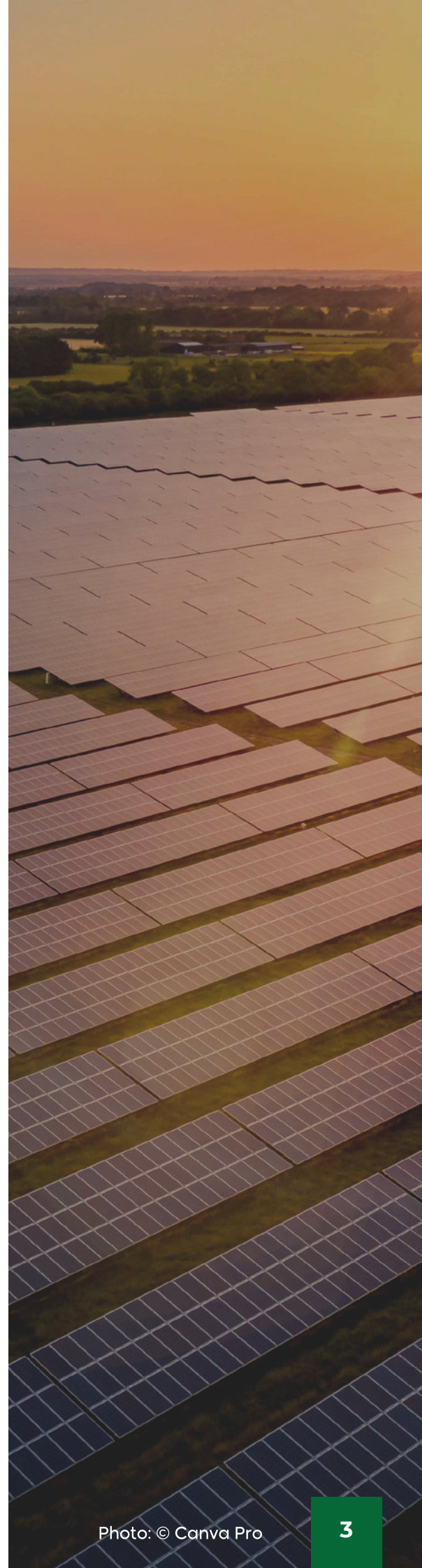
In addition to exacerbating these pre-existing challenges, **the economic crisis and political instability in Lebanon have relegated environmental issues to the background**, complicating the prioritization of climate and environmental reforms.

Environmental governance has long been neglected and requires a long-term strategic agenda. According to the World Bank, weak governance has resulted in Lebanon being one of the countries least ready to face climate change in the world. [5] While the country has enacted important environmental laws and regulations, **their effectiveness is undermined by weak enforcement and implementation, systemic corruption, a fragmented institutional framework, and limited institutional capacity**. Moreover, according to experts, existing environmental laws need to be updated and structural reforms across various sectors are needed to achieve sustainable development and a green transition.

The need for reforms is particularly evident in the water sector, where overlapping laws and regulations have created a complex institutional framework, weakening accountability and transparency, and undermining the sector's capacity to respond to the impacts of climate change.

Similarly, **Lebanon's energy sector requires significant reforms to ensure reliable and sustainable energy supply.** While the adoption of the Distributed Renewable Energy Law is a positive step, additional reforms are needed, such as the establishment of an independent energy regulator to enhance transparency and eliminate political interference in decision-making processes [6].

In the transport sector, disjointed laws and fragmented incentive programs aimed at greener transport lack proper implementation and legal frameworks. Meanwhile, the integrated solid waste management sector, despite the passage of Law 80/2018, continues to suffer from inefficiencies, poor stakeholder coordination, and the absence of a cost recovery law to cover some of its operational costs. Additionally, **comprehensive laws and regulations governing quarrying activities must be strictly enforced to address ongoing environmental degradation.**



The media's role in promoting effective environmental governance: How can it help?

In Brief

Media has the potential to raise awareness of environmental issues and climate change, thereby informing the public and policymakers, and driving policy change. It also serves as a watchdog, fostering accountability and transparency in the environmental sector.

Here comes the role of the media, which can influence policies and act as a catalyst for change. Indeed, the media plays a vital role in spotlighting environmental issues, bringing these topics to the forefront of public discourse. Research has demonstrated that the way media frames environmental issues, highlights their urgency and consequences, and mobilizes public opinion can significantly shape policy agendas, influence decision-makers, and drive policy changes. [7] By raising public awareness of environmental challenges, highlighting potential solutions, and promoting sustainable practices, the media empowers individuals and communities to pressure governments to take action.

Additionally, the media plays a crucial role not only in informing the public but also policymakers about environmental issues, serving as a bridge between scientific research and public discourse. Indeed, environmental reporting is key for informed decision-making and policy development since policymakers rely on accurate and up-to-date environmental information to design effective regulations. [8] Furthermore, it serves as an intermediary, relaying the public's concerns to policymakers while also explaining government initiatives to the public.



