

Partnership forum strengthens Lebanese NGOs

By **Ornella Najm**
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A group of 34 newly trained civil society organizations and volunteers met Wednesday with public and private donors as part of a Partnership Forum, organized jointly by the University of St. Joseph and the Catholic Relief service.

The project represented the culmination of the U.S. government-funded MEPI Mentor project, which aims to build NGO capacity and promote networks among civil society organizations, municipal and national government.

Mirna Srour, an economics student at the Lebanese University who is helping with Volunteers without Borders, told The Daily Star during the event that they “now have connections with MEPI, CRS and all the other NGOs so we can coordinate and help each other.”

“VWB helped me deal with the Syrian Crisis, they taught me a lot because they spread information and awareness to prevent violence, racism and discrimination. We learned that we can help others, especially when

teaching the Syrian refugees and empower innovation,” Srour said.

Elise Bitar, a psychotherapist working with Together for a Safe Childhood, described a vision of a project called Kid Power to The Daily Star. The project will teach children techniques for protecting themselves, “psychologically, physically and socially.”

They would also help mothers in low income families by giving them sources of employment through teaching them to make a doll that the organization would sell.

The donor fair took place at USJ’s Science campus in Sodeco. It was attended by government ministers, U.S. Charge d’Affaires Richard Jones and a number of major funders, marks a strengthening of civil society organizations from across Lebanon.

“I’m a firm believer that civil society is a very important backup that creates strong state institutions that care about social policies and social development,” Nayla Moawad, former social affairs minister and founder of the René Moawad Foundation, told The Daily Star at