

## **Chapter 5. Challenging the Gatekeepers: Disability Rights Advocacy and the Struggle for Self-Representation within Lebanon's Postwar Sectarian Democracy**

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### **Introduction**

Marginalized groups across the world have been struggling for their rights as citizens from the beginning of the modern state era. These struggles have been particularly challenging within the Global South where emerging states have been weaker, the effects of capitalist penetration more unevenly distributed and, hence, where the concentration of socio-economic and political power has been more pronounced. Particularly challenging for many marginalized groups has been the resilient perpetuation of clientelist dynamics that have thrived within these conditions of socio-economic and political inequality – giving rise to political systems dominated by mediated rather than direct/unmediated access to the state and to the rights and resources that should flow from one's status of being a citizen. Much of the history of citizenship across the world – now being played out within most of the countries of the Global South – has been characterized by this very struggle to enhance the dynamics of mediated access to the state, if not establish direct access to the fruits of citizenship (Waldner 1999).

If these underlying struggles depict the plight of most marginalized populations in the Global South, it is a particularly poignant one for people with disabilities, the focus of this paper. Though the numbers of people with disabilities in the Global South are difficult to ascertain in a precise manner – given both the weak capacity of public administrations and the complex debates about what constitutes a disability (Shakespeare 2006) – it is nonetheless clear that increasingly large numbers of peoples with disabilities live in the Global South and that these populations are among the poorest and most politically marginalized of its population groups.<sup>1</sup> In her study as part of the Disability Knowledge and Research (KaR) Programme in the United Kingdom, Rebecca Yoe (2005: 4) argued that the disabled are 'overrepresented among the poorest of the poor', and estimated further that over 10,000 disabled people die every day of extreme poverty, a situation which she adds is 'the inevitable and logical result of existing global relations'. A recent report by the World Bank on disability within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region – that includes Lebanon which is the focus of this paper – offers a similar portrait of disabled people as being poorer as a group than the general population, more likely to have income levels below the poverty line, and less likely to have savings and other assets. It further described people with disabilities in the MENA region as having higher illiteracy, stressing that the situation was particularly bad for women with disabilities. Finally, it argued that individuals living in poverty are more at risk of becoming disabled than the non-poor. In short, the World Bank (2005: 5) report concluded that disabled people in the MENA region are often trapped in a 'life-long cycle of poverty'.

The political consequence of such endemic marginalization of people with disabilities has been their reliance on others when trying to fulfill their basic needs, if not their rights as citizens. Rather than accepting passively this reality of mediated forms of citizenship, however, activists

with disabilities worldwide – including an increasingly active coterie of groups within the Global South – have been challenging this reality, working to establish instead more favourable, if not direct, ways to represent their needs and interests within their respective polities. This paper examines these particular struggles within the context of Lebanon in the period after its 15 year civil war ended in 1989. The paper will be organized along the following lines. First, it will present a series of conceptual reflections that will guide subsequent analysis of the Lebanese case study about the relational nature of marginality and the entrenched nature of these dynamics. This will be followed by an examination of how these dynamics articulate themselves within the context of Lebanon's disability sector - producing entrenched and subordinating mediated access to its social policy domain for people with disabilities. Having set the context, the paper then examines two approaches to disability advocacy - both of which were aimed at challenging the 'gatekeeping' dynamics of the major social welfare institutions of the country. One pursued their advocacy campaigns through direct action; the other decided to instrumentalize the prevailing system of sectarian mediation in the country to promote its progressive reforms. Both strategies achieved some measure of greater accountability in the system, be it of a discursive or programmatic nature. Yet, the achievements of both were ultimately limited?

### **The 'Stickiness' of Mediated Forms of Politics in Weak Democracies – The Case of Lebanon and its Disability Sector**

There is a strong correlation between mediated systems of politics and entrenched conditions of marginality. This section will outline three basic reasons why this might be so before subsequently examining whether this relationship leaves much room for manoeuvre for marginalized populations themselves. The basic premise here is that conditions of marginalization do not stem so much from qualities associated with the marginalized themselves but from their relationship with a broader array of structures and agents – in particular, mediating agents. As David Mosse (2007: 5) argues, poverty must be studied and understood in 'relational' context; or as Geof Woods (2003: 456) stresses in his own work on poverty and social welfare regimes in weak states, 'people are poor because of others' .

