

Leb.Inc. Promoting Inclusive Business in Lebanon - AID 10962

FINAL EVALUATION REPORT

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Disclaimer

This Evaluation Report is compiled for COSV by Antonino Faibene, Stefania Chirizzi and Barbara Lilliu, Independent Evaluation Consultants. The information and views set out in this report are those of the authors and of those who have contributed to it, and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the donor - AICS.

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Executive Summary

Leb.Inc.: Promoting Inclusive Business in Lebanon was financed by the Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione e lo Sviluppo (AICS) and implemented in Northern Lebanon and in the Beqaa Valley. The initial 36-months timeframe to implement the project was extended and ran from April 2017 to June 2021, due to several external contingencies. Led by COSV, activities were implemented by a consortium of partners which included local organisation Beyond Reform & Development (BRD), and Italian organisations Avanzi – Sostenibilità per Azioni (S.r.l) and Consorzio Nazionale della Cooperazione Sociale Gino Mattarelli (CGM).

The General Objective of the project was to promote a scalable, sustainable, and replicable inclusive business model by (i) guaranteeing direct impact on students and unemployed young people, and (ii) by developing a favourable environment towards the sustainability of the action through the collaboration with Universities and Training Institutes.

The Project had two specific objectives:

OS.1: Increase the employability of young people, improving their entrepreneurial skills with particular attention to aspects of innovation and social entrepreneurship

OS.2: To make universities and professional training institutes, places for the promotion of inclusive and alternative economic and social development

Linked to the specific objectives were the following results:

R1.1: Local young people have a higher degree of employability

R1.2: The beneficiaries of entrepreneurship support services are connected through a network to increased opportunities for social impact on the territory

R2.1: Key stakeholders have access to real data and up-to-date information relating to the labour market in the North and Beqaa regions in Lebanon

R2.2: Universities and vocational training institutes provide entrepreneurship support services to students, unemployed young people and potential actors of local change

R2.3: The developed model is promoted to local and national stakeholders for the definition of good practices

The final evaluation of the project aimed at capturing the learning coming from the project and assessing the achievement of its objectives. The evaluation was based on the OEDC/DAC criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability, with an in-depth analysis of the project adaptability, flexibility, governance, adaptive learning, gender and inclusivity. The evaluation furthermore identified and clustered the Leb.Inc actions under the three interrelated macro, meso and micro dimensions.

The evaluation took place between July and September 2021 and used the following methodological steps:

- Desk Research Phase: review of project data and materials in addition to secondary sources of information;

- Primary Data Gathering Phase: data collected through remote meetings and interviews;
- Data Analysis Phase: thematic coding, analysis and triangulation of information from reviewed documentation, transcripts of interviews and focus groups with key informants;
- Validation/Reporting Phase: final round of calls with project staff and the submission of the first draft report

Assessment and Findings

The task of fully assessing whether the Leb.Inc project managed to generate employability opportunities for youth and whether the universities could effectively play a role in the promotion of inclusive and alternative economic and social development, was hindered by the fast-changing and complex Lebanese context at the time of implementation. If clearly identifying results was therefore not straightforward under the circumstances in the country, the findings certainly point at the ability of Leb.Inc to adapt, learn, and plant the seeds for innovative approaches with a focus on the rise of the social enterprise sector as an alternative growth path for Lebanese youths.

Throughout the implementation of the Leb.Inc project, Lebanon experienced one of the most turbulent periods of its recent history. The 2019 economic crisis was defined by the World Bank as “one of the sharpest depressions of modern times”, with the Covid-19 pandemic further weakening the economy and the already precarious medical infrastructure. Adding to the instability, a large amount of ammonium nitrate stored at the Port of Beirut exploded in August 2020 rocking the Lebanese capital and inflicting further human and material loss on the exacerbated population.

In this extreme context, the project was nevertheless able to adapt its implementation logic and, overall, remain relevant to the country's needs. The project also managed to consistently operate and engage individuals, Universities, Institutions, and existing social enterprises over its lifespan, which testifies to the relevance of the initiative within such a complex environment.

One of the key recommendations from the mid-term evaluation was to build a common vision amongst the project partners and target stakeholders about the project. The current review of the project materials and the consultation of the key informants highlighted a clear, if not fully achieved, shift in this area through defined steps such as the organization of a workshop led by COSV and BRD, which brought together all project partners to reflect on a common project scope and shared ways forward. This awareness also led to the partners engaging more and in various ways with the Universities by giving hands on support to the coaches working with the students.

The development of Market-Oriented Curricula (MOC) provided a concrete opportunity for the targeted University coaches and focal points to get more insights on the project intent, familiarise with the social business concept, and to plan their activities in a “formative and innovative” process. At the systemic level, the targeted Universities only started institutionalizing the MOC through the Leb.Inc project, knowing there would be limitations around the accreditation of new courses within the limited available timeframe.

The consultation of students with diverse backgrounds (with a focus on a gender lens) would have made the implementation process more inclusive and would have contributed to enhancing their agency in preparation for the following stages of the project.

Although the Universities managed to establish the Social Innovation Hubs (SIH) within the project timeframe, circumstances related to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic prevented SIHs from operating in their full capacity. Nevertheless, the evaluation team was able to assess the potential for the SIHs to serve as enterprise incubators, and as community centres for students, entrepreneurs, and the local population to interact.

The Labour Market Observatory (LMO) added value to the role of the Universities and to the skills-building promoted by the project. However, the market research fell short of its ambition because of delays in developing the digital platform, reduced contribution to the LMO by existing enterprises, limited follow-up on information accuracy, and the gradual decrease in commitment from the Universities. The evaluation team could appreciate the ongoing partnership with the youth-led Tripoli Entrepreneurs Club (TEC) on the LMO as a strong push to guarantee a higher degree of sustainability to the observatory.

For participating students, the social innovation competition process was one of the most stimulating activities of the project, triggering high levels of participation and motivation. The process was particularly appreciated in its effort to transform students into entrepreneurs through a change of mentality and an innovative learning style. The arrival of the start-up expert was instrumental in facilitating that shift by helping them understand enterprise development, the skills needed to run an enterprise, and the importance of collaboration.

Although the number of trained university coaches was limited to 15 and their specific entrepreneurial competencies were rather low, they were significantly and meaningfully involved in the various project components, improving the ways in which they supported students after the arrival of the start-up expert.

The project only partially involved the local communities and engaged with youths from outside of the universities. Of the 16 funded start-ups, only one was external to the university, confirming that the project was not able to engage the local population in a broader community-university partnership for social development.

It wasn't always easy for the Leb.Inc partners to find a balance between the qualitative and quantitative needs of the project. In the case of the start-up grants, the evaluation team found that the project had sometimes concentrated more on trying to reach several hundreds of students, as required by the donor, than on comprehensively targeting fewer promising students with a passion for social enterprise development. Although the quality vs quantity dilemma affects development organisations in general, and is certainly not unique to Leb.Inc, a more focused approach may have resulted in an increase in supported start-ups, from 16 to closer to the 40 envisioned in the project proposal.

The reallocation of funding from the second social innovation competition to a Covid-19 emergency tender for existing social enterprises, is proof of the project's ability to adapt to the shifting context, and to reflect on how to best make an impact in the country. Beyond being a financial safety-net for social enterprises, the emergency tender was meant as a way to find new strategies to impact the meso level, something that was almost impossible to do through the start-ups alone.

As stressed in the mid-term evaluation report, and observed to a certain extent during this evaluation, the relationship between the two main partners of the action, BRD and COSV, was marred by different views on project activities and each other's roles. This was especially true at the beginning of the project due to several contributing causes, including the limited capability of the COSV staff to engage on the technical aspects of the project with the partner, and the differing visions and methodological approaches they used. As dialogue gradually improved, it appears that the partners started working almost independently from each other on different components: COSV on the start-ups, seed funds, and LMO; BRD on employability and curriculum development with the universities. This model which emphasises clarity of roles, rather than joint collaboration on all components, can be seen in the strategy adopted in the SEE Change project which started in September 2020 involving both COSV and BRD.

Internal communication adversely affected the project throughout its lifespan and contributed to negatively impacting some of the mentioned findings (i.e., common vision, relationship between partners). One recurring example was the already-mentioned recruitment of the start-up expert with funding diverted from the start-up grants. Although this was understood as a move towards increased effectiveness, there was little previous consultation among partners on how to proceed with the change.