Photo © 2017 Human Rights Watch

It is also worth noting that the media serves as a platform for diverse perspectives and communities to engage in the environmental discourse. It plays a key role in amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, ensuring their needs are recognized, while also highlighting the perspectives and contributions of activists, experts, and local communities. By fostering dialogue, providing a platform for sharing evidence, and showcasing innovative and collaborative solutions, the media can inform decision-making processes and shape policy debates. [9]

Picture 1: Environment Training with the Minister of Environment in Lebanon



Picture 2: Environment Training with Environment Experts

Finally, the media also serves as a watchdog, playing a key role in holding powerful actors accountable, and fostering good governance and transparency. Indeed, environmental coverage can expose the gaps and shortcomings of existing policies, highlight their lack of implementation and enforcement, and uncover instances of corruption, environmental harm and malpractice. This scrutiny can drive public demand for policy reforms and regulatory interventions. [10]

Challenges and gaps hindering effective environmental reporting in Lebanon

The big picture:

Underreporting, lack of expertise, data gaps and various other factors hinder the media's ability to strengthen environmental governance in Lebanon.

Despite the important role that media should be playing in the environmental field, several challenges and gaps still impede accurate, up-to-date, and comprehensive environmental reporting. These challenges and gaps in environmental reporting were highlighted in the media monitoring study conducted by Maharat Foundation on environment issues and climate change, as well as during roundtable discussions with representatives from NGOs, international organizations, journalists, academics, and public actors, organized by Maharat Foundation.

• Underreporting of environmental issues

The first challenge is the underreporting of environmental issues, which stems from a lack of prioritization, driven by various factors. One major factor is the limited space allocated for environmental reporting, often constrained by editorial decisions that reduce the coverage of such topics. Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of editorial guidance on environmental issues, with media institutions generally prioritizing other topics, particularly in light of Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis and political instability. This lack of interest and focus on environmental topics contributes to underreporting, leaving critical environmental issues insufficiently covered in the media. While global attention is increasingly turning to climate change, in Lebanon, environmental issues remain secondary. Additionally, the absence of editorial freedom and government transparency in Lebanon limits the ability of journalists to adequately cover environmental issues and give them the attention they require.

• Lack of expertise and specialization in environmental journalism

Lebanon's media landscape is characterized by a shortage of journalists with expertise in environmental and climate change topics, particularly at the grassroots level. This can be linked to the fact that the educational system does not prioritize environmental journalism as a specialization, limiting the development of journalists capable of addressing these critical issues. However, increasing the knowledge capacity of journalists to understand climate issues, thus enhancing their role in the whole-of-society climate approach, is crucial and was highlighted as one of the recommendations in The Lebanon Country Climate and Development Report (CCDR).

- **Lack of in-depth reporting on environmental issues and climate change**

Another challenge is the lack of in-depth reporting on environmental issues and climate change. Media monitoring conducted by Maharat Foundation reveals that interviews, opinion and analysis pieces, and investigations are scarce, with coverage often restricted to news reports. While the media should provide deeper insights into the causes and complexities of environmental issues and their impact, including on other sectors, superficial coverage prevails.

- **Absence of a constructive approach**

Many journalists fail to adopt a constructive approach that involves proactively offering or promoting solutions. Hence, they miss the opportunity to engage audiences with constructive narratives that highlight success stories, grassroots initiatives and innovative solutions capable of inspiring action and driving policy change.

- **Lack of investigative journalism**

There is a noticeable lack of investigative journalism on environmental issues and climate change in Lebanon, which is essential to expose hidden truths and vested interests especially in a context where systemic corruption, and the lack of transparency and accountability of public institutions persist. Indeed, the media plays an important role in monitoring the implementation of environmental policies and commitments, as well as exposing corruption and environmental malpractice. This lack of investigative journalism can be partly attributed to financial barriers which hinder thorough environmental investigations, as laboratory analyses required for such reports are costly.

- **Focus on current events and incidents**

Environmental coverage in Lebanon tends to focus on current events and incidents. However, the long-term and gradual nature of climate change and environmental crises means these issues often don't generate immediate coverage. As a result, they may not capture the media's attention consistently, leading to gaps in ongoing reporting and public awareness. For example, Lebanon's longstanding waste management crisis is a persistent issue that receives attention only during specific moments, such as street protests or when waste visibly accumulates, rather than as part of sustained coverage. This limited media coverage is compounded by a general lack of awareness regarding the importance and consequences of climate change and environmental issues, including among journalists.

- **Absence of governance and policy-related aspects in environmental coverage**

The media monitoring conducted by Maharat Foundation on climate change and environmental issues revealed that environmental coverage often neglects governance and policy-related aspects. Several factors contributing to weak governance, such as inadequate enforcement, systemic corruption, and a fragmented institutional framework, should be emphasized in media coverage. The latter which pertains to how responsibilities and powers are distributed among state institutions, is particularly relevant, as politicians and business elites with political ties have exploited loopholes in Lebanon's fragmented system for their profit. [11]

The quarrying sector illustrates the negative impact of Lebanon's fragmented institutional framework. While a successful permit must pass through the National Council for Quarries and Crushers, which is headed by the Minister of Environment, the issuance of licenses falls under the jurisdiction of the governor, who is under the authority of the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities. However, this Ministry has been known in previous governments for granting legal deadlines contrary to the procedures and without referring to the National Council for Quarries and Crushers. [12]

This gap in environmental coverage can be partly attributed to a lack of journalists' knowledge about national environmental legal and policy frameworks and international agreements on climate change and environmental protection.