The starting point for explaining the production and reproduction of conditions of marginality are structural, revolving around the inequality generating effects of capitalist penetration and state formation in the global periphery. David Mosse (2010: 1157) writes of 'the exclusionary and expropriating aspects of long term processes of capitalist transformation' that, in conjunction with parallel ones of state formation, produce radically unequal power relations. The principle point to be remembered here is that the resultant condition of marginality, rather than being peripheral and residual to these processes, is central. Indeed, Mosse (2010: 1164) describes it as one of the 'background engines of poverty'. Mosse lists numerous marginalizing characteristics of capitalist penetration – from the initial dynamics of dispossession arising from processes of primitive accumulation, to capitalism's tendency to generate pools of unemployment, to the perpetuation of processes of pauperization as a result of such processes as the production of harmful commodities (weapons, etc), to the generation of environmental

destruction as a result of capitalism's relentless drive to produce, to the marginalization of particular groups of the 'undeserving poor' – that would include the diseased and disabled.

Of equal importance in understanding the resilient nature of conditions of marginalization are the social mechanisms that work to establish and reproduce relationships of domination. Foremost among them is clientelism – linking subaltern populations, through both distributive and coercive mechanisms, in hierarchical and subordinating relationships with social and political elites. Buttressing clientelist mechanisms of subordination has been their strategic intertwining with the politics of identity, or 'categorization' as Charles Tilly (1998: 8) calls it, processes that he argues have been very effective in creating, maintaining, and perpetuating what he refers to as 'opportunity hoarding' on the part of elite social and political forces. Indeed, Tilly argues that it is these processes that have a powerful effect on the reproduction of inequality in societies, 'durable inequality' as he calls it (Tilly 1999); and Mosse, adapting the arguments of Tilly, makes a similar assertion with respect to his concept of 'durable poverty' (Mosse 2007 and 2010).

However, be it the generation of poverty by peripheral capitalism, the subordinating reinforcement of clientelism, or the controlling effects of the politics of categorization, all must be seen in the context of the ways in which their marginalizing dynamics are accentuated by their interactions with the state. In theory, the formal institutions of the state are designed to provide marginalized populations with universalized access to its resources and protection against the machinations of particularistic and powerful social forces, acting as a 'third party enforcer' of their rights. In reality, states within the developing world are often weak and permeated by elite social forces that have the capacity to capture its parts and mould its dynamics in particularist directions. In states with ostensibly democratic regimes, this often translates into its formal and rights-oriented democratic rules being overwhelmed by a particularist set of informal rules associated with the politics of clientelism and identity that close off the possibility of direct, universal access to the state for marginalized populations, forcing them instead to work through informal channels of access, mediated by socio-political elites. In turn, this clientelisation of popular power not only accentuates the capacity of elite networks to prevent the state from emerging as a 'third party enforcer' of citizenship rights for all; it also provides them with a crucial set of resources needed to perpetuate their particularist socio-economic and political hegemony, helping to explain why informal political dynamics within states of the Global South can be so tenacious and resilient (Knight 1992, Kingston 2013).

How do the marginalizing dynamics associated with peripheral capitalism, clientelism, categorization, and weak states apply to the plight of people with disabilities in the Lebanese context? On the one hand, there are contentious debates within the field of disability studies about the exact effect of capitalist expansion on processes of disabling (See Russell and Malhotra 2002, see also Melling and Forsythe 1999). At the same time, however, there is no disputing the empirical reality that contemporary labour markets have largely excluded people with disabilities from access to employment. In Lebanon, for example, over 40% of people with disabilities have been unemployed with most being 'overwhelmed by the obstacles they face in getting a job' (Lakkis and Thomas 2003: 5). Moreover, women with disabilities were described

as facing 'double discrimination' given their already low rates of participation in the labour force and, in a further discouraging finding. Of those select few that do have stable jobs, a significant number are self-employed, a situation that, it was argued, also points to 'the inaccessibility of the disabled to the mainstream labour market' (Wehbi and Lahib 2007). Further indicative of the 'precarious nature' of economic opportunities for people with disabilities in Lebanon is the fact that very few of those employed seemed to have access to or can earn enough to pay into the National Social Security Fund (NSSF or *daman*), one of the only and increasingly inadequate sources of social protection in the country only accessible to those working in the formal sector (Lakkis and Thomas 2003). Finally and consistent with more general trend in other developing countries towards the 'informalization of labour', it is clear that most employed people with disabilities in Lebanon have been forced to find their niche in the informal sector which offers very low pay and low security. In short, the nature of the labour market in Lebanon, embedded as it is within the country's laissez-faire variety of capitalism, generates powerful mechanisms of exclusion for disabled people.