Options for a way Forward

Based on the findings and the analysis of the project results, several recommendations have been defined to support partner reflection on internal dynamics, learning and potential for future development.

Further explore the possibility to establish stronger links between the start-ups and the surrounding communities with the hubs acting as a melting pot for these two dimensions. The social innovation hubs could be strengthened as incubation spaces where the start-ups can learn, network, and grow. Based on the experience of COSV with the "Community Capital" approach, local resources (skills, expertise, investment, etc) can be harvested and used to strengthen the start-ups by forming student-community partnerships. The hubs would also be connected to the Labour Market Observatory (LMO) managed by the Tripoli Entrepreneurs Club (TEC).

Proceeding from the general to the particular, the project strategy could better shape the process that engages youth in the promotion of social business. This would mean involving a foundational level for everyone in targeted settings and an advanced level that is tailored to sustain

customised pathways. To develop the start-ups, resources should be invested in selecting fewer potential entrepreneurs rather than engaging with several hundreds of students.

Streamline an intersectional approach that would help identify and address vulnerability factors among the target population in fragile contexts. Particularly, the evaluation recommends adopting more sensitive approaches towards gender and disability that should also be captured by internal measurement systems. In addition to that, the project could plan for integrated services for youth who need supplementary support (such as life skills) to succeed in their entrepreneurial experience.

To ensure the micro, meso, and macro dimensions of the social enterprise are tackled, the actions should simultaneously engage start-ups and existing social enterprises. The micro-level would be covered by work with the start-ups, the meso-level by working with established enterprises and their networks, the macro-level by translating the needs of the social enterprises into advocacy recommendations towards decision-makers. The social enterprises could additionally mentor and coach the start-ups during the incubation period in the hubs.

Time and resources should be allocated to ensure partners and stakeholders are involved in a participatory way during all phases of the project cycle management, starting with the design phase when common objectives and plans are defined. An organogram should be agreed together with the terms of references for key project staff, to ensure skills and backgrounds match the project and partner needs.

During the inception period of future projects, **the partners should invest in co-creating internal and external communication plans.** The internal plan should have clear communication flows, means, and frequency of face-to-face and online meetings. The external communication plan should clarify hierarchical levels of interaction with other stakeholders to ensure communication flows are clear, agreed in advance, and coherent with shared vision and planning.

Acknowledging the fact that COSV is already working on capitalising its learning, this evaluation recommends **documenting the knowledge generated through the Leb.Inc experience towards a new model for social business development in fragile contexts.**

1-The Leb.Inc Project: An Overview

When the Leb.Inc Project initiative was developed between 2016 and 2017, Lebanon was a country which showed promise in terms of business development in the broader entrepreneurship sector. According to the most recent Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Report (2018), Lebanon was rated as 'one of the world's most entrepreneurial countries, with nearly one in four adults starting or running a new business, the fourth highest level of the 48 countries participating in the 2018 GEM Adult Population Survey (APS). Of those 48 countries in 2018, Lebanon ranked second for both the proportion of adults running a new business and the proportion running an established business. Taken together, nearly one in two adults in Lebanon were starting, or running a new or established business. In a society generally inclined towards entrepreneurship, 'the components of the entrepreneurial ecosystem varied in terms of their effectiveness, with little in the way of government policy support, and with major obstacles to the market entry of new businesses'.

In this broader context, the concept of social entrepreneurship came along and gradually developed. Rooted into old practices - particularly in rural areas - the concept of social business was not entirely new to the country. National debate on the promotion of social entrepreneurship as a way for proactive individuals or groups, and particularly youth, kicked off in 2010. Since then, initiatives in support of social business development have consistently increased over the last few years, also thanks to investments from the international community.

In the absence of policies and legal frameworks for social enterprises in Lebanon, the criteria underpinning the definition of social enterprise have been quite fluid over time. More recently, national and international organizations in association with the specialised sector have moved towards the identification of criteria in alignment with international standards. The example below was defined by Beyond Reform and Development (BRD) - partner in the Leb.Inc project- in 2016.



The deterioration of the socio-economic situation, coupled with the political and security instability, and the scarcity of resources in the country, posed significant constraints to the operability of existing businesses, and negatively affected the development of new businesses. Yet, the promotion of social entrepreneurship can still be seen as strategic for the future of the country.

It is within this context that the project Leb.Inc "*Promoting Inclusive business in Lebanon* " was developed and started in April 2017 with funding from AICS – Italian Cooperation for a timeframe of three years (later extended). The project has been implemented by COSV, as the lead agency, in partnership with Beyond Reform & Development (BRD - Lebanon), Avanzi and Consorzio Nazionale della Cooperazione Sociale Gino Mattarelli (CGM).

The General Objective of the project was to promote a scalable, sustainable and replicable inclusive business model as a driving force for stability, development and social innovation in Northern Lebanon and in the Beqaa Valley. To achieve that, the intervention worked on a double level: (i) to guarantee direct impact on the one hand (students, unemployed young people, etc.) and (ii) on the other hand the development of a favourable environment capable of guaranteeing the sustainability of the action (Universities and training Institutes).

In line with this approach, the project was divided into two specific objectives:

- OS.1: Increase the employability of young people, improving their entrepreneurial skills with particular attention to aspects of innovation and social entrepreneurship
- OS.2: To make universities and professional training institutes, places for the promotion of inclusive and alternative economic and social development

The project planned to achieve the following results: R1.1: Local young people have a higher degree of employability R1.2: The beneficiaries of entrepreneurship support services are connected through a network to increased opportunities for social impact on the territory. R2.1: Key stakeholders have access to real data and up-to-date information relating to the labour market in the North and Beqaa regions in Lebanon. R2.2: Universities and vocational training institutes provide entrepreneurship support services to students, unemployed young people and potential actors of local change. R2.3: The developed model is promoted to local and national stakeholders for the definition of good practices.

2-The Evaluation Process

2.1 Objectives and scope of the evaluation

The final evaluation of the Leb.Inc project aims to capture learnings from the project experience and the achievement of its objectives and outcomes. Particularly, the evaluation considers the actual results/outcomes produced by the project, in relation to the methodology applied to attain them, as well as the anticipated results planned at proposal stage.

Moreover it aims to:

- ❖ examine the extent to which the initiative complied with the main evaluation criteria identified
- ❖ examine the intervention's design, relevance to various stakeholders, as well as the efficiency, efficacy and sustainability of its operations

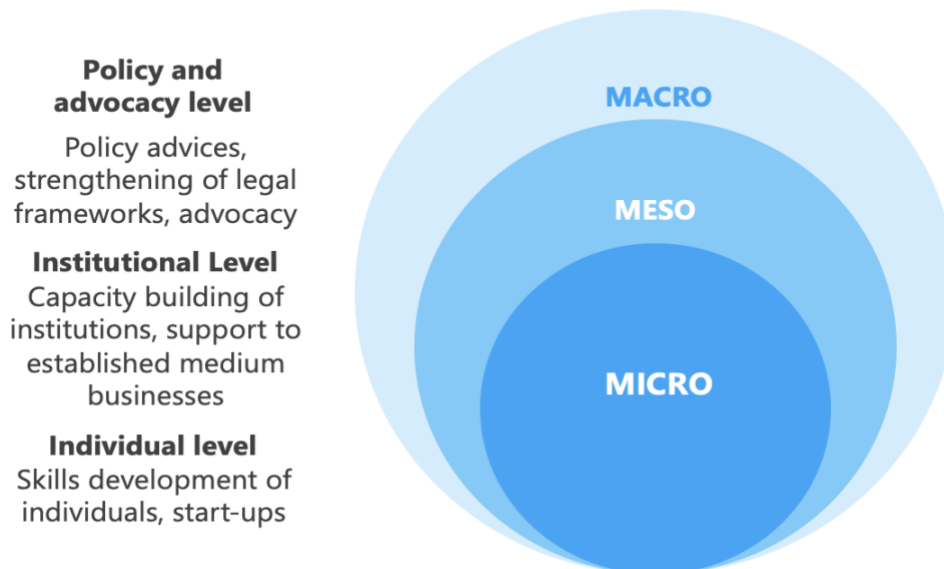
- ❖ Provide a forward-looking exercise seeking to identify the lessons learned and areas for improvement for future actions

Conceptual framework

Based on the above-mentioned evaluation objectives, the theoretical framework outlining the standards of reference for this evaluation is based on the OECD/DAC criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. These have been enriched by adding the notions of adaptability, flexibility, governance and adaptive learning, to better encompass the challenges of the implementation context and other external factors that may have influenced the achievements of the project. Gender and inclusivity are considered cross-cutting issues and therefore intrinsic and mainstreamed within the main criteria.

