MAWRED'S INITIATIVE:

LEBANON HUMANITARIAN FUND THROUGH CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS

Humanitarian Response as Cultural Infrastructure: the Experience of Artist Initiatives in Crisis Response during Israel's 2024 war on Lebanon

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(July 2025)

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Abstract

This report documents the experiences of six cultural initiatives in Lebanon that took on humanitarian and art relief work during Israel's escalated war in the fall of 2024, and received Mawred's Lebanon Humanitarian Fund. Based on interviews, group meetings, and field visits, it reflects how these actors mobilized, adjusted, and sustained their work with displaced populations, amid heavy bombardment and abrupt ceasefire. It highlights the practical challenges, emotional toll, ethical considerations, and forms of solidarity that shaped their response. In doing so, it situates cultural relief not as a temporary deviation but as a meaningful practice anchored in long-standing commitments to social engagement, and considers its potential as an infrastructural and ethical component of cultural work in contexts of recurrent crisis.

INTRODUCTION

In September 2024, Culture Resource (Mawred) launched a fund exceptionally supporting cultural initiatives and institutions that were active in the field of humanitarian work, in response to the sudden and forced internal displacement of residents in South Beirut, South Lebanon and the Beqaa upon Israel's war of escalation in the country. A total of 72,000 Euros was disbursed to six trusted initiatives, which had previously received support from Mawred, and who had spontaneously launched or were actively planning to start emergency relief work soon after Israel's first strike on September 23.

This report documents the experiences of members from these six initiatives in doing emergency relief work, both humanitarian and cultural (artistic) in nature, from the time they mobilized, throughout the heavy shelling, and until the proclaimed ceasefire reached by agreement on November 27, 2024[1]. At the time of writing, Israel had continued its bombardment, infiltration and occupation of parts of South Lebanon and persisted with impromptu precision strikes[2] and assassinations in various other urban and rural locations. However, most of the people, whom the war had displaced to unaffected parts of the city and country, very promptly returned at the end of November to their homes or damaged hometowns and neighborhoods. The departure of beneficiaries from shelters where assistance work could unfold imposed a transition on initiatives, either as a rapid adjustment or a total halt in their relief activities. For a few who had difficulty starting, activities took place after the ceasefire.

Carrying out emergency relief came with challenges and unforeseen adjustments for initiative members, who juggled efforts at first spontaneous, then gradually more formalized, and with significant psychological and physical toll throughout. Participants expressed the impulse to respond rapidly, while also hoping - this time around - to address ethical and strategic concerns, both emerging in the present and residual from their previous crisis-response experience.

1: At the time of writing, Israel had violated the cease-fire at least 4000 times.

2: Precisely during our one-hour field visit to Kfarumman's Stayha cultural center on May 8, 2025, Israel fired a deafening airstrike on a nearby hill.

Research for this report spanned late January to mid-April, 2025, and is based on individual semi-structured interviews with at least one representative from each initiative that Mawred supported and two group meetings between these actors and the Mawred team. It also included two field visits to Roaya Corner Cultural Center in Nahr el Bared, North Lebanon, and Al Madina Theater. It documents the experiences, challenges, adjustments, and lessons of this particular occasion of doing cultural relief work, against the backdrop of interlocutors' previous responses to calamities Lebanon faced in the recent past. It concludes with reflections based on this accumulated knowledge and visioning, with a potential to inform best practices, cautions and guidances in this area of cultural relief, either in the face of (future!) calamities of this kind and magnitude in this context, or in other geographic contexts facing similar calamities.

PROFILES: Initiatives and their Social Engagement

The six initiatives that received Mawred's Lebanon Humanitarian Fund (LHF) consisted of nine entities (See APPENDIX 3) made up of individuals, as well as organizations and informal collectives. Established between 1994 and 2021, these entities work in clowning and laughter, literature, electronic music, animation, theater, fine arts, publication, and digital expression. They work within different levels of formality, including prominent local institutions and foundations, medium- to small-sized civic associations, companies and informal and grassroots collectives and alliances. As a group of individuals, the grantees are made up of professional theater directors, actors and performers, artists and art therapists, musicians and music producers, animation artists and illustrators, writers and poets, journalists and social activists, researchers, strategists and multidisciplinary creatives.

Interviewees were of varied ages, had varied lengths of experience with crisis and relief work, and relied on different degrees of impromptu engagement with publics in their habitual work. By virtue of residing in Lebanon presently as adults, they have invariably witnessed at least some of the major crises the country has gone through in the past decade and been involved in crisis-response efforts through personal initiative if not in their present or other organizational affiliations. The length of experience in both witnessing and responding to calamity depended on their age, and their residence in the country (as opposed to the diaspora for stretches of time). In other words, if they were old enough and living in Lebanon, they got involved. Naturally, all had experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and were impacted directly or indirectly and the economic collapse that ensued. Most initiatives located in Beirut participated in emergency response after the Beirut Port Blast of August 4, 2020.