It is also clear that people with disabilities worldwide have had to contend with the power of marginalizing forms of 'categorizations'. Early treatment of people with disabilities in Lebanon, for example, were characterized by a variety of dehumanizing stigmatizations – from their disabilities being represented by religious clerics as manifestations of demons that had to be violently chased away (Rogan, 2001), to their categorization by a broad set of patriarchal elites as shameful violations of family honour – something that had a particularly marginalizing effect on girls and women (Turmusani 2003, Abu-Habib 1997). It is also clear that these denigrating forms of categorization have persisted into Lebanon's contemporary era. Nawaf Kabbara, a pioneering Lebanese disabled activist, noted that the lack of accessibility of the majority of mosques and churches in the country indicated that the country's main religious leaders were not yet open to accepting the disabled in their midst 'as human beings' (NARD, WRF, and USAID, 1995). Neither has the rise of social welfare institutions that began in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century dramatically altered this situation, people with disabilities often being treated as voiceless objects of charity, a 'categorical' approach that continues to hold hegemonic sway over the Lebanese social welfare field as a whole (Ibid).

With the development of modern medicine, people with disabilities have also struggled against the rising power of medical professionals who have approached disability from narrow 'medical' perspectives that has often led to their treatment as being 'broken victims' in need of rehabilitation. When fused with 'charitable' approaches, this 'medical model' of disability has had a controlling effect on people with disabilities, often leading them to being entrapped within institutions controlled by clerical and medical 'gatekeepers' who have acted as mediators of their interests and concerns to the families of people with disabilities, their broader society, and the state (Turmusani 2003; Lord 2004). Indeed, during Lebanon's long civil war when the state – already a weak entity as it was – virtually ceased to exist, many advocates for people with disabilities wrote of horrendous abuses of the disabled at the hands of Lebanon's 'rehabilitation industry' (Abu-Habib 1998). In one horrendous wartime instance of institutionalized abuse, for example, a researcher with the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) in Lebanon found mentally handicapped patients being kept on metal beds without

mattresses; in another, he found patients being kept on beds that consisted of sponges soaked with urine and excreta. Another heart-wrenching account of institutional neglect was his discovery of a person reduced to utter passivity as a result of having been kept in a bed for over 16 years (Dehbozorgi, 1983).

The question is – did the return of the state at the end of Lebanon’s civil war in 1989-1990 offer people with disabilities hope that it would push for greater accountability and support? Would the state be able to challenge the power of these structurally embedded mediating institutions – be it the religious establishments or the sectarian social welfare/rehabilitation institutions – in order to establish a disability sector that offered people with disabilities in the country an avenue of escape from these marginalizing dynamics and a direct voice in the management of disability affairs? On the one hand, the historically entrenched nature of these socio-political processes of marginalization did not augur well for reform in Lebanon’s disability sector. Underpinning Lebanon’s sectarian democracy, for example, has been a historically weak state apparatus subject to the longstanding penetrations of the country’s sectarian elites. Over time, they have managed to implant in hegemonic fashion their own informal particularist sectarian political logic into the very heart of the country’s ostensibly democratic regime.