Additionally, based on the initial review of relevant documentation and consultation with COSV staff, the evaluation consultants have identified three levels of interventions under which the Leb.Inc project can be clustered: macro, meso and micro. The diagram below provides an overview of these areas and the linkage with the corresponding project components.

Levels of Interventions



The evaluation approach was designed to embrace all three levels of intervention.

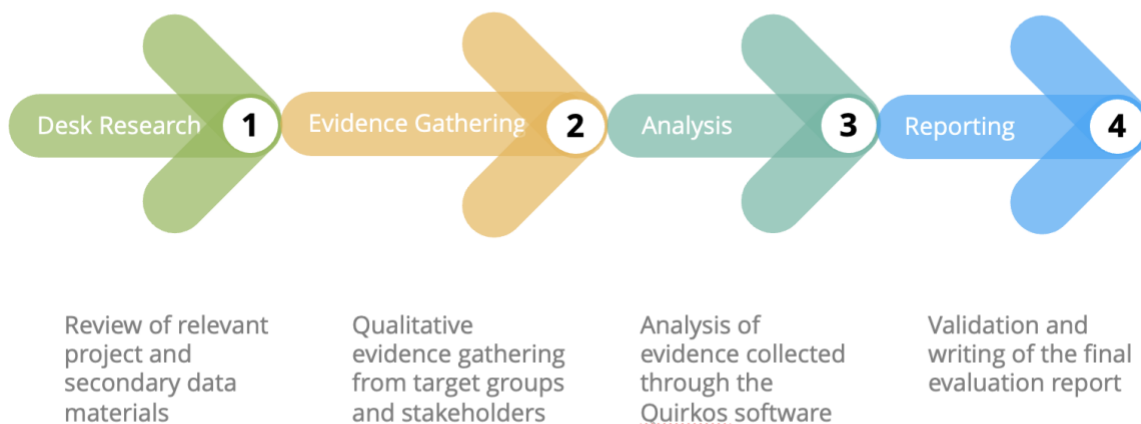
2.2 Methodology and analysis process

Mindful of Covid-19 restrictions and logistic constraints, the evaluation process was designed to maximize broad involvement of the main actors at every stage including project staff, partners and relevant informants in a remote fashion. The evaluation took place between July and September 2021.

The overall methodology draws from project-driven data generated throughout the monitoring of each project activity, supplemented by the employment of additional qualitative methods designed to capture evidence, insights, views and inputs from diverse actors and stakeholders involved in the project. The final evaluation methodology rests on the following activities and steps, also illustrated in the diagram below :

4-STEP EVALUATION PROCESS

LEB.INC PROJECT



Desk Research Phase: as an initial step, the evaluation team familiarized with the Leb.Inc approach through a deep dive into project data and materials in addition to a thorough review of secondary sources of information in order to determine the contextual background . The review of relevant materials included:

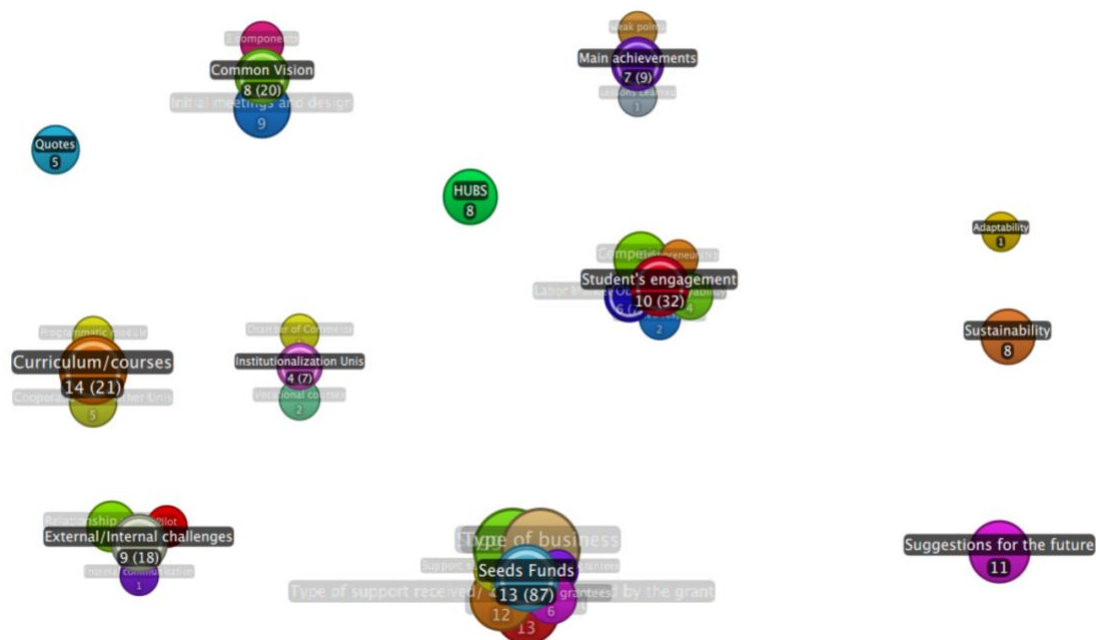
- Project reports;
- Review of current M&E framework and progress towards anticipated milestones;
- Review of secondary sources of information that are relevant to the scope of the Leb.Inc project;
- Other internal strategic and programmatic documents as relevant

Primary Data Gathering Phase: primary data have been collected according to a combination of methods as follows:

- 1) Remote meetings with project staff arranged throughout the evaluation exercise to discuss process updates, gather ad hoc information and to validate findings.
- 2) Remote interviews and small group discussions were organized with involved stakeholders: focal points in target universities, coaches, students, grantees and partner staff. These key informants were identified in coordination with project staff. A total of 25 Individuals were interviewed (sometimes several times). Please see Annex I for a detailed list.

Data Analysis Phase: the methodology adopted for the data analysis was thematic coding (grounded theory). The study used a software program (Quirkos) to analyze and triangulate information from reviewed documentation, transcripts of interviews and focus groups with key informants. The coding was carried out primarily on the basis of frequency, for example: the number of respondents with “similar” answers or who stated similar ideas were labeled by the evaluators under simple codes/themes (e.g. “common vision” or “suggestions for the future”). The lists of emerging themes was finalized once saturation was reached.

Quirks Canvas - Primary



The themes were then grouped under the main objectives of the project.

Validation/Reporting Phase: The outcomes were validated through a final round of calls with project staff and the submission of the first draft report. The final evaluation report, commented and validated by project staff, was finalized highlighting learning outcomes and approaches to inform future programming.

3-Assessment and Findings

3.1 Alignment and adaptability to country and people's needs

Lebanon is facing its worst crisis since the 1975-90 civil war. Fueled by decades of state waste and graft, the crisis started before the COVID-19 pandemic (an additional factor that exacerbated the economic crises) and accelerated after a huge stockpile of ammonium nitrate exploded in the capital's port in August 2020, killing 200 people.

The 2019 economic crisis was worsened by a "debilitating institutional void" caused by political deadlock which led to around 78% of the Lebanese population falling into poverty over the last two years. The World Bank says it is one of the [sharpest depressions of modern times](#).

Early in the crisis, Lebanon defaulted on its massive public debt, including \$31 billions of Eurobonds that remain outstanding to creditors. The currency has fallen by more than 90%, demolishing purchasing power in a country dependent on imports. Lebanese people are being denied access to their savings by most banks in the country, so that it has become increasingly difficult to afford even essentials like water and bread. Food prices have jumped by 557% since October 2019 according to the World Food Programme, and [the economy has contracted by 30% since 2017](#). Fuel shortages have crippled normal life, affecting essential services including hospitals and bakeries. Essential [medicines have also run out](#) and many of Lebanon's most qualified have left the country in a steady brain drain.

These medicine, food and fuel shortages can be partly attributed to the port explosion that devastated Lebanon's main access to the rest of the world. Roughly \$7.4B worth of traded goods passed through the Port of Beirut before its decimation, a significant increase in the past several years as Syria's civil war forced Lebanon to rely on its access to the sea for goods, commerce, and business. The Covid-19 pandemic, which caused [over half a million cases and almost 8,000 deaths](#) in the country, will probably continue as Lebanon has almost no medical infrastructure to carry out tests, vaccinations, and to treat patients in intensive care.