An older group was active during Israel's July War on Lebanon in 2006 and the periodic political turbulences that erupted between then and now, such as the skirmishes of 2007, the Garbage crisis of 2015 or the Uprising of 2019. A still older generation had accumulated experience from the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), and could give a deeper historic perspective on cultural relief. Recurrent crises have made rapid response a periodic necessity and a social calling in the Lebanese context, a reality that is reflected in how swift and effective many cultural workers - and civic organizations more generally - have become at mobilizing response, including during Israel's 2024 war.

Prior to this war, and like the Lebanese cultural sector as a whole, the organizations

and individuals here interviewed struggled increasingly to find funding for their activity in recent years, due to global funds dwindling for culture and art, amid Israel's intensifying Genocide in Gaza. Most interviewees have other jobs besides their commitments to their initiatives. While those in formal organizations are either employed or contracted, the change in the funding landscape is also affecting their ability to sustain and evolve their programs, and threatens their organization's ability to remain active. When the war began, all their regular activities and most of their work were reduced to a minimum or came to a halt.

Across their variations, all the initiatives have a practice of incorporating community engagement and outreach in their programs prior to this war, if in various degrees and scopes. They have worked with people, mostly youth, and underprivileged or marginalized communities, including migrants of various nationalities, in sites and regions of the country where resources and infrastructures for art and culture are limited, and initiatives scarce, due more to shortage of funding than lack of local demand, intent and expertise. They share the perception that art and socially engaged culture can be practiced to intervene on social and economic inequality and marginality, alleviate psychological strain, and inspire personal and collective change by harnessing connections across diverse backgrounds that build up the capacities and potentials of beneficiaries and practitioners alike. Their narratives of doing crisis-response yielded several key experiences in common, including similar challenges, solutions and adaptations to these challenges that are summarized in what follows.

KEY EXPERIENCES: Challenges and Adjustments

Getting Started

Initiatives differed in how and when they mobilized their interventions. In all cases, the country was burgeoning with spontaneous response initiatives and fast-forming coalitions of assistance. Half were able to get started almost immediately, albeit not before a momentary pause at the very start to catch their bearings from the shock of yet another war breaking out, and to reflect on whether rapid relief is the way to go, this latter aspect is discussed in a final section below.

For some initiatives, the early days of the war were marked by reflection on how to proceed – this time. They pondered the nature of relief work in relation to their cultural/artistic mandate and capabilities as organizations, drawing on evaluations of their involvement in crisis-response in previous instances, and considered the sensitivity of recipients' conditions, needs and wants. Still others were able to start straight away, overcoming limitations and hesitation, the very act of being involved and active serving as redressor for the natural emotional strain to atrocities.

For example, Clown Me In (CMI) got started almost immediately. Their practiced mode of response, namely impromptu and interactive public performance around laughter, gives them something of an advantage. They were not providing humanitarian aid, so they required minimal material or logistical support to begin. From having done work in schools before, they already had permits – or partnerships with organizations that had – from the Education Ministry to access schools where recipients were sheltered. They needed just their presence, their bodies and their psychological ability to get started; this latter not being evident in the midst of raging war, and with the generalized fear and sense of paralysis impacting most people in this period. CMI discussed briefly amongst themselves if laughter is an appropriate medium in this tragic situation of tremendous loss, whether this would be considerate and acceptable to recipient communities. Those amongst the team who were geographically accessible and psychologically available enough to participate, gathered and launched activities. Confident in their ability to adapt to various social contexts, and having years of proven success using laughter to promote wellbeing and human connection, they were driven by the need to "do something!"

"You start an initiative and however it works, it works. If not, you keep working. Bil harakeh fi barakeh (in movement there is prosperity/blessing). Once you start, you attract others to join in or help you." These were the words of theater visual

artist and professor, Mona Knio, the lead on Al Madina Theatre's LHF initiative, referring to crisis-response work she did in the civil war during the battles of 1983, recruiting as volunteers her university students in communications and creative dramatics into workshops for the displaced. During the first days of Israel's 2006 war, the theater sheltered around 100 people in the first days, only to find themselves unprepared for the additional 200 who arrived in the days to follow. She enlisted all her university students, as well as volunteers from a partner Palestinian association, turning the premises into an activity space for children and adolescents during the day, and accommodations for families at night.

Working together for the first time in a crisis context, Beirut Synthesizer Center and Tunefork Studios (BSC-T)[3] also kick-started their response quickly and spontaneously, choosing to provide humanitarian aid rather than art relief. From the second day of the atrocities, the coalition joined efforts to channel and distribute donations to the displaced. On their Whatsapp group, one member suggested they open their center, an apartment in an unaffected area of the city, to shelter displaced people; when another member responded, "Let's do more. Instead of giving our space up, let's use it for a relief operation." Drawing on their vast personal and artistic networks, including – especially – in the diaspora, and before having the time to formalize any systems of operation, they began fielding requests and distributing necessities.