The consequences for the country’s social welfare and disability sector have been profound. First, the state has historically never assumed anything more than a very limited role in the social policy domain, delegating that responsibility to an increasing array of intermediary social welfare institutions embedded within the various sectarian communities. This has created a system of ‘welfare particularism’ that, under French colonial rule, became consolidated and entrenched (Jawad 2007, Thompson 2000). While the postcolonial Lebanese state did increase its presence within the social welfare sector – both institutionally through the creation of the Ministry of Social Affairs (MSA) and financially through the provision of greater amounts of finance, this increased presence has served to reinforce (rather than replace) the sector’s longstanding informal sectarian dynamics. Indeed, all attempts to reform Lebanon’s social welfare sector in ways that would allow the state to enforce more universal and rights-oriented standards of access and care have run up against the informal ‘veto’ and ‘gatekeeping’ power of its various intermediary sectarian social welfare institutions, eager to preserve their own power and autonomy. It is these historically entrenched dynamics, backed up by the continual reproduction of unequal power relations, which would pose formidable challenges to those rights-oriented associations run by people with disabilities in Lebanon pushing to challenge the ‘gatekeeping’ power of disability institutions in the country (Kingston 2013: 193). As one EU report on Lebanon’s postwar social welfare sector concluded, the resistance of ‘entrenched institutional political-sectarian influences’ would make ‘even minor reforms concerning...social affairs very difficult to get adopted and implemented’ (119, CDR and ESFD, 2005; see also Kingston, 2013, p. 193).

### **The Emergence of ‘Restricted Agents’ of Change – The Rise of Disability Advocacy Networks**

However unequal and entrenched power relations may be, they are rarely if ever ‘one way’ (Levy and Newell 2002: 85). Neither are ‘sticky’ institutional environments – even those

underpinned by informal ‘mediating’ dynamics – completely static or ‘locked in’, no matter how resistant to change the socio-political forces underpinning it are (Pierson, 2004: 73). Rather, political opportunities to promote institutional change can always be created by what Ira Katznelson calls ‘restricted agency’ (2003: 282) though, as Pierson emphasizes, institutional change when it does take place is usually of a ‘bounded’ nature, boxed in by the particular configurations of power that underlie the institutional order. Indeed, despite the myriad of factors lined up against them, disability activists in postwar Lebanon were able to achieve some notable successes in their advocacy campaigns – all of which nibbled away at the entrenched power of sectarian mediators in the disability field. They established an associational presence and ‘voice’ within Lebanon’s highly contested and penetrated civil society – a voice that called for new ways of understanding disability and new models of disability care. They successfully lobbied for the right of people with disabilities to be represented within the disability policy-making institutions of the state – symbolized by their inclusion in the newly-created National Council for Disabled Peoples (NCDP) in the early postwar period. And, moving further up the complex ladder of policy-making, their strategic lobbying led to the establishment of a new system of service delivery for people with disabilities called the Rights and Access Program (RA) designed to operate according to principles of rights and not sectarian belonging. All represent attempts by disability activists to wrestle control of the disability sector away from powerful and sectarian-backed disability institutions and into the hands of the Lebanese state which they hoped would act as a ‘third part enforced’ of their rights.

Underlying these successes, were two distinct advocacy strategies of ‘restricted agency’, each represented by a distinct disability advocacy network. The first strategy, pushed by a small, cross-sectarian network of disability activists and associations, directly challenged the system of sectarian mediation within the country’s disability sector. Their vocal advocacy campaigns helped to bring the issue of disability into the public realm in ways that had never existed before and in ways that forced some discursive accountability on the part of politicians and disability institutions that in the past had been able to act with complete autonomy, if not impunity. The most important driver of policy change and reform in Lebanon’s postwar disability sector, however, emanated from a distinct network of disability activists and associations emanating from the Christian communities of the country. They based their advocacy efforts on a distinct strategic calculation that the only way to promote progressive reforms to Lebanon’s disability sector was not to challenge the system directly – an agenda that they calculated was not backed up by the kind of social power needed to succeed – but to instrumentalize the predominantly informal sectarian dynamics of the country’s disability sector for the purposes of progressive change. In short, it was by playing according to (rather than challenging) the rules of the system *through the cultivation of more effective and progressive forms of mediation* that this particular network of disability activists hoped to effect significant reforms. Before reaching conclusions as to the ultimately restricted and ‘bounded’ nature of these attempts, it is to a comparison of these two strategic approaches to advocacy that we turn now.