- **Absence of municipalities and civil society in environmental coverage**

Similarly, media monitoring revealed that municipalities are notably absent from environmental coverage, despite their direct relevance to these topics. Furthermore, civil society and environmental advocacy groups also appear to have a limited presence in such coverage. This limits their participation in the environmental discourse and creates a gap in accountability and public awareness, since citizens are less informed about community-led initiatives, advocacy actions and local governance, hindering their engagement and capacity to demand action.

- **Limited representation of women and the absence of a gendered perspective in environmental coverage**

The media monitoring conducted by Maharat Foundation also revealed limited representation of women in media coverage of climate change and environmental issues. The gender distribution of main actors in media coverage across the monitored media outlets shows that 76% were male, 15% mixed-gender, and 9% female. Furthermore, women were rarely the primary focus of coverage related to these issues. Their absence in media coverage related to environmental issues and climate change limits their power to influence decisions in these areas as well as the development of inclusive policies, particularly given that women and girls are disproportionately affected by environmental issues and climate change. It is also worth noting that this gendered impact of climate change remains insufficiently understood and highlighted by journalists in Lebanon.

- **Lack of access to sufficient, reliable, and updated environmental data**

Another challenge is the lack of access to sufficient, reliable, and updated environmental data, which significantly hampers effective environmental reporting. Indeed, the overall amount of available environmental data related to Lebanon, including studies and research, is considered limited, insufficient and outdated.

Furthermore, since 2019, the air pollution monitoring network has been out of service due to the state's inability to allocate the necessary funds for its operation and maintenance. This breakdown has left the country without crucial air pollution data, including the impacts of major events such as the Beirut blast and the ongoing electricity crisis, making it difficult for journalists to report directly on pollution levels. Additionally, while information often exists within public institutions, it remains inaccessible due to technical limitations, outdated websites and the lack of government transparency. As a result, access to government data on environmental degradation and climate change is significantly limited.

Furthermore, identifying reliable and scientific sources, and understanding climate change and environmental terminology remains challenging for journalists. Compounding these challenges is a lack of awareness about Lebanon's Right of Access to Information Law, which further limits access to critical information related to the environmental sector.



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Bridging the Gaps: Enabling the Media to Promote Effective Environmental Governance

Moving forward

Collaboration among journalists, policymakers, public institutions, and civil society is key to enabling the media to play its role in informing decision-making processes, as well as promoting accountability, transparency, and public engagement in environmental issues and climate change.

Recommendations to Media Organizations and Journalists:

- Ensure that environmental topics are placed on **media agendas** and given **adequate coverage**.
- Develop **in-depth reports** that explore the causes and complexities of environmental issues and their impact on other sectors such as health, the economy and agriculture.
- Adopt a **constructive approach**, highlighting success stories, grassroots initiatives and innovative solutions capable of inspiring action and driving policy change.
- Leverage resources like **university laboratories** to reduce the cost of environmental investigations.
- Partner with **civil society organizations** to publish environmental stories when traditional media is constrained.
- Journalists should educate themselves on the **Right of Access to Information Law** and advocate for its use.
- Foster **transparency and accountability** through environmental reporting, by monitoring environmental policies and commitments, and conducting investigative reporting to expose corruption as well as environmental harm and malpractice.
- **Collaborate** with public institutions to **ensure access to environmental data** and advocate for greater transparency in the process.
- **Engage the public** in the environmental discourse and **amplify marginalized voices** to ensure diverse, inclusive, and representative environmental reporting.



Recommendations to Civil Society:

- Strengthen **relationships** with **public institutions** to facilitate information access.
- Pressure the government to ensure transparency and compliance with the **Right of Access to Information Law**.
- Present work and initiatives in a **compelling** way to attract media coverage and encourage **sustained reporting**, ensuring they reach the public and spark interest.

Recommendations to Policymakers:

- Set **clear priorities** for organizing the production of environmental information.
- Enhance **environmental monitoring** by **allocating resources** for continuous monitoring and analysis.
- Facilitate **collaboration** between the National Council for Scientific Research and the journalistic community.

Recommendations to Public Institutions:

- Enhance the **technical capacity** of institutional websites and ensure their regular updates to improve data accessibility.
 - Facilitate **access to environmental information** by ensuring that documents are published on official websites in accordance with the **Right of Access to Information Law**.
 - Foster **collaboration** between experts and researchers under the Ministry of Environment's supervision to document environmental impacts in a centralized manner.
- Foster **collaboration** between the media, academics, policymakers, public institutions and civil society to strengthen networking and produce more studies and information related to the environment, adopting the **whole-of-society climate approach**.

All Stakeholders:



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