For others, concrete barriers prevented their ability to respond in the time of the crisis, reflecting an ability to act in the aftermath, and not only in the eye of the storm. Beirut Art Center (BAC) and Al Madina Theater could not start activities before the ceasefire because they could not access the displaced children and youth they had planned for. In BAC's case, they had yet to obtain permits from the Education Ministry to operate in public schools and training centers, and this process was all the more sluggish under a caretaker government[4]. "We were reluctant to just go, or to be reactive, even if we are in crisis," said Nohad El Hajj, consultant with BAC on their LHF initiative, adding, "We felt we should take it slowly and carefully towards the people we would work with. We took seriously the attachments that would be built with the kids."

For example, local political gatekeepers required Al Madina theater to get the consent of parents to send their kids to the theater for workshops from nearby shelters, which they did not obtain in time, before the ceasefire. While poised with a program, an abundance of volunteers and ready to proceed, they saw displaced persons return to their homes before they could deliver their intervention. Their eventual contributions were art workshops benefitting other deserving institutions. In the case of BAC, they held art workshops at a school whose students and staff come predominantly from affected areas; in the case of Al Madina, they hosted children

3: The BSC-T was also joined by InConcert, and 4+1 who played a central and dynamic if unofficial role in their relief initiative, earning them the status of "unsung heroes" by the coalition.

4: May 2022 - February 2025.

from an orphanage located close to the targeted neighborhoods, for recreational theater workshops on the weekends.

Across cases, networks of trust and longstanding relationships with partners, funders, and community members proved crucial in mobilizing effectively and meaningfully, if not always immediately.

Sustaining Momentum

After initial mobilization came the challenge of sustaining momentum over an extended and unpredictable period of time, through the naturally chaotic environment of war, the perils of mobility, the daily hassles of overstretched infrastructures (shortage of water and electricity), and the psychological and emotional strain affecting people in the whole country, albeit to vastly varying degrees[5]. The activity of most so-called non-vital professional sectors, including culture and art, came to a total standstill. Initiative members experienced this period as one of committed and continuous labor, fielded the growing needs of people displaced from ever-growing target areas. They acquired or used existing skills at speed, in real time, on the job and under the bombs, managing an overwhelming influx of donations, coordinating dozens of volunteers, creating internal systems of communication and feedback, and much more. Several teams worked through dense layers of messaging apps and logistical spreadsheets, while managing supply chains for basic provisions or workshop supplies, as needed.

There's no knowing exactly when a war will begin, even if one anticipates it. With Mawred's grant becoming available some weeks into Israel's first strikes on Lebanon in November, it came as a boost to help sustain trusted partners who were already active on the humanitarian scene, trying to be or well-reputed for socially engaged community art practice or did effective relief work in previous crises. That Mawred left the grant spending timeframe flexible and open, was pivotal not only in allowing initiatives that could not implement their initiative until ceasefire to work thereafter. It also permitted initiatives that were so inclined, to reflect on the mechanisms and meaning of their current intervention within the broader context of crisis-response in a setting where crises recur, and where funding for arts and culture is drastically dwindling in general. Such reflection was interrupted only by the compulsion to act fast in the urgent situation, address hurdles quickly and efficiently, and cope with personal and interpersonal considerations.

5: The degrees vary vastly in the case of Israel's repeated attacks on Lebanon where it claims to seek to "eliminate Hizbullah" and with it the party's so-called "strongholds," which all amount in reality to pre-dominantly Shiite parts of the country, which are to a great degree geographically distinct, leaving other non-Shiite parts largely safer.

Funding

This and previous Lebanese crises have often attracted exceptional surges of philanthropic donations for response efforts, even as foreign grants are dwindling, and operations are relying increasingly on crowd-funding and self-funding. One of the biggest assets of arts and culture initiatives in Lebanon is their ability to activate their networks, especially in the diaspora, to continue their work or gear up for crisis-response. However, one of the biggest hurdles to cashing on this asset was the banking and finance sector. Firstly, the Lebanese banking system taxes humanitarian funds arriving for non-profit organizations, and bars transfers to unregistered organizations. Meanwhile, private businesses that channel their revenues towards socially engaged art and to humanitarian relief in times of crisis, are not permitted by law to receive any donations. In all cases, Lebanon's blacklisting restricted transfers from abroad throughout the war. This was the bind for some organizations, including those that are unregistered. And yet, after the public call on social media, followed by quick responsiveness and an influx of private donations, some had to find a solution. After many attempts, the only solution remaining was to receive funds through the personal accounts of their members. It was made possible by the established credibility of organizations and particular relationships of trust between individuals. By the end of the atrocities, for instance, BSC-T had received and disbursed $180,000 in crowd funds through its initiative.