The Leb.Inc project was implemented within this challenging and fast-changing context. The project leveraged its ability to read the context by adapting its implementation strategy in several ways. From the analytical review of the **Leb.Inc intervention logic** it emerged that initially, the project structure largely invested on the role and the functions of targeted Universities as vehicles of innovation in the broader area of employability of youth. At the intersection of micro and meso dimensions, Universities were seen as primary actors in the promotion of social business at both theoretical and practical levels:

- In itself, the engagement of Universities in diverse geographical areas (with different socio-economic connotations from the capital city) emerges as an innovative element - as compared to other similar interventions in Lebanon. As such, the Leb.Inc project involves **a strategy that is quite exploratory in defining a new model** for promoting social business in Lebanon with a combination of activities that had only partially been previously tested.
- The **three main project components** (University curricula and the Innovation Hubs, the Labour Market Observatory, and the support to startups) that were initially designed to feed into one another did not work in synergy as expected - due to several internal and external factors, illustrated above, that largely influenced the project's implementation. In this regard, the final evaluation confirms the analysis made in the mid-term assessment. However, it recognizes the capacity of the project to be **flexible** and to adapt to the changing context, shifting to online mode when the pandemic hit, and switching to emergency mode, revising the support to the start-ups component in favour of a support to existing social businesses when the economic crisis escalated.

Overall, the project design, including its intervention logic, is **relevant** to the country's aforementioned needs. The project has also managed to consistently operate and engage individuals, Universities/Institutions and existing social businesses over its implementation, which is a testimony to the relevance of the initiative within such a complex environment.

3.2 Building The Project's Strategic and Common Vision

One of the key recommendations from the mid-term evaluation was to increase focus on **building a common vision amongst the project partners and target stakeholders** about the project, both at the conceptual and operational levels. Following up on this recommendation, the final evaluation has assessed whether some progress was made towards its fulfilment. The review of the project materials and the consultation of the key informants highlighted a **clear shift in this area through defined steps**. The first benchmark was the organization of a workshop led by COSV and BRD, which brought together all project partners to reflect on the project scope and agree on the way forward in a manner that was relevant to identified needs and the respective roles of each partner through this experience.

"When we started on a project we didn't have the idea about it; we were going to work on entrepreneurship, about competitions, about new ideas, innovations, about motivation of youth to work or to think out of the box. But meeting over meeting, we started to gain a broad perspective, broader clarity about the project objectives, the steps, the process. With time, we started to gain many ideas and information about what the strategy is, concerning this project and what we should work on to reach the aim of it". (University focal point)

Although some specific remarks concerning the decision-making process remained, all key informants interviewed for this evaluation confirmed that they started to feel comfortable with the overarching project strategy and the specific project activities over time.

From a technical perspective, the targeted Universities in Tripoli and the Beqaa had experienced none or very little exposure to the debate around social entrepreneurship and innovation prior to the Leb.Inc project. Leb.Inc project staff acknowledged that building the foundational level of understanding amongst Universities would have required more dedication at the early stage of the project. *I think at the beginning, the University partners were not clear because of their situation away from the capital where social entrepreneurship is mainly blooming. The concept of social entrepreneurship was still not that mature with them, while the project was initially designed thinking that they might know more about social entrepreneurship. But then, this was recognized and re-evaluated (Leb.Inc Project Staff).* To address that, the Leb.Inc project staff worked closely with the selected coaches to increase their knowledge about social entrepreneurship and support them through the coaching activities aimed at students.

3.3 Universities: Beyond theoretical knowledge

Brief introduction

With the view of strengthening the link between University programmes and employability of youth, the Leb.Inc project engaged the selected Universities in the development of market-oriented curricula (MOC). The three targeted Universities went through customized pathways to develop and adopt the new curricula within their own settings. Training Institutes were also called to collaborate and provide their technical support through this phase. BRD was the main reference for coordination, technical oversight and the delivery of training.

What was achieved

The development of the MOC provided a concrete opportunity for the targeted Universities to get more insights on the project intent, familiarize with the thematic focus on social business and mobilize internal assets to keep up with the workplan. The process was described by key informants as formative and innovative.



Gathering inputs from local firms and training institutes - to identify main gaps and desired skills from an employability standpoint - was interesting and clearly instrumental to the design of the new curricula.



The targeted Universities were exposed to a learning experience that placed them in a better position to understand the labour market and to elaborate academic products that were more geared towards the employability of students.



All targeted Universities became more knowledgeable about social business and started to consider it as a resource for youth.



Targeted students gained new skills that were framed in a more business oriented manner and had access to a composite learning journey.



Other than students, Universities proactively reached out to other external actors such as firms, secondary schools and training institutes to promote the training courses based on the new curricula. In the case of Al Jinan University, one training was held at the Chamber of Commerce and it was open to participants with different backgrounds. All of this contributed to strengthening local networking and provided Universities with the opportunity to leverage their new resources.

Adaptive Sustainability and Lessons Learnt

The final evaluation has identified elements for sustainability, which vary to different degrees across the targeted Universities. As a common ground, the three Universities acknowledged the **importance of investing in human resources**, with a focus on the growth of the coaches and the focal points in terms of skills, motivation and engagement. At the **individual level**, this experience brought significant change in their attitudes and their mindset towards social business. Leb.Inc staff described the individual journey of coaches and focal points as one of the most relevant gains of the project. Not only did they qualify as trained coaches and focal points, they also became advocates. *"I love the concept. It was really new and really interesting and I'm very convinced with that. So now with my students, with my patients, with my clients, I really advise them to think of a social enterprise, to start their own social enterprises with whatever facilities they have. So it's really a very interesting thing. I think spreading them, spreading these concepts among youth is very important because everyone wants to be employed"* (University coach).

At the **systemic level**, the targeted Universities only started moving their first steps towards institutionalizing the products generated through the Leb.Inc project, knowing that the journey is long and complex. For instance, Leb.Inc partners were aware of the **limitations around the accreditation of new courses** (in relation to social business and related skills) within the available time-frame. Key informants confirmed that although some initial discussions had been held both internally and with the Ministry of Education, there is no expectation to institutionalize the new curricula as primary courses in the short term. The new curricula remain a resource that can enrich the academic programme for University students as additional tools in unstructured settings (workshops, short trainings, seminars) most probably in association with the Innovation Hubs.

One **concrete suggestion for future consideration** is to design and deliver the training package for coaches and instructors as a Training of Trainers in order to maximise the potential for replicability and increase the sense of local ownership among targeted actors.

Another area explored by the final evaluation was the extent to which the Leb.Inc activities had sought the **involvement of students**, enabling their active participation and equal access to the overall process. Students were largely dealt with as recipients of the new curricula. By carrying out the market research, students had the opportunity to exercise the new acquired skills learned through the training and they got a sense of the main findings that informed the development of the curricula. However, it doesn't seem that there was a space for students to validate this data from their own perspective and to feed into the drafting of the new courses. The consultation of students with diverse backgrounds (with a focus on a gender lens) would have made the process more inclusive and it would have contributed to enhancing their agency in preparation for the following stages of the project.

3.4 Social Innovation Hubs as a catalyst for change

Brief introduction

The Social Innovation Hubs (SIH) were designed to provide students with a dedicated space within each targeted University where to discuss business ideas, receive innovative learning opportunities such as training and coaching, and orientation about funding opportunities. Dynamic in nature, SIHs should encourage entrepreneurship, provide business planning support, and create job placement opportunities. These places exemplify the Leb.Inc project ambition of creating a conducive environment for youth to engage in social business activities, building on the role of Universities as leading forces.

What was achieved

Although BAU, LIU and Al Jinan Universities managed to complete the establishment of the SIHs within the project timeframe, circumstances related to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic prevented SIHs from operating in their full capacity. Despite that, in the eyes of the University coaches and focal points consulted through this final evaluation **SIHs constitute one of the most tangible outputs.**



As a physical space made available inside or nearby Universities, the social innovation hub is an important output that gives *visibility* to the work undertaken through the Leb.Inc project initiative. It is visible to students, to the senior management, and to other entities from the local communities. *"When I was working with the university teams on the organizational model of the hubs, I saw the excitement from both the university coaches and the university administration. They were creating something from scratch! What was really important is that all of them did not want the hub to work only for the sake of the university itself. They wanted to play a key role in the social entrepreneurship or the innovation field in their own region"* (Leb.Inc Project staff).