*Challenging Sectarian Mediation in Postwar Lebanon – Disability Activism and the Push for the Right to Self-Representation in Postwar Lebanon*

The most vocal advocacy strategy by disability activists in Lebanon have revolved around a direct challenge to the system of sectarian mediation in the disability field, calling instead for new ways of understanding disability based upon a 'social' rather than a 'medical' model, and new 'community-based' systems of disability care that could help people with disabilities escape the clutches of the powerful sectarian mediating disability institutions. Crucial to the impact of these associational voices was the rise of the global disability movement spearheaded by people with disabilities in the 1970s. Diane Dreidger, the historian of a pioneering advocacy association run by people with disabilities, Disabled Peoples International (DPI), described this global movement as emerging from a determination among people with disabilities to 'to wrestle power from those with money and technical resources who would not grant them control' and throw off 'the yoke of paternalism and 'charity' that surrounded them (1989: 37). Their campaigns quickly had an impact on disability politics around the world, symbolized by a succession of successes at the global level - from the declaration in 1981 of the UN Decade for Disability, to the passage of the Standard Rules for Equalization of Opportunity for Peoples with Disabilities in 1993, to the ratification of the global Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against People with Disabilities in 2004.

The most important effects of the rise of the global disability rights movement, however, have been the 'boomerang' effects it has had on the fledgling disability movements of people with disabilities emerging in a variety of local contexts (Keck and Sikkink 1998), providing them with crucial moral, financial, and discursive support. These catalytic effects were no more apparent than in the case of Lebanon where the rise of the global disability movement coincided with the Lebanese civil war and the emerging civil opposition against it. Among these 'civil' opponents was an emerging group of disability activist who were beginning to establish their own advocacy associations, extend rudimentary and piecemeal service provision to some of the peripheral areas of the country systematically ignored by the urban-based sectarian disability institutions, and launch targeted campaigns against selected disability institutions that had particularly bad reputations for abuse. One of the crowning achievements of this emerging coterie of disability activists – at least from a symbolic perspective - was the organization of a much publicized 'disability march' in 1987 across the country in the midst of its civil war. Campaigning both as disability activists and as part of a broader wartime civil peace movement, its main organizer, Nawaf Kabbara, described the march as 'a turning point in the history of disability in Lebanon. At a stroke, we moved from being a marginalized group that has to be 'looked after' to a political force to be reckoned with' (1992). As a result, by the end of the civil war in 1990, Lebanon's disability sector, traditionally dominated by a small number of large and powerfully-backed sectarian social welfare institutions, was now both larger and more diverse, encompassing associations with a broader array of perspectives on disability policy and practice. As Kabbara remarked, in contrast to the pre-war period where people with disabilities were essentially at the mercy of sectarian-affiliated rehabilitation institutions, 'now there was a disability movement to respond to' (Interview 1999).

Taking advantage of the civil society platforms that they had begun to create during wartime, these disability activists and associations continued their public sector activism into the postwar

period. They campaigned on a variety of issues from the passage and implementation of a comprehensive law guaranteeing the rights of people with disabilities, to the right to greater accessibility with respect to the country's public infrastructure that included everything from public buildings to schools to polling stations during elections, to greater access to employment opportunities, to the establishment of a more inclusive educational system. These campaigns utilized a wide repertoire of public actions strategies – from street level activism and 'sit-ins' in front of public buildings, to street 'celebrations' as opposed to 'demonstrations' (especially useful as a way to get around the ban on political gatherings in the mid-1990s), to awareness raising campaigns within the country's public school system, to the distribution of country-wide petitions, to the forging of alliances with an array of civil society associations, to the targeting and strategic lobbying of public officials and politicians at both the 'strategic heights' of the Lebanese polity and its 'trenches' (Migdal 1994). Connections with Prime Minister Hoss and President Lahoud in the late 1990s proved especially useful in the efforts of disability activists to have the comprehensive law on disabilities passed by the Lebanese parliament in 2000, something that stands as a significant, if preliminary, achievement for the disability movement as a whole, providing them with a legal platform upon which to continue to push for their rights. Kabarra, for example, described its passage as 'a marvel...it covers almost everything' and as Sylvana Lakkis, a leading women among Lebanon's disability activists, proudly exclaimed 'now, we have rights!' (Interview 2001).