While having to devise ways to receive an abundance of donations was a more favorable scenario than trying to deliver emergency assistance with shortage of funding and resources, either way, as the demand for response was so great, and growing daily as the war progressed, informal and make-shift solutions were constantly being devised, irrespective of the amount of funding accessible to a given initiative. This included collaborating within cultural relief coalitions to find complementary ways to fill any gaps, mostly as in-kind resources, including work and storage spaces, transportation channels, and volunteers.

While on the Ground

Funding aside, the experiences in this section have to do with the various aspects of implementing a response program, in real time and on the ground. Firstly, the spatial considerations of sheltering and assisting the masses of forced displaced, and the crowding this can cause in community centers and neighborhoods. Community kitchens, distribution stations, warehouses, and the traffic between them take up space in the city that could put strain on relief workers and neighbors. In one case, relocating parts of operations to other partner spaces helped reduce pressure on the primary location. Similarly for volunteers, who showed up in abundance at various operations, and causing parking

congestion in available parking spaces that inconvenienced residents. Some technical remedies for this included setting up shifts among core members and volunteers, and referring volunteers to other initiatives in the vast network of active organizations, to relieve pressure on any single organization or neighborhood. In some cases, a volunteer sign-up system was set up on Whatsapp to control crowding. Something to avoid in all cases, however, was posting an open call for volunteers and donations, or the organization's phone number on social media, before having the management in place to handle them, advised Elyse Tabet of BSC.

Online communication bottlenecks also proved to be a problem. Especially for central command teams, keeping up with communication was exceedingly overwhelming. One interviewee recalls having over 100 messages to respond to per day, on seven different Whatsapp groups; and ultimately having to switch off her phone for 2 days to recuperate. Among regular team members, division of labor became both a survival mechanism and a reflection of team solidarity, complementarity and versatility, in the effort to avoid burnout. Where there was a gap in the labor chain, where someone faltered from sheer exhaustion and needed rest, someone else would step in.

For all fieldworkers—drivers, delivery crews, animators, facilitators —the risks of moving between areas to do their work were a major challenge, and sometimes entailed navigating roadblocks and entering areas of recent bombardment. It presented a moral responsibility on core teams that required special attention. The most prevalent and obvious was to operate with extreme caution and flexibility. Prioritizing staff and volunteer safety was done by mapping the regions of response that are safe on a day-by-day basis, and being prepared to switch or halt distributions or activities with any new incoming information. "We decided daily if it made sense to proceed," reported Stephanie Sotiry from CMI.

For the Art Relief (AR) initiative, which also launched after ceasefire in centers located in a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut's southern suburb, and in Kfarumman in south Lebanon, the dilemma was whether to take the risk and go to these sites to implement their planned workshops, or remain safe and be unable to implement, given that both areas (the latter more so) were still under threat of Israeli bombardment. One way to mitigate that was to tap into their network of artists that they knew to reside near these partner centers; or at least within a maximum of 5 kilometers radius, to minimize time on the road.

Liaising with artists and facilitators who live near or indeed come from the recipient communities, as AR did, had the added advantage that they know the social and cultural context better. To a great extent, this could be achieved through an accumulation of years and decades of experience, which they also had, amongst several other initiative members. The added value, beyond trust and friendship that is invariably built at some point of

the response process, opens the way for leveraging and negotiating with local institutions and gatekeepers, who have the power to influence the roll-out of activities and workshops. Particularly in the case of artistic and cultural components of response, gaining access to a recipient group relied on the permission of key individuals or socio-political groups. Obstacles include the content or form of the art being frowned upon, as was the case of music mainly, which could be prohibited, prompting flexibility and the willingness to adapt, interrupt or even withdraw a particular type of intervention. In addition to formal public permits, others experienced the condition of needing explicit parental (paternal) approval before any child could participate, which was logistically difficult to obtain[6] (as in Al Madina's case).

While the material, physical, and practical labor of relief work was considerable and constant, the psychological and emotional strain of living under war for most interviewees was the single biggest challenge of the experience.

Psychological and Emotional Strain

Irrespective of Israel's threats preceding the start of its war, the first strikes came as a shock, instilled fear, and ushered in a state of psychological and emotional distress as generalized public insecurity and personal experiences of vulnerability. From their various backgrounds and geographic locations, LHF relief workers reported feeling fear, sadness, and anger – indeed outrage at Israel's atrocity and its effects on people's lives. Those amongst them, namely managerial support team members, who were in the diaspora at the time, or who took shelter abroad after the war started, were also affected, not least because the inability to act directly on the ground as they had become accustomed to doing or as they had wished, intensified their sense of isolation and powerlessness. The communion of gathering people and efforts around necessary humanitarian aid and creative activities brought psychological relief for most. Though feelings of helplessness, depression, and numbness surfaced regularly in interviews, one organizer noted that her ability to function came not from personal strength, but from knowing someone else was depending on her. The act of giving and of helping where dire help is needed, and of standing in solidarity with fellow residents, was rewarding for relief workers, giving them a sense of purpose and contributing to their emotional stability.