Indeed, SIHs are invested with expectations as they set a **new trend for the Universities' modus operandi**. In this sense, the Leb.Inc experience opened the way to strategic considerations for the future. *"I do believe that the shape of Universities will change. The Universities will die as they were before. Universities should be totally related to the community, to society and to the youth so that the University will return to being a laboratory. The only hope for Universities is to be connected with society and the communities around"* (University focal point and senior manager).

Adaptive Sustainability and Lessons Learnt

The final evaluation has not found evidence that substantiates the effective functioning of the SIHs to date, largely due to Covid-19 related measures that limited access to educational facilities.

Nonetheless, an **interesting potential for the SIHs to serve as a catalyst for change** was noted.

BAU, LIU and Al Jinan Universities are left with a valuable resource that can potentially serve multiple purposes. As multi-functional spaces SIHs might:

- I. host formal and non-formal learning opportunities for students or other target groups from the community;
- II. provide orientation to students from secondary schools and University students based on data analysed by the Labour Market Observatory;
- III. spread information and supporting materials for youth interested in creating business;
- IV. host events in collaboration with NGOs, Chambers of Commerce, civil society on themes related to social business and innovation;
- V. offer the space for youth to access tutoring schemes for the development and the incubation of business projects;
- VI. be instrumental to building partnerships with specialized sectors and actors for the promotion of social business and entrepreneurship at the local level.

Such a configuration would give impulse to the role of Universities, putting them at the forefront of this innovation process. Universities would act as dynamic laboratories that are well grounded in their own communities and are able to understand and take up new challenges posed by the changing context.

Prior to the end of the project, the three targeted Universities with the supervision of BRD and COSV, produced an **operational plan** for their respective SIHs. *"The project won't stop here and everything has finished. No. We have now the place which is the social innovation hub. We have trainers that already have a full background about the project. I can say that we will be continuing with this project and involve more students until we can possibly expand to other campuses of our University"* (University coach). To date, the plans are still in the process of being formally endorsed by the Universities. *"We shared the idea. The University was concerned with monetary contributions because they told us to keep in mind that the University is not in a position to disburse amounts for such a hub. So we told them that we set a strategy. We selected topics for the training, for workshops, and we are thinking of having such workshops and training that is able to return a financial revenue or*

a financial return that gives the hub a push to sustain. Actually, from the beginning of the project, specifically talking about the hub, the university also has a plan to have a big guest center. So they are aware of the importance of having the hub in the University". (University focal point).

3.5 Labour Market Observatory (LMO)

Brief introduction

The labor market observatory (LMO) was conceived as a platform offering critical data regarding employment in Lebanon to primary stakeholders such as Universities, local enterprises and youth. Specifically the LMO was meant to support:

- universities and vocational training institutes to design or update their programmes based on real time inputs from the labour market and serve students with market oriented products;
- local businesses to join a network and to understand market trends;
- donors, NGOs and local institutions to *read* the labour market needs based on updated information

Overall, the LMO was meant to bridge the gap between education and employment by bringing different standpoints together and creating better matches for the employability of youth. With the engagement of the targeted Universities, two rounds of surveys were conducted by trained students to profile local firms and gather data. A digital application was created to support the exchange of information among the established network.

What was achieved



The establishment of a labour market observatory such as the one proposed by the Leb Inc project is an **unprecedented initiative in Lebanon**. Built on a small pilot implemented by COSV through a previous project, the idea was elaborated in collaboration with BRD to be initially linked with the core role of the Universities in the Leb.Inc Project.



In a general context where entrepreneurship is underregulated and not standardized (especially when it comes to social business), having access to updated and reliable data in relation to existing enterprises and opportunities for employment was certainly needed. Given the vacuum of similar platforms and the scarce availability of official data in the country, this task appeared to be as interesting as it was challenging. Once Universities were introduced to this initiative, students trained on data collection and research carried out the surveys for the market research. *Engaging students in market research was a new type of task. Even though students were enrolled in the business faculty, they had never been exposed to this type of work (University focal point).*

In a framework that focuses on strengthening the role of Universities (including staff and students) **the LMO piece clearly added value to the skills-building journey** promoted by the Leb.Inc project. However, the market research and the training of students were only the beginning of a **composite process that proved rather difficult** moving forward:

- The development of the digital application supporting the platform for the exchange of information and the identification of employment opportunities spanned over multiple phases (taking longer than planned) as the initial results were not up to expectations;
- The contributions of the enterprises - initially more responsive - were partial;
- Follow up on the accuracy of the inputs was limited;
- The commitment from Universities towards the LMO management gradually decreased, in consideration of the competing priorities that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent crisis.

Adaptive Sustainability and Lessons Learnt

Although the development of the LMO had diverged from the initial scheme, the potential for growth was still visible to the Leb.Inc partners. While many of the technical aspects related to the digital application were addressed, **new key partnerships were being developed around the LMO initiative**. With a focus on adaptive sustainability, Leb.Inc partners engaged in this journey with the Tripoli Entrepreneurs Club (TEC), a youth-led social enterprise that aims at supporting local entrepreneurship in collaboration with the Tripoli Chamber of Commerce and the financial support of national and international donors.

3.6 Social Enterprises: the way forward

Brief introduction

One of the promising aspects of the action was to be the strong collaboration between universities, training institutions and Italian organisations specialised in social innovation (Avanzi and GCM), towards shared learning and support to social enterprises through incubation, co-creation, bootcamps, competition and innovation hubs. This was particularly meaningful as the social enterprise concept is quite new and under-regulated in Lebanon.

The ambition of the project was to train 60 coaches to be based in the universities, involve 2000 youths in social innovation competitions, and train 200 students in understanding the social economy environment. Furthermore, 200,000 Euro was made available for 40 start-ups to be selected through various competitive rounds.

Subgrants: an essential timeline



What was achieved



At the end of the project, a total of 15 university professors received coach training to facilitate enterprise incubation.



After many delays due to security and financial setbacks in Lebanon, the project funded a total of 16 subgrants (out of 18 initially selected). Seven of the funded start-ups are in Northern Lebanon, while the remaining nine are in the Beqaa Valley.



With Covid-19 spreading in Lebanon from March 2020, the project partners suspended the second competition round, and instead launched a "COVID-19 Social Enterprise Support Grant" "to support established and operating Social Enterprises in Lebanon in adopting and scaling up innovation processes to cope with the radical production and organizational change needed to face the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic." A total of six grants were awarded to existing social enterprises.

Academic vs market-oriented mentality

For students involved, **the social innovation competition process was one of the most exciting activities of the project**, triggering high levels of participation and motivation. The idea of being able to turn ideas into start-ups and students into entrepreneurs was enticing, with several university coaches and students highlighting the first competition round as a successful example of collaboration among partners.

The concept of "competition" generated several discussions with interviewees unsure whether this was the best way to promote an entrepreneurial spirit among youths. It was suggested that a different approach, emphasizing the **enterprise building "process"** rather than the "prize" would have been more in tune with the project ambition. Much groundwork was needed after the competition to guide the winning projects through an incubation process with a market-oriented approach quite dissimilar from a more traditional academic one. The arrival of the start-up expert in 2019 was instrumental in facilitating that **shift in mentality from being students to being potential entrepreneurs**, by accompanying them through a process that included basic understanding of enterprise development, and also practical skills needed to run a successful enterprise such as accounting, marketing, and public relations, stressing the importance of collaboration as a key element for success.

A recipient of the Covid-19 emergency fund aptly described having an *"entrepreneur mind as having clear goals, having the means and the human resource that are skilled in order to be very proactive and very flexible in their work, to adapt and always have maybe a plan B and plan C, and this plan B or*

C is working sometimes for one week."

One participant in the evaluation expressed his satisfaction about this pragmatic non-academic approach in the following terms *"it was the first time that I got this type of support, that you have someone listening to you for like two hours"* (Start-up Grantee)

According to several sources, the universities involved were disconnected from the market reality and the dynamics which regulate it, making it difficult for them to fully understand and adapt their training and approaches to go beyond the academic theoretical dimension. One university focal point felt that the university was focusing *"too much on the books and not enough on the human being"* and that the universities should have *"given the students the experience and not just the information"*.

