



Ardi Ardak

National Food Security Initiative

I. Background

Global challenges reflected by recurrent environmental, economic and food crises are giving rise to widespread community-based responses toward a more sustainable future. Local initiatives such as Community Supported Agriculture, Farmers Market, Fair Trade Networks, and Sectorial Eco-Centers (Eco-Villages, Eco-Tourism, Eco-Communities, Eco-Museums, etc.) are springing up all over the globe. The MENA region has been facing tremendous challenges in managing its natural resource base achieving its food security and providing its young population with sustainable opportunities. The region, considered one of the most food insecure in the world and forecasted to be severely hit by global warming, is lagging behind in the development and adoption of comprehensive long-term solutions.

Lebanon suffers from severe food insecurity, with the country being dependent on imports representing 80% of its consumption, and with around 31% of the population being unable to consume healthy food throughout the year. The lack of government support and intervention in the agricultural sector resulted in the lack of regulations of farming practices and created challenges to farmers who are forced to operate in highly competitive environments¹. Food insecurity has been exacerbated by the Syrian crisis which resulted in the high Syrian refugees' influx exerting extra pressure on its natural resources, infrastructure and employment services. These harsh conditions are further aggravated by the current socioeconomic situation which is considered the worst since 1975: debt to GDP ratio 152%² (among the highest in the world), youth unemployment exceeding 35%³, swelling inflation and rising food prices, rising taxes, widening inequalities (Gini coefficient of 50.7 ranking at 129 from 141 countries in terms of equal distribution of income⁴), lack of access to basic human rights including resources, clean water, healthcare, proper housing, and safe working conditions.

In light of the current situation - as Lebanese traders struggle to pay for imports of a variety of goods including food products, as vulnerable communities struggle to pay their food, as small-scale farmers are stuck in poverty trap - the importance of local food system today rises more than ever. The Environment and Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU) in partnership with the Lebanese League for Women in Business (LLWB), the Food Heritage Foundation and Ziko House are currently consolidating "Ardi Ardak", a national food security initiative which aims at

¹ Jeanmougin, C. (2017). You Reap What They Sow. Beirut: Heinrich Boell Foundation Middle East Office. Retrieved from https://lb.boell.org/sites/default/files/agricultural_sector_lebanon_jeanmougin.pdf

² BBC. (2020). How did Lebanon become the third most indebted nation? <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50183895> last accessed on 10th of February.

³ Lebanese Republic Economic and Social Council. (2019). Unemployment in Lebanon last accessed on 10th of February, 2020

⁴ UNDP. (2017). Assessing Labor Income Inequality in Lebanon's Private Sector <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/Governance/Publications/Assessing%20Labor%20Income%20Inequality%20in%20Lebanon%E2%80%99s%20Private%20Sector.pdf>

reviving food security sector by focusing on small scale holders with a special emphasis on rural women. By promoting the local food system in an import-dependent nation, Ardi Ardak aims at promoting food security at the rural producers level by promoting small scale producers access to markets; and urban consumers level by providing them access to healthy local produce.

II. Strategy

Ardi Ardak is a network of initiatives that base on two main pillars:

i. Promoting access to markets

Initiatives under this pillar offer small-scale producers access to marketing channels and offer urban consumers access to healthy local produce. Initiatives include promoting local produce through a central kitchen which would provide its raw material from ESDU's network of community kitchens and small producers, mobile outlets, farmers markets, food trails promoting local producers through rural tourism, Food and Roots online platform promoting climate-smart produce and sustainable producer and new marketing channels to be identified.

ii. Promoting self-sufficiency

Initiatives under this pillar offer consumers the chance of becoming the producers of their own food through urban agriculture and community gardens which both can have considerable impacts on the micro-environment and household consumption hence enhancing food security at household and community levels.