6: Parents - particularly fathers, to whose authority most children deferred - sometimes left their families to return and check on whether their homes were still standing, thereby leaving these children with other relatives, but without permission to participate. Obtaining permissions from scores of fathers could take weeks and sometimes never came.

The psychological and emotional challenges and coping mechanisms of relief workers, however, were central to this conversation. In the day-to-day operation, this aspect of the experience needed to be dealt with extreme delicacy, at the level of relations within working teams, and in the interface between providers and recipient community members. Meanwhile, this distinction gets blurred by the fact that some cultural workers are also residents or natives of affected areas, or have friends and family under fire, and almost all shared emotional stakes in the attack and the extent of its destruction, not least as Israel's genocide in Palestine continues.

Living in an episodically crisis-ridden context, which was heightened in Lebanon over the past five years at least, teaches one that there are vast differences between how people deal with the vulnerability of war, that yield different reactions and abilities. After grappling with the initial sense of paralysis discussed above, initiatives reported centering the personal choice of each individual member to join the response initiative or not. There was care to avoid imposing any moral imperative to participate, and giving people the time and space they needed. In some instances, being inclusive of members who sat it out at first, by keeping them in the loop, consulting them even if they were not on the ground, gave them confidence and encouragement to join at a later stage or assume a supportive role from home.

After the initial wave of reckoning with the magnitude and intensity of the calamity, team members prioritized integrating self-care, mutual care and structures of psychosocial support (PSS) into their operations. Having already practiced socially engaged art before the war, including art therapy, some initiatives had exposure to or significant training in PSS, while other individuals had personal therapists they could rely on, allowing them to withstand and extend informal support and care to peers. Where possible, routines of care were folded into routines of work, including regular check-ins, shared meals or private debriefs when a team member became overwhelmed, irrespective of whether goods or workshops were being coordinated. These small personal interventions between team members served as much to protect them from psychological breakdown and strengthen solidarity, as to streamline and adjust activities to fit ever-changing conditions on the ground and amongst recipient groups.

The distress level of a targeted people who are forcibly displaced and whose homes and land are destroyed and sometimes occupied, is not to be underestimated, though it lies outside the scope of this report. However, at the interface between team members and recipients, there was the imperative to be sensitive to the emotional and psychological strain on recipients, and to approach it with consideration and care. In a PSS training session organized by Mawred in collaboration with BAC on February 4, 2025, two mental health specialists[7] emphasized the professional limitations of cultural workers to handle severely traumatized people in a way that

7: Mike Ayvazian and Joelle Samaha, co-founders of the NGO, Astharte: Association de Thérapie par les Arts Expressifs.

is safe, for the person, for the team, and for other recipients. Once identifying 'red flags' of 'abnormal response' in beneficiaries' appearance and behavior, they are cautioned against impulsive reaction, and advised to refer to professional mental healthcare workers. This required workers to have mindfulness and pause to gauge their own abilities and inabilities, as well as to prioritize collective over individual needs. From this standpoint, cultural relief is a collective effort, while psychological intervention is better equipped for individualized care.

Still, testimonies showed there was a spectrum of ways to intervene, that either positively or negatively impacted individuals' participation, notwithstanding the "chemistry" between individual providers and recipients. For instance, the high expectations that facilitators (particularly of younger inexperienced artists) sometimes had from recipients, to respond or act in a certain way, to gain particular artistic skills or produce particular outcomes, could strain workshop environments. For instance, YAP observed that – for a lot of valid and understandable reasons – a lot of the displaced children were unwilling or unable to sit still and quietly at a table to hear and follow instructions for assignments. In their eagerness to accomplish certain goals (including sometimes perceived donor expectations), trainers could become too exigent and subsequently disappointed and demotivated when their young beneficiaries did not cooperate as imagined. "We needed to bring down the expectation that our role is to build artistic proficiency or produce recognizable outputs and impacts during these workshops," Fadi Syriani of YAP said. "If some kids work better on the floor, let them do that. What is important is the experience and process." Short of disrupting the collective experience, such accommodations of going with the flow relieve pressure on children and facilitators alike. When sessions go well, it builds everyone's morale, which has psychological benefits. "If you took a picture before we went into a session and after we left, you could see the change on people's faces," Stephanie recalls.

When activities were approached with flexibility and authenticity, they took place with memorable moments of effectiveness, synergy, and a sense of accomplishment. Recalling a relief program she ran in response to the 2006 war, Knio said, "It was great. The war passed in a beautiful way. Imagine that I can just say that! It's because we did something beautiful in the face of the disaster."

Just like there's no telling when a war starts, there's no telling when it ends either. In addition to the irony that it often takes calamity to unite people in meaningful exchange across distant (and different) geographic, social and cultural places, such a communion is temporary. When a crisis ends, so does response, most often. Either way, team members, volunteers and beneficiaries who bonded and grew attached to one another in that exceptional frame of time, have to say goodbye.