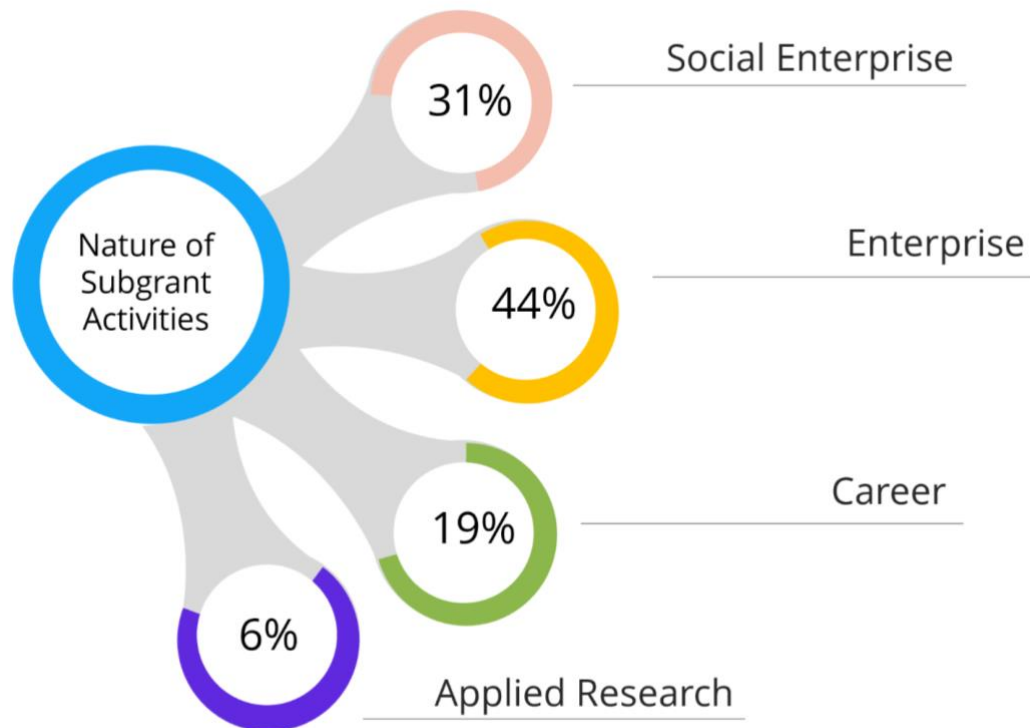
Limited interaction between the start-up incubator and the rest of the project

Due to several external and internal factors, the start-ups were not as embedded in the other project components as was hoped for. The consequences of the delays in establishing the SIHs were twofold: (i) on the one hand the start-up students were not able to meet and network in the incubation hubs; (ii) on the other, the start-up expert and the university counterparts did not have a dedicated space to coordinate in a systematic manner. Despite this, the mentoring process occurred monthly through face-to-face and online sessions encouraging incubation principles of collaboration and cross-fertilisation among start-ups even without a dedicated incubation space.

The Leb.Inc project partners trained 15 coaches by the end of the project. Although few in numbers, several sources reported the **coaches were significantly involved** in the various project components, but that they had limited competencies to truly facilitate the mentoring process for the start-ups. The inadequate number of coaches and their limited understanding of the social enterprise, spurred the recruitment of the **start-up expert to professionalise the mentoring process**, which also proved beneficial for the learning of the university coaches.

The recruitment helped the project achieve its objective of accompanying the selected start-ups (16 of 40 planned) towards sustainability, but also generated some discontent among students and universities for how it had happened, with funding for the expert diverted from the start-up funds with little or no discussion among project partners. *"Internal relationship dynamics influenced the way in which the situation evolved, and communication was managed, this is something we need to work on"* (Senior Leb.Inc Project Staff).

The project did not reach out to the communities and engage with youths outside of the universities. Out of the 16 funded start-ups, only one was external to the university, confirming that the component, also due to the Covid-19 pandemic, had little interaction with the communities surrounding the universities.



Less is more: The quantitative conundrum and the impact of passionate individuals on quality

"The very first thing I thought when I saw the project was that we are spreading ourselves too thin. Less is more! Sometimes doing less doesn't mean having less impact, it means you are able to focus more on details and quality". (Leb.Inc Project Staff)

Among university and civil society partners alike, the feeling that the project was **tackling too many activities** was widespread. When referring to the process to fund and mentor the start-ups, there was the impression that the project was engaging with too many students, instead of focusing on fewer, passionate individuals with entrepreneurial potential.

"I don't care about numbers. We should care about people with passion, those people can become real entrepreneurs in the end, but when we have one hundred people without passion, at the end we are wasting our time and our efforts. For sure, at the beginning we have to make a meeting with one hundred people, but at the end we should know that from that hundred people we cannot get more than two percent of people with passion. I think this quality versus quantity is always something NGOs struggle with, the donor wants to see numbers. From the beginning, we should make inspirational workshops with our students and inspire them to join this project instead of pushing them again and again and again and telling them that they should be able to do this project. Being entrepreneurs is something that we have deep inside, we cannot force it from the outside! Of course, we have the external environment that we can work on, but it's from deep inside that people have it. We worked mechanically and we missed this human part of the project". (University Focal Point)

It can be difficult to strike a balance between the value for money that donors often identify with high numbers, and the high quality that can be achieved with fewer students. Notwithstanding the effectiveness of reaching out to hundreds of students for trainings on basic understanding of what social enterprises are and how they work, a more focused targeting of students with a passion for social enterprise development may have helped the partners increase the number of grantees.

In striving for a balance, the final evaluation suggests that other aspects require further consideration. The blanket approach adopted by the project ensured that every student - from whichever background - could have access to the Leb.Inc opportunities. This reveals important values underlying the project action. At the same time, operating in a context where individuals are often confronted with constraints and discrimination - on the basis of their nationality, gender identity, and disabilities - requires that adequate resources are in place to understand the specific needs and ensure proper support. An example mentioned by University coaches and students refers to the difficulties faced by non-Lebanese students in dealing with the establishment of the start-ups due to limitations related to their legal status. Additional scenarios might concern young women from remote areas or persons with disabilities. Recognizing that people have different identities, needs, priorities and capacities that are not static, intersectional approaches would help uncover vulnerability factors and support resilience building, which is key for this type of interventions in fragile contexts.

Within a general approach that provides targeted youth with equal access to the opportunities provided by the project in terms of learning, awareness, information and competitions, there needs to be an advanced stage where the specific needs of individuals are dealt with through a more focused approach. This could also involve the provision of supplementing support such as life skills coaching, as in many instances youth might not feel well equipped to undertake the entrepreneurship experience although they have a clear interest in it and excellent business ideas.

The **drive, passion and sheer stubbornness** needed to develop and sustain a social enterprise cannot be stressed enough and are evident in the words of some of the Leb.Inc grantees:

"To be bold means in times of crisis, to be able to say this year, the company will not lose, we will gain money, we will sell more than before, we will be able to create new designs and new products. And this is what we have done" (Covid-19 Seeds Fund Recipient)

"I have a lot of energy, thinking positively, but I lose, I lose my energy and I lose my positive vibes a little bit. But really, when I see someone like COSV or another stakeholder also here in Lebanon support me, listen to me, I can see the opportunities that I can take to continue, to never give up. It's like a push to continue what you start and believe, and we just believe and continue "
(Start-up Grantee)

"Our project did not stop, we continued working even after this project. Sometimes we had to spend our own money to proceed. We cannot forget how important this grant was for our project. We improved our work to be self-dependent by selling our goods and promoting them. In 2019 we received a prize from the SPARK organisation, and we won the title of "the best start-up for 2019" from the IGNITE initiative in Holland" (Start-up Grantee)

"Due to the deterioration of the economic situation and to the high prices, and because of the increase of the cost of living for parents [sending their children to our creche] and the Covid-19 pandemic, there were negative impacts on all of us, but we are still surviving" (Start-up Grantee)

Adaptive Sustainability

The reallocation of funding destined to a new batch of start-ups to fund **existing social enterprises** and help them recover from the brunt of the Covid-19 pandemic is proof that the project could read the context and adapt to it in two different ways: (i) switching to emergency mode in a crisis; (ii) increasing impact by investing in existing social enterprises.

(i) In March 2020, the partners launched a tender "To support established and operating Social Enterprises in Lebanon in adopting and scaling up innovation processes to cope with the pandemic. A series of lockdowns had been in place since March 2020, reducing activities in the private and public sectors. Consequently, the social enterprises were affected by the Covid-19 and lockdowns through a drop in sales and revenue, lack of access to cash, more production costs, obstacles with importing materials needed for operations, as well as digital transformation needs."