III. Mechanism

ESDU, LLWB and the FHF are working now on developing a robust mechanism through which they can achieve the following:

i. Formalisation of entrepreneurial activities

Formalisation generally refers to the registration of entrepreneurial activities and the participation in the tax and regulation system. Here it is understood in a broader sense, as the process of developing rules and responsibilities for operating procedures and relationships necessary to gain revenue, including product development, product testing, certification, quality control, market access, marketing, channelling of sales and market visibility.

ii. Institutionalization of innovation support

Institutionalization of innovation support refers to the building of sustainable supportive structures for entrepreneurial activities previous to market entry, such as offering training, developing business plans, conducting market analysis, or setting up supply chains, marketing

and sales. The consortium aims at turning Akleh Central kitchen into an incubator for entrepreneurial activities and food innovation.

IV. Approach

i. Community Supported Initiatives

The different initiatives under Ardi Ardak are characterized by their “community-supported” approach providing urban consumers and the private sector the opportunity to engage in fostering the local food system and supporting small-scale rural producers. These initiatives are based on mutual commitments between producers and a community of supporters hence providing a direct link between the production and consumption of food and fostering food sovereignty. They are organized in a way to inspire communities to work together with their local producers, provide mutual benefits and reconnect people to the land where their food is grown.

ii. Gender Mainstreaming

This network provides women, who are among the most vulnerable groups within their communities, special consideration throughout its activities. Women are key stakeholders having significant impact on sustainable management of natural resources, sustainable farming practices and livelihood strategies, promotion of food security, and ensuring healthy successful generations. By building women’s capacities in agriculture and agrofood processing and in business development through ESDU and LLWB capacity building projects, this initiative tends to promote women empowerment, decrease gender inequality and improves nutrition status as women play an important role in promoting food security at the households’ and communities’ levels. Providing women access to knowledge and to the market would promote their decision-making power and offer them the potentials to invest their skills in new livelihood strategies fostering their economic empowerment.

iii. Linking Innovation to Traditional Production





This initiative promotes innovation applied to traditional agro-food productions, aiming at introducing innovative food production and combining between product innovation and authenticity, making production processes more sustainable and strengthening the linkages among producers, markets and consumers.

iv. Sustainability

This initiative fosters sustainability by promoting organic farming techniques and adopting environmentally friendly practices in the production and the marketing process. In addition, by reducing import dependencies and fostering local food systems, this initiative reduces the carbon footprint. Building the capacities of this network’s beneficiaries, through ongoing ESDU, FHF and LLWB capacity building projects, fosters local people to take action on issues themselves and promotes sense of ownership and empowerment so that beneficiaries gain greater control

over their development. In addition, by having full ownership of their initiatives (e.g. urban agriculture system, community gardens, community kitchens linked to Akleh), beneficiaries are further encouraged to invest (effort, time and resources) to ensure the success and sustainability of their plans.

V. Ardi Ardak Initiatives:

	Initiative	Summary
	Lunch Box – <i>Akleh</i>	Lunch boxes are prepared in Akleh Central Kitchen (incubator kitchen). Raw material is provided from ESDU's network of community kitchens and small producers.
	Family Meal – <i>Tanjara</i>	Each “tanjara” you buy will provide a similar “tanjara” to a vulnerable household. Food is prepared in Akleh Central Kitchen (incubator kitchen). Raw material is provided from ESDU's network of community kitchens and small producers.
	Herbal Kitchen Kit – <i>Aroma</i>	Urban agriculture (planting in balcony, on roofs, in spaces available in urban areas) fosters household self-sufficiency.
	Souk Al Souk (Farmers' Market) – <i>Moms & Kids</i>	Farmers market supporting small scale producers and promoting authentic healthy products.