Yet, although disability activists had managed to secure for themselves a foothold within Lebanese civil society and a legal basis upon which to justify their claims for greater rights, they remained a weak political force within the country compared to the historically entrenched centers of disability power. Their financing was extremely limited, often depending upon foreign support that had begun to decrease with the end of the civil war; and relations between associations and individuals within this network were divisive and competitive, despite efforts by external donors to promote greater cooperation and coordination. In fact, the once unified wartime network has effectively split into two distinct sub-networks. One revolved around Nawaf Kabbara (FOH and the National Association for the Rights of the Disabled (NARD) who took the lead in establishing the Lebanese Council for Disabled Peoples (LCDP) - a network of about 13 disability NGOs officially affiliated with DPI; the other revolved around the figures of Sylvana Lakkis (LSHU) and Amer Makarem (YAB) who went on to establish the 'Inclusion Network' that would win a significant World Bank grant in 2005.

Most importantly, however, their advocacy efforts never expanded beyond the realms of their small and fragmented network, making it difficult to actually speak of the existence of a popularly-supported disability movement in the country. Most people with disabilities, for example, remained under the sway and care of the large sectarian-affiliated disability institutions and the clientelist distributions of the political class; as one disability activist remarked, the large rehabilitation institutions are 'very, very, very strong. They have money, they have traditions, [and] they have ignorance that support them' (Interview 1999). Hence, as Kabbara implicitly recognized in his defence of politicized and public advocacy, given their limited power – which he compared to a mosquito that was weak and small but 'could be



effective in not letting political society sleep' - their strategy was at best a long term one (Interview 1999).

*Instrumentalising Sectarian Mediation – A Strategic Recalculation of Disability Activism in Postwar Lebanon*

The second disability advocacy network emanated from within the Christian communities of Lebanon and it was their strategic manoeuvring that led to the most significant developments within Lebanon's postwar disability sector – the creation of the National Council for Disabled Peoples (NCDP) upon which people with disabilities were represented, and the establishment of a new service delivery mechanism called the Rights and Access Program (RA). Ostensibly, these initiatives emanated from an interesting and paradoxical source – the newly appointed head of the Ministry of Social Affairs (MSA) in 1993, Elie Hobeika, a former commander of the wartime militia, the Lebanese Forces, who had shown a surprising degree of interest in the issue of disability and spent considerable time in the wake of his appointment consulting with disability activists. '[Hobeika] gave us a space', noted one disability advocate who described the first year of his short tenure as having been 'very exciting' (Interview 2008). Hobeika's interest, however, was actually sparked by the behind the scenes lobbying efforts of this second disability advocacy network which saw Hobeika's appointment as an opportunity to exploit the intense sectarian power-sharing dynamics in Lebanon's early postwar period to promote their reformist agenda.

At the strategic core of this group was Pierre Issa, one of the founders of a small wartime disability NGO called Arc en Ciel that would go on to play the lead role within the RA program and grow to become one of the most important and progressive service providers and disability advocacy associations in the country. As a result of Issa's strong connections within elite Christian political circles and, in particular, the Lebanese Forces, he was targeted by the network as the one 'with the possibility'. While Issa has always denied being part of a larger 'superstructure', it was clear that both the NCDP and the RA program emerged out of a three-way sectarian bargaining process between representatives of the Sunni, Shi'a and Arc en Ciel as the de facto representative of the Christian communities – a system of 'three-partheit' as one activists sarcastically called it (Interview 2008). This was implicitly recognized by a member of Issa's network itself who acknowledged, 'he had to bargain, he had to bargain, he can't do it any other way' (Interview 1999). In short, this reformist disability network surmised that it was only by working within the prevailing system of sectarian power relations that – using Hobeika as a mediating mechanism to catapult their project to the highest political levels – their small but strategically-situated disability advocacy network would be able to carve out enough autonomous space for itself within which they could implement their reformist agenda.