Six existing social enterprises were selected and received a **lifeline fund** to continue to operate and sometimes innovate during the crisis. An added merit of the grant was its **flexibility** which allowed the enterprises to invest in what they believed was useful to their survival and adaptation.

"With this grant we covered the graphic designer, the consultants that worked closely with the beneficiaries, raw materials, packaging, stickers, labelling and other minor expenses. There was

another component regarding marketing to improve the brand that helped us open a new point of [online] sales for our production” (Covid-19 Seeds Fund Recipient)

“The grant was used mainly to support the producers that we work with, plus our production unit. We contracted a consultant on agribusiness, another on agri-food, and a consultant and chief consultant to work on innovation in agri-food. Innovation is important to cope with the crisis, especially in agri-food production and especially with the depreciation of the Lebanese lira. Our focus now is on import substitution, the demand on local production is very high” (Covid-19 Seeds Fund Recipient)

Funding received was used to innovate and boost business in several ways:



Marketing for campaigns, content, advertising and online presence



Business development to identify business gaps, scale-up, and build the capacity of nano-micro-small medium enterprises for export



Materials and tools for production (i.e.: raw materials, excavator, sieve)



Digitisation and digitalisation through upgraded software and the creation of digital platforms

(ii) Beyond adapting to new circumstances, through the emergency tender, the project tried to find new strategies to have a greater **impact on the meso level** than was possible with the start-ups. The change of focus, from funding budding entrepreneurs to supporting solid social enterprise realities, was a consequence of reflections the team made following the first granting round.

“We believed it would be more efficient to support existing social enterprises, rather than focusing on other processes that in the long-term may be less impactful. We wanted to tackle change at meso level, and focusing on the micro-level would not be enough to reach higher-level stakeholders and the broader business environment. This meso level would then help us to access and influence the macro-level where we could do advocacy on normative frameworks. Learning about the needs and constraints of the social enterprises also gives us the information that is needed to support other actors active in Lebanon and to support networks of smaller realities that rely on these well-

established social enterprises for their business, capacity, and access to markets” (COSV Project Staff)

Mature social enterprises are also in a better position than start-ups to influence consumers who are, according to one grantee, “*more and more sensitive and aware that they can shop while doing good.*” This grantee firmly believed that it was their “*responsibility to use our social mission as a marketing tool*” and that “*by boosting the visibility of the social aspect of our products, younger people are now buying our products.*”

3.7 Internal Governance and Communication Flow

As thoroughly reported in the mid-term evaluation, the relationship between BRD and COSV was less than ideal and impacted the relationship with the other project stakeholders, in particular the universities. Issues frequently stemmed from **overlaps in roles and responsibilities**, and different interpretations of project objectives and how to achieve them. The root causes of these conceptual misunderstandings, or “conflicts” according to some, seem to originate in the initial proposal development and implementation during the first year or two of the project. Universities were only marginally involved in writing the proposal, which led to an “on the job” development of concepts and actions during the implementation phase, and to the early drop out of one of the four initially targeted universities.

According to several interviewees, COSV was initially less involved in the implementation of the action as most technical decisions were left to BRD, and also because of the **limited capability** of the COSV staff to engage on the technical aspects of the project with the partner.

Visions also differed between COSV and BRD. This was especially evident in the methodological approaches they had towards the engagement of local stakeholders, with BRD prioritising the development of the business environment, and COSV keen on facilitating interactions among relevant local stakeholders.

Improved dialogue between the partners starting from the second year of the project resulted in the identification of ways to constructively, if not ideally, completing the project by **working separately on different components** of the project: COSV on the start-ups, seed funds, and LMO; BRD on employability and curriculum development with the universities.

The evaluation team was unable to interview anyone from Avanzi and GCM, the other Italian partners of the project. It is the evaluation team’s understanding that they were involved quite late in the project and that their support, for internal and external circumstances, was not as impactful as initially envisaged.

Interestingly, COSV, together with BRD and Oxfam are partnering in the **SEE Change project** which started in September 2020 with EU funding. The project focuses on four aspects of the enterprise development: community enterprises; school-enterprise links; public-private partnerships; social enterprises. When asked how they had avoided the bottlenecks encountered in the Leb.Inc project, partner staff said that there was “*a very clear separation of responsibilities among partners, with BRD*

and Oxfam taking over all the work done with the individual enterprises, while COSV works at a meso level with existing model social enterprises.” (Senior Project Staff)

“We tried to create spaces for collaboration while avoiding any space for interference” (Senior Project Staff)

“This time we tried to avoid situations that could lead to conflict. We are very autonomous in our component of the project, but we are complementary to each other and well-coordinated” (Senior Project Staff)

Whenever **personal relationships** among staff were mentioned, there was a general agreement that there were no concerns, that the project staff were “very cooperative and flexible” and that it was overall a “very cooperative experience”.

Opinions somewhat differed when referring to **staff adequacy** in terms of skills, knowledge, and management experience. According to one senior COSV staff member who has been with the project from the very beginning, the initial misunderstanding around the project design and approaches were further complicated by staff based in Lebanon who did not have “a strong background on social enterprise development” and “was less able to manage the relationship with the local partner.” The gradual strengthening of the field team through the recruitment of a Project Manager with background experience in Social Enterprises, and of a Start-Up specialist, helped professionalise and stabilise the relationship between partners and steer the project in its final period.

Internal **communication** was singled out as one of the issues affecting the project throughout its lifespan. A frequent example that was reported was the already mentioned recruitment of the start-up specialist in 2019 with reallocated grant funds. This was understood as an understandable move towards professionalising the granting process, but was made, according to many interviewees, with no previous consultation with partners, leaving the grantees with a de facto cut in their financial contributions.

Another move that generated a certain amount of discontent was the reallocation of funding for the second round of start-up grants to the emergency Covid-19 support grant for existing social enterprises. Although the move showed an ability to adapt to the crisis, it was not decided collegially by partners, or communicated appropriately.

Covid-19 further exacerbated communication among partners.

“Yeah, you know at a certain level we felt that we're not in power to achieve the goal of this project and the outcome of this project, especially once we were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. We felt that we lost a lot of communication between us and between the main organizer of the project. I guess a lot of people, as they are under pressure and they were focusing on the Covid-19 evolution, felt out of connection with this project” (University Focal Point)

"Maybe the Covid-19 situation, and the economic crisis before that, made it very challenging for us to continue in our communication with others" (University Coach)

Once communication issues were ironed out and explained to grantees by committed project staff, communication with funded start-ups and social enterprises improved greatly. *"It was a smooth communication, it was easy. We didn't face any problem in this regard, and they were very responsive"* (Covid-19 Seeds Fund Recipient)

3.8 Conclusive observations

The questions at the heart of this evaluation study were to understand whether the Leb.Inc project had generated more employability opportunities for youth and whether the universities could effectively play a role in the promotion of inclusive and alternative economic and social development. Considering the fast-changing and complex Lebanese context, in addition to the global Covid-19 pandemic that changed working modalities for all (including the evaluation team that carried out the study remotely), it was extremely difficult to identify a straightforward answer.

The project went through different phases to find its voice, and a common vision, as was evidenced by the mid-term evaluation. A clear shift in this area, through defined steps, was highlighted in this final evaluation, marking a step forward towards a shared understanding of the project's goals and terminology amongst the project partners and target stakeholders.

At the university level, it left behind important investments in terms of human resources, with a focus on the growth of the coaches and the focal points in terms of skills, motivation and engagement. This individual journey has been reported as one of the most relevant gains of the project. It impacted not only on coaches and focal points qualifications and skills, but they became advocates for the project showing a change of attitudes and mindset towards social business.

At the systemic level, the journey for the institutionalization of the products such as the curricula, generated through the Leb.Inc project within targeted universities, is long and complex. Although the curricula remains a resource to enrich the academic offer, the limitations around the accreditation of new courses (in relation to social business and related skills) within the available time-frame, were evident to the Leb.Inc partners and there were no expectations of institutionalising the new curricula in the short term.

The Social Innovation Hubs (SIH) are amongst the resources produced by Leb.Inc that bear interesting potential to serve as a catalyst for change through serving multiple purposes. As multi-functional spaces the Hubs might be employed to strengthen the link between universities and communities acting as dynamic laboratories to inform, tutor and experiment on new ways to take up the challenges posed by the changing context.