Ceasefire and Infrastructures of Support

The declared ceasefire on November 27 brought abrupt logistical and emotional shifts. Shelters emptied out almost overnight. Volunteers went back to work, or returned home if they too had been displaced. The crowdfunding dried up. This sudden halt and dispersal disrupted workflows and ended some programs before they could start, or carry out all their planned intervention. The inability to follow through—on workshops, provisions or simply emotional relationships built with recipients, created a sense of fragmentation. Still, many adapted swiftly. BSC-T, for instance, shifted organically to small-scale home repairs and winterization, distributing heaters and insulating windows in destroyed return zones. Others used leftover funds for art materials, or transitional workshops focused on coping and healing after the war.

During previous crisis-response, initiatives had found themselves with funds they could not have hoped to receive in non-critical times. Building infrastructures for crisis-response that carry over to post-crisis periods and potentially future crises. For example, in the aftermath of the Beirut Port Blast of August 2020, BSC was able to secure a seed fund that allowed them to rent a space for the first time, having worked without a space for four years. This drew in more stable work and, in turn, more funds, and was valuable to the center's present abilities to join response. With Mawred's funding, for instance, Roaya Corner was able to upgrade their kitchen to cook and distribute larger amounts of free daily meals, continuing to distribute in reduced amounts after the ceasefire. They were also able to equip one of their activity rooms with proper work tables, a chalk board and other vital fixtures that carry over to facilitate their regular youth educational support programs.

In the case of Al Madina, a large theater space in the center of town with high running costs, scarce crisis funds had to be allocated to basic salaries and utility bills, including AC to prevent mold (being underground), to enable them to host beneficiary groups in their space. With the theater sector being hardest hit by funding shortages and without the resources to stage productions of their own, the theater normally relies on revenues from hosting other self-funded productions, to maintain the space. During the course of their LHF-supported relief activities, the heavy wear and tear from the usage of 50 active children required constant repair to the facilities. In that sense, crisis funds - similarly to the revenue from outside self-funded productions - help keep the theater running and open[8].

Immaterial resources and infrastructures of mutual support proved as vital as material ones. Partnerships, collaborations and cooperations that took shape during past crisis episodes, often carried over from one response experience to the next, sometimes

8: Noticeably, the two organizations that most emphasized the difficulty of finding funding are CMI and Al Madina who are both in drama. Workshops in multimedia arts and crafts, by way of the art therapy paradigm, tend to get more funding.

becoming integral to organizations' regular make-up and structure. In addition to sharing equipment and spaces, they shared knowledge, skills, personnel, logistical contacts and communication strategies. Whether accumulated over five years or five decades of crises and aftermaths, these generative dynamics have contributed significantly to keeping these organizations active, enabling them to continue playing effective humanitarian roles.

In leveraging their experience from the Beirut Port Blast of 2020, some initiatives, for instance, were able to repurpose contacts and logistics plans, storage spaces or access to bulk vendors. Even in less critical though nevertheless dire conditions, some actors began institutionalizing these collective practices into their regular operations: formalizing volunteer programs, keeping spaces and resources available for continued relief outreach, or maintaining WhatsApp groups for future reactivation. Interviewees noted that these moments of mutual support also deepened their sense of solidarity within the cultural sector, making relief efforts a site of encounter between groups and individuals who might not otherwise cross paths. The trust and mutual recognition solidified as a welcome byproduct, such that "acquaintances became friends."

After considering what remains and how to continue once the bombing stops, some initiatives reflected critically and constructively on their experience, asking how to work more sustainably and meaningfully with or without crisis, while becoming better prepared for the eventuality of crisis.

On the Scope and Role of Cultural Relief

Throughout the fieldwork for this report, interlocutors not only described what happened and what they did. They evaluated their process, raised doubts, voiced dilemmas and envisioned better ways to proceed in the future. Clearly there are many moving parts within this experience, some of which affect all initiatives almost universally, and some more particular to specific ones. Can crisis-response within this local art scene become a more coordinated action rather than a set of isolated interventions? How is the notion of art relief and socially engaged art transformed when crisis and its response are recurrent and episodic?

This report cannot definitively answer these questions. However, the initiatives' own learnings yielded several reflections on what considerations and practices can help define the role and scope of art relief in this context. Among these, such as Ibrahim Nehme's from BAC, was the suggestion to move toward a shared methodology, or at least a replicable protocol to inform future practice, not just within the six LHF initiatives but beyond. Some felt this could lead to a form of knowledge infrastructure in its own right.

One core dilemma ran throughout: do we, as cultural relief workers, respond to the general public with provisions

and services, or support our own artistic community? “Musicians are in a bad state,” reflected Fadi Tabbal of Tunefork Studios. “How do we help them, which is our initial goal when they themselves are volunteering in the relief effort?” Faced with this contradiction, and without the time or capacity to resolve it as crowd funds poured in for humanitarian assistance, they opted for that instead of cultural or artistic relief.