	<p>Community Gardens – <i>Jnaineh</i></p>	<p>Gardening activity overtaken by people living in the same commune, neighborhood or street, aiming namely at securing their food.</p>
	<p>Visiting Keepers of Darb el Karam - <i>Mechwar</i></p>	<p>Food tourism network proposing thematic packages by harvest seasons where visitors can participate in picking and preserves making activities and eat at the houses of small-scale food producers and in tables d'hôte where they enjoy local culinary specialties.</p>
	<p>Community Supported Outlets (for marketing & distribution) – <i>Khayme</i></p>	<p>Mobile outlets for the promotion and marketing of products from small-scale producers</p>
	<p>Mouneh Basket – Cedar Basket</p>	<p>Linking Lebanese diaspora to producers by sending them local products.</p>

VI. Sustainability and upscaling of the network

The sustainability of this network builds on the following pillars:

1. ESDU infrastructure including: 1) demonstration plots which serve as knowledge hubs to promote climate-smart ecofriendly practices and train producers following the Farmers Field School Approach; 2) community kitchens network serving as a hub for cooking classes, food incubators, and vocational training; 3) network of producers and community kitchens who were trained by ESDU on food safety and food processing.
2. ESDU's ongoing projects on building capacities of farmers on sustainable agriculture, food processing and food safety.
3. LLWB's network of partnerships with the private sector.

4. LLWB's ongoing projects on building business development capacities of small-scale producers.
5. The Food Heritage Foundation ongoing services: Souk al Souk Farmers Market; and capacity building on Food Safety and Food processing.
6. The formation of a steering committee with members from ESDU, LLWB, FHF and Ziko House and relevant stakeholders. This committee ensures the sustainability of the activities and seeks to attract more funds to keep the unit functional.
7. The partnerships established through the implementation of the marketing linkages.
8. The linkages created between different stakeholders involved in the initiatives to sustain the outcomes and synergize activities.
9. Regular monitoring and evaluation as well as sustainability assessment held to evaluate the progress of the initiatives and solicit advice and take corrective actions whenever needed in order to ensure sustainability.

This project will be linked to REEF (Rural Empowerment & Entrepreneurship Forum, an online platform aiming to link relevant stakeholders and developmental agencies, share knowledge, and develop joint developmental strategies) to ensure connections of all stakeholders. The material documented as well as the tools developed under this project have all a great potential for scaling up to communities within rural settings throughout Lebanon. The dissemination of the initiatives results and the promotion of the producers will be done through the partners' social media including Karianet, an online MENA regional network platform hosted by ESDU for the management and sharing of knowledge, information and experience in agriculture and rural development and which is based on open-access principle ensuring broad access to and usage of information.

VII. Implementing Partners

i. Environment and Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU)

The Environment & Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU), hosted at the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences (FAFS) of the American University of Beirut (AUB), is a regional inter-disciplinary research and development center specialized in rural community development, local food systems and sustainable agriculture. With well-established networks in the MENA region, ESDU has been successfully promoting sustainable livelihoods since 2001 (www.aub.edu.lb/fafs/esdu/Pages/default.aspx). The Unit focuses on participatory development and capacity building through knowledge management and sharing, appropriate technologies, and impact analysis with particular attention to smallholder farmers, women and youth in the rural areas.

ii. *Lebanese League for Women in Business (LLWB)*

LLWB, founded in 2006, is a socio-economic, apolitical, non-religious association bringing together professional women and women entrepreneurs and providing them with a platform for sharing experiences, developing competencies and skills, mentorship and access to funding.

LLWB's mission has been driven by building partnerships and collaborations with various stakeholders in the ecosystem that share similar goals of addressing socio-economic gaps. The association operates in the regions of Beirut, North Lebanon, Beqaa, Chouf and South Lebanon.

iii. *The Food Heritage Foundation*

The Food Heritage Foundation (FHF), established in 2013 by ESDU, is a non-governmental organization to promote rural livelihoods, Local Food Systems (LFS) and capacity building on best practices. FHF aims at conserving Lebanon's collective memory and indigenous knowledge through the preservation, documentation and revival of Lebanon's traditional food heritage. It seeks to create jobs for the Lebanese rural population, namely women and small producers, by reviving the market for healthy home-cooked local cuisine and organic products.

iv. *Ziko House*

Ziko House is a heritage house in Spears, Beirut, hosting humanitarian and developmental agencies. Ziko House is currently hosting Akleh Central Kitchen and has been facing sustainability challenges in the face of the growing economic expansion.