The same perspective applies to the Labour Market Observatory. Although divergent from the initial purpose, the potential for growth of the LMO has been leveraged through new partnerships, and a private-public initiative, developed for the upgrade, supervision and effective use of the platform.

All the previous aspects somehow strengthened the capacity of the universities to provide knowledge and possibly support to students who want to engage with social businesses. To what extent, exactly, these investments increased the employability of youth in targeted areas requires further analysis.

Some active students acquired a range of skills, including what they have learned through their direct involvement in the implementation of the activities (carrying out the market research, organizing outreach events), that went beyond mere theoretical training and that played a pivotal role in their motivation to stay in Lebanon and engage in social entrepreneurship. However, this can only be affirmed for a limited number of students involved, further confirming the idea that perhaps this type of intervention is probably more impactful when the focus is on fewer, passionate individuals with entrepreneurial potential, rather than on larger numbers. Striking a balance between the value for money that donors often identify with high numbers, and the high quality that can be achieved with fewer students is not an easy task and can be food for thought for the Leb.Inc partners.

An added merit of the project was its flexibility and capacity to adapt to the changing context and to internal constraints in various ways: revising its overall strategy, switching to emergency mode in a crisis and investing in existing social enterprises. It also managed to consistently operate and engage individuals, Universities/Institutions and existing social businesses over its implementation, which is a testimony to the relevance of the initiative within such a complex environment.

The commitment and passion of the various actors involved in the Leb.Inc project was evidenced throughout this evaluation exercise. The project involved its target groups at different levels strengthening the overall feeling of ownership, and sowing the seeds for potential long term cooperation between universities and communities and existing and new social enterprises and institutions/authorities.

Furthermore, it helped build the resilience of the targeted universities leaving behind different capitals, both human and social, that have the potential to become the driving forces behind the redefinition of the role of the universities, necessary to take up the challenges imposed by the Lebanese context. The same can be said for the individuals that the project supported. Students, startups and existing social enterprises benefited in different ways, but it is undeniable that the project helped them in strengthening their resilience to adjust to the challenges brought by the economic crises and the pandemic. From enhancing individual skills, to providing opportunities to expand business outreach or by supporting the blossoming of ideas into startups, the project's legacy is a wealth of valuable learnings to capitalize on. Learning that would require an effort to be documented and standardized could eventually be disseminated amongst stakeholders in Lebanon, as well as other countries interested in the social entrepreneurship journey.

4-Options for a way forward

Based on the findings and the analysis of the project results previously presented, the final evaluation has identified a number of recommendations that can be of reference for Leb.Inc partners to reflect on internal dynamics, existing resources and potential for future development.

R1. Further explore the possibility to establish stronger links between the start-ups and the surrounding communities with the hubs acting as a melting pot for these two dimensions.

The hubs, located in the universities, are an important resource for the start-ups and should be used as incubation spaces where the newly established social enterprises can learn, network and grow. The use of the incubation space would be time-bound as the enterprises become sustainable (or cease to operate). Based on the experience of COSV with the "Community Capital" approach, local resources (skills, expertise, investment, etc) can be harvested and used to strengthen/integrate the start-ups by forming student-community partnerships that would help embed the start-ups in society and increase the "social" element of the social enterprises. The hubs would also be connected to the Labour Market Observatory (LMO) managed by the Tripoli Entrepreneurs Club.

R2: Proceeding from the general to the particular, the project strategy could better shape the process that engages youth in the promotion of social business.

That would involve a foundational level - including the provision of learning opportunities, information, awareness raising and orientation - for everyone in targeted settings and an advanced level that is tailored to sustain customized pathways. To develop the start-ups, resources should be invested in selecting fewer potential entrepreneurs rather than engaging with hundreds of students who have not demonstrated interest or inclination in building a social enterprise. The selection process should be based on clear criteria around potential product viability and commitment to the project from the very beginning of the project. They would then enter into a hands-on mentoring process to enhance their soft skills (communication, leadership) and technical skills (product development, finance management, marketing) towards a viable and sustainable idea, through constant prototyping and refining of their product.

R3: Linked to the previous recommendation, the final evaluation flags the importance for the project strategy to streamline an intersectional approach that would help identify and address vulnerability factors among the target population in fragile contexts.

Particularly, the evaluation recommends adopting more sensitive approaches towards gender and disability that should also be captured by internal measurement systems. In addition to that, the project could plan for integrated services for youth who necessitate supplementing support (such as life skills for instance) in order to succeed in their individual entrepreneurship experience. Such services could be arranged in partnership with other actors with an expertise in these areas of intervention.

R4. To ensure the micro, meso, and macro dimensions of the social enterprise are tackled, the actions should simultaneously engage start-ups and existing social enterprises.

The micro-level would be covered by work with the start-ups, the meso-level by working with established enterprises and their networks, the macro-level by translating the needs of the social enterprises into advocacy recommendations towards decision-makers. The dual approach would additionally help the start-ups to network with successful social enterprises with their wealth of knowledge of the context and market. Indeed, the social enterprises could also be recruited to formally mentor the start-ups during incubation in the hubs.

R5. Time and resources should be allocated to ensure partners and stakeholders are involved in a participatory way during all phases of the project cycle management, starting with the design phase when common objectives and plans are defined. According to these, an organigramme is agreed and also the terms of references for key project staff, to ensure skills and backgrounds match the project needs in a concerted effort to create a well-balanced team with integrated competencies and profiles. This recommendation is a reiteration of what was advised during the mid-term evaluation and partially implemented in the SEE Change project.

R6. During the inception period of future projects, the partners should invest in co-creating internal and external communication plans. The internal plan should have clear communication flows, communication means, and frequency of face-to-face and online meetings. Additionally, the external communication plan should clarify hierarchical levels of interaction with other stakeholders to ensure communication flows are clear, agreed in advance, and coherent with shared vision and planning.

Acknowledging the fact that COSV is already working on this aspect through the creation of an *ad hoc* unit, as a final remark, this evaluation sees the opportunity for COSV to **document the learning** generated through the Leb.Inc experience. This should be in addition to other previous and ongoing initiatives while moving forward in the definition of a new model for social business development in fragile contexts.

Annex I

List of key informants Interviewed

<i>N</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Method</i>
1	Radwan Choughri	University Focal Point	Al Jinan University	Key Informant Interview
2	Ola Saleh	University Focal Point	LIU	Key Informant Interview
3	Hani Chaarani	University Focal Point	BAU	Key Informant Interview
4	Tharaa Haddad	University Coach	Al Jinan University	Key Informant Interview
5	Ayman Haddad	University Coach	Al Jinan University	Key Informant Interview
6	Rana Hindi	University Coach	LIU	Key Informant Interview
7	Azzam Rifi	University Coach	BAU	Key Informant Interview
8	Rayan el Jam	University Coach	BAU	Key Informant Interview
9	Neamat Kabbara	University Student	BAU	Key Informant Interview
10	Nour	University Student	BAU	Key Informant Interview
11	Ayman Dahrouj	Senior University Representative	LIU	Key Informant Interview
12	Abdallah el Chakik	SIH Coordinator	BAU	Key Informant Interview
13	Luigi Cavallito	Business Developer	External Consultant - COSV	Key Informant Interview
14	Abbas Khalifeh	Project Coordinator	Beyond Reform and Development	Group Discussion

15	Natalia Menhal	Field Coordinator	Beyond Reform and Development	Group Discussion
16	Khoder Eid	Start Up Focal Point	Green Track	Key Informant Interview
17	Zamzam el Cheikh	Start Up Focal Point	Pas a Pas	Questionnaire
18	Alaa el Zohouri	Start Up Focal Point	Jelly Fish	Questionnaire
19	Daniel Malaeb & Rola	Seeds Emergency Fund	L'Artisan du Liban	Group Discussion
20	Rana Abdou	Seeds Emergency Fund	Arc en Ciel	Key Informant Interview
21	Fadi Mikati	Focal Point LMO	Tripoli Entrepreneurs Club	Key Informant Interview
22	Natasha Ghawi	Former Project Officer	COSV	Key Informant Interview
23	Annalisa Contini	Former Project Coordinator		Group Discussion
24	Tommaso Cassiani	Design, Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator	COSV	Group Discussion
25	Paolo Comoglio	Country Representative	COSV	Key Informant Interview