The question remained, however, as to how far this strategy of playing by the rules of the mediating sectarian power structures rather than directly challenging them could actually work. Kabbara was sceptical, doubting that the scope of Issa's bargain would extend far enough to challenge the power and autonomy of the large sectarian social welfare institutions that effectively dominated the disability sector. 'Where is their political understanding of disability?'

he asked, stressing instead the need for broader political action as the only way to inject accountability into the system (Interview 2001). Kabbara seems to have been partially correct with respect to the dynamics of the newly established NCDP. Created to provide a mechanism for civil society consultation with respect to disability policies that included the novel inclusion of both associations run by people with disabilities and elected representatives of disabled people themselves, the NCDP, after the initial dynamics under Hobeika's short tenure as minister, gradually descended into deliberative council immobilized by sectarian political dynamics over such questions as appointments, foreign aid distribution and, in the years after 2000, the broader immobilizing battles between political factions in the country. Interestingly, representatives of associations run by people with disabilities expressed particular scepticism over the stipulation that people with disabilities be elected, noting that this would open the door to the clientelizing influence of the larger sectarian social welfare institutions upon which many people with disabilities depended, further complicating efforts on the part of these associations to have their reformist ideas effectively represented. The result, as one disability activist admitted, was a emergence of a deliberative disability policy council that, while 'inclusive', was too 'dysfunctional' to act as a mechanism of representation and accountability for people with disabilities as a whole (Interview 2008).

It was the RA program, however, for which the small network of reformist Christian disability associations held out the most hope. Using the creation and distribution of a new disability card to people with disabilities, the architects of the RA program hoped that this could provide the MSA with vital information needed to strengthen its administrative capacity – allowing it to establish more accurate and contextualized classifications of disability, to develop a more rigorous system of standards to which the services of even the large politically-connected sectarian social welfare institutions would be subject, and to develop decentralized and community-based systems of disability service provision – using NGOs as mechanisms – that would more effectively reach people with disabilities in peripheral and previously ignored areas of the country. Ultimately, they hoped that the combined effect of all of these policy innovations would lead to the rechanneling of scarce finance and bureaucratic capacity away from 'institutionalized care' provided for by the large sectarian-affiliated disability institutions towards 'community-based rehabilitation'.

Initially, there were signs of promise. After a slow beginning, the distribution of disability cards began to pick up, facilitating the distribution of over 2.5 million services by the RA program by 2004. There were also signs that previously marginalized areas of the country were beginning to be better serviced (NCDP 2004). Yet, these optimistic beginnings were ultimately hampered by a combination of financial, administrative, and most of all, political obstacles. Financially, the MZA proved unable to finance the RA program to its full extent. The result was that the RA program has never been able to provide for the full extent of demands emanating from people with disabilities in the country. Indeed, due to a lack of funds, it often has had to stop its distribution of technical aids before the end of each month. Not only has this opened the door to forms of petty corruption – disability officials being given the power to exercise some distributional discretion, it has also and most importantly continued to leave people with disabilities in the country subject to the clientelist power of both disability institutions and

political elites. Neither has the program been able to establish and exercise a significant supervisory power that could have held the larger sectarian-based disability institutions accountable to a consistent set of standards. While some significant bureaucratic capacity has developed within the RA program, there has never been the number of employees needed to establish an effective regulatory regime. Indeed, as one representative from one of the larger disability institutions admitted, there is effectively 'no system of control' at all (Interview 2008).

Clearly, what was needed was an injection of new financial resources as well as a redistribution of those already committed by the MSA to 'institutionalized' care – an amount that makes up the overwhelming bulk of the MSA's overall budget – towards more community-based activities. It was here that the reform program has ultimately stalled, blocked by the resistance of those representing the prevailing system of institutionalized sectarian distribution in the disability sector, backed up by the underlying dynamics within Lebanon's sectarian system as a whole that overwhelms what limited power the Lebanese state might be able to muster as a 'third party enforcer'. The result is that, while the RA program was promising in theory, in practice, it has not been able to spread its progressive logic throughout the disability sector as a whole in postwar Lebanon. Instead, while its contributions are not negligible, the program itself has been confined to an 'island' of progressive disability service provision amidst a larger and hegemonic clientelized sea – its survival dependent on the very sectarian logic of Lebanon's mediated political system that its creation was designed to weaken.