At the same time, values and ethos were being reassessed. “Thinking of others” (the title of Roaya Corner’s initiative)—colleagues, beneficiaries, strangers—as an orientation, not a task, became an entry point into redefining what it means to be a cultural worker in crisis. The question of whose well-being matters, and who counts as the object of care, was extended to include team members themselves. “We started directing care toward each other,” one said. This was echoed in an insistence on mutuality by all initiatives, and in acts of communion that were not always outcome-oriented. “Presence,” Roula Kobeissi from CMI said, “was valuable in and of itself. Not networking. Not leveraging. Just being there.”

A recurring concern was how to sustain energy and commitment beyond the adrenaline of emergency. “Fight mode is not sustainable,” said Mike Ayvazian of Astharte. Stephanie echoed: “The emergency energy has to be harnessed into regular practice.” That transition—between urgency and continuity—was seen as crucial to the sustainability not just of the work, but of motivation and morale.

Several initiatives highlighted the ability to work with minimal or no funding. Knio emphasized the reliance on human resource and exchange: “We had no money, just people. The best partner in sustainability is the community. But where does that begin and end?” Alongside this came the warning to resist allowing donor dynamics and politics to create divisions between initiatives. The scarcity of money must not translate into scarcity of solidarity.

A practical learning emerged around sourcing collaborators directly from recipient communities. This had tangible implications for safety and access, and helped center the efforts of the initiatives within the community itself. In the case of Art Relief, a delay in mobilizing their intervention yielded a fortunate misfortune, namely of ending up supporting centers in/near affected areas rather than individuals, focusing on equipping and activating existing spaces to make them more impactful in the long run.

Several remarked that only in the case of a shared emergency does collaboration become not just ideal but necessary. “You suddenly know exactly what people can offer and are willing to offer,” said Bassel Abdel Aal of Roaya Corner. “It’s a telling time.” The necessity of collaboration created conditions where formerly parallel efforts could move in unison, out of urgency if not yet habit.

In this context, informality and flexibility were not merely adaptations, but methodological imperatives. For some initiatives, accessing schools being used as shelters became possible only by teaming up with an NGO that already had permission, or by leveraging personal

connections. Where possible, initiatives used their artistic reputation or social standing to channel foreign funds toward causes and communities in need. “Using artistic clout,” as one interviewee put it, became a mode of cultural leverage in a context where credibility matters.

All initiatives agreed on one thing: keeping psychosocial support (PSS) integral to all work, wartime or otherwise, must be a shared priority. “We have to insert the narrative of time needed for healing—during war and after—with support tailored to the individual,” said Ranwa Yehya, of ADEF. In tandem with referral-only models, she suggested buddy systems, shared responsibility among team members, and collaborative training in PSS can allow for mutual support rather than isolated expertise.

While all recognized the need for basic survival—food, water, shelter—several reminded us not to downplay the role of mental health and joy. Whether they called it “art therapy” or “creative dynamics,” the point was the same: the process matters. And even if the intervention is interrupted, that may still be better than never having tried. “Sometimes it’s better to have tried and stopped than not to have done anything at all,” all agreed. While all recognize that the crisis is bigger than any one initiative, any one response episode, and perhaps bigger than all combined, all saw the effort as worthwhile, especially if the benefit, even if modest, becomes mutual and sustainable in the long-run, through war and its truces. Because being present matters, and connection in times of rupture, is also a form of cultural labor.

CONCLUSION: Considerations and Learnings

The experiences recounted in this report reaffirm the vital, if under-recognized, role that cultural actors continue to play in Lebanon's humanitarian response. Far from being marginal, these actors responded quickly, resourcefully, and often at personal risk—mobilizing social capital, activating networks, and creating moments of dignity and collective care amid devastation.

Several patterns emerge from their work. First, effective cultural relief depends not only on creative content but on infrastructure—legal, spatial, relational. Having prior experience, trusted reputations, and organizational grounding enables fast and adaptive action. Second, the line between cultural and humanitarian work blurs in times of war, and such blending brings new challenges around ethics, efficacy, and emotional labor. Rather than seeing this as an obstruction, it can be understood as an expansion of cultural work's remit.

Third, the psychological and emotional toll of this labor—on both providers and recipients—must be acknowledged and mitigated. Psychosocial support cannot remain an afterthought or outsourced service. It must be woven into the everyday practices of cultural relief. Fourth, informal practices—improvisation, mutual aid, flexibility—proved essential. Yet they also exposed gaps in preparedness, highlighting the need for shared protocols and methodologies, and peer learning across initiatives.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the recurring nature of crisis in Lebanon suggests the need to rethink "emergency" as a temporary disruption. Cultural actors are not stepping outside their roles to do this work. They are extending them. And in doing so, they are crafting a form of cultural infrastructure that is slow, relational, cumulative, and above all, grounded in care.

This report is not a manual. But it is a mirror. It offers a view of what is already being done, and proposes what can be sustained—if resourced, respected, and remembered.

The cultural relief work carried out during the fall of 2024 reveals not only the responsiveness of Lebanon's artistic field, but its adaptability, ethical reflexivity, and infrastructural

imagination. The picture that emerges is not one of ideal conditions or flawless responses, but of resourcefulness under duress, of values shaping action, and of practice deeply grounded in both place and people.

Several lessons stand out. First, the importance of maintaining relationships with institutions—ministries, municipalities, schools, orphanages—during times of relative calm. Those who had such ties were able to access spaces and audiences with minimal delay. Second, the experience reaffirmed that socially-engaged art is not a luxury or accessory, but a foundational methodology for building human connection, capacity and civic engagement. These are not only soft outcomes but core components of relief work.

Third, organizational well-being must be taken seriously. Relief actors are often stretched thin, and burnout not only threatens individual health, but undermines the longevity of programs. Peer support, mutual care, and downtime are part of the toolkit. Fourth, funding must accommodate not only the speed of emergency but the rhythm of the aftermath[9]. Flexible deadlines, permissive spending categories, and minimal bureaucratic demands were instrumental to this fund.

Finally, the value of trust—across time, institutions, generations, and borders—cannot be overstated. It is this trust, accrued over years of collaboration, shared work, and mutual recognition, that allowed cultural workers to act with such immediacy and integrity when disaster struck, transforming cultural work from temporary stopgap action into potentially concrete and longer-term impact.

In a country where calamities are recurrent, and where governance falters, the cultural field remains one of the spheres where values, visioning, and concrete action can align. This report hopes to document that alignment, and affirm its importance moving forward in Lebanon, and in other regions grappling with the intertwined challenges of war, displacement, and cultural survival.

9: In August 2025, ADEF Lebanon went on to receive additional support from the Landscapes of Hope network, of which they are a part, to carry out a second round of their initiative "Art Relief" in Stayha cultural center in Kfarumman, and in Mayli Library in Baalbak; this in continued partnership with YAP.

APPENDIX 1: Interview Questions

- First experience with humanitarian work?
- Number of times, experiences? Previous experiences?
- What were the biggest challenges?
- What lessons did you learn from resolving or adapting to these challenges?
- What would you have done differently, if at all?
- What might you do differently next time? Now that you've been through the experience (several times)?
- What skills did you use that you'd acquired during your usual/regular non emergency operation?
- How would you imagine the arts/culture sector doing relief in the future?
- What did your regular practice benefit from the experience of involvement in humanitarianism, if at all? What remains after the emergency ends?

APPENDIX 2: Fieldwork Log

Interviews (2025):

/ **January 31:** Elyse Tabet (Beirut Synthesizer Center)

/ **February 4:** Fadi Tabbal (Tunefork Studios)

/ **February 7:** Bassel Abdelal and Ahmad Deeb (Roaya Corner)

/ **February 20:** Fadi Syriani (Youth Animation Platform)

/ **March 4:** Stephanie Sotiry and Roula Kobeissi (Clown Me In)

/ **March 15:** Ibrahim Nehme and Nohad al-Hajj (Beirut Art Center)

/ **March 15:** Mona Knio (Al Madina Theater)

Field visits (2025):

/ **February 7:** Roaya Corner, Nahr el Bared Camp, al-Minieh, North Lebanon

/ **April 12:** Al Madina Theater, Beirut

/ **May 8:** Stayha, Kfarumman, Nabatieh, South Lebanon

Group discussions among initiatives and Culture Resource:

/ **December 9, 2024:** Online

/ **February 4, 2025:** BAC, following PSS training with Ashtharte

APPENDIX 3: Initiatives' Log

Organizations' dates of establishment:

- 1994 Al Madina Theatre (Association of Al Madina Theatre for Arts and Culture)
- 2002 InConcert
- 2008 Clown Me In (CMI)
- 2009 Beirut Art Center (BAC), Arab Digital Expression Foundation (ADEF)
- 2014 Tunefork Studios
- 2017 Beirut Synthesizer Center (BSC)
- 2018 Youth Animation Platform (YAP)
- 2021 Roaya Corner

Initiatives and partnerships:

1. "Recreational Theater Workshops" - Al Madina Theater
2. "Think of Others" - فكر بغيرك - Roaya Corner Cultural Center
3. "Clowning Shows Initiative" - Awrad - Clown Me In
4. "Artists in Shelter" - Beirut Art Center
5. "Art Relief" - YAP, ADEF, Lena Merhej (animator, illustrator) and InConcert (Samar Kehdy).
6. "Beirut Synthesizer Center & Tunefork Studios Joint Initiative for the Displaced" - Beirut Synthesizer Center (BSC), Tunefork Studios

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