### **Conclusion – The Limits of Mediation as a Mechanism for Advocacy**

This paper has compared the activism of two advocacy networks in Lebanon's postwar disability field. Each – run by people with disabilities and, hence, making the implicit claim that they had a right to represent the interests of the broader community of people with disabilities in Lebanon – had to grapple with ways of challenging the marginalizing and entrenched power of the country's sectarian social welfare institutions that dominated the country's disability sector and acted as a 'gatekeeper' when representing the interests and needs of people with disabilities at the level of the state. The first, made up of a small but cross-sectarian group of associations run by people with disabilities, sought to directly challenge the marginalizing dynamics of Lebanon's mediated sectarian political system in order to gain a voice for people with disabilities in the formulation of laws, policies, and programs; the other, emanating from a small group of associations within the Christian communities of the country, made the strategic calculation that the most effective way to promote reform within the country's disability sector was to work *with* the system of sectarian political mediation that had such a marginalizing effect on them. This conclusion will compare the initial results of these two approaches to challenging the disabling dynamics of Lebanon's political system before returning to the overall argument of this paper that political systems dominated by the informal mediating political dynamics possess a powerful mechanism of self-reproduction that present structural obstacles to efforts aimed at challenging their marginalizing dynamics.

The approach of the first network of disability activists achieved some notable successes in their approach of direct confrontation. Through their wartime advocacy, for example, they

injected progressive discourses about disability that revolved around notions of 'rights' rather than 'honour' and 'charity' into the heart of Lebanon's returning public sphere and, especially, into the intense post war debates that raged over approaches to reconstruction. These discourses, even if they were misused and instrumentalized by the large social welfare institutions, have now established a permanent hold within the country's disability sector – establishing a discursive source of accountability within the sector as a whole. Where the approach of this network of disability activists has fallen short is in their attempt to back up these discursive forms of accountability with 'on the ground' political power – constrained as they are by their small numbers, their limited finance, and their own fractious relations inside their network. Progressive disability networks in Lebanon have not been able to become progressive disability movements.

The second disability advocacy network, acutely aware of the seemingly insurmountable challenges in trying to build up a salient disability movement, sought instead to empower their own advocacy efforts through the instrumentalization of the country's prevailing sectarian dynamics, made possible by the strategic situation of one of their network's members. Carving out autonomous space within the state's bureaucracy, this network was able to create and implement a universalist rather than particularist program of service delivery to people with disabilities in the country, hoping to plant the seeds for radical transformation of the country's disability sector away from institutionalized and towards community-based care. Yet, their efforts were ultimately hemmed in by the hegemonic power of the larger system of sectarian mediation as well as by the particularist nature of the sectarian political bargain that brought this experiment about, preventing this novel experiment in advocacy-oriented mediation from growing.

Hence, this article has very measured conclusions. On the one hand, its findings attest to the possibility of challenging entrenched and marginalizing system of mediated representation, even by instrumentalising that system of mediation itself. Indeed, the very informal nature of mediated systems of politics leaves all sorts of room for manoeuvre for agents interested in challenging its hegemonic dynamics. At the same time, however, it is also clear that politics dominated by particularistic informal political dynamics present huge challenges to such efforts, 'bounding' them within the confines of structural parameters whose dynamics are reproduced and entrenched over time. Hence, while both approaches to disability advocacy achieved some limited success, both represented 'restricted' forms of agency, unable to muster the kind of social power ultimately needed to establish more institutionalized mechanisms of political accountability. In the absence of these possibilities, both advocacy networks looked 'upwards', seeking to find some source of power within the political system itself – the first advocacy network through the cultivation of like-minded allies with political society, the second through their entering into the very political mediating dynamics they were hoping to challenge. While both strategies produced symbolically significant and, in more limited terms, tangible policy gains, their efforts, in the absence of real social power, could never have been anything more than structurally limited, fleeting, and ultimately vulnerable to being absorbed by the prevailing and marginalizing political system over time.

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<sup>i</sup> Both the absolute numbers of people with disabilities and the proportion of them living in the developing world - where it is estimated that over 80% live - has been on the rise since the 1970s. See Khuzama Hijal Sharr, 'A Historical Overview of the Load of Impairment, Disability and Handicap in Lebanon' in Khuzama Hijal Shaar, Mark McCarthy, and Rami Anis Shaar, *Is Their Life After Disability: Insights into the Social Context of Disablement and Disadvantage*, Alpha Books: Montreal, 2002, p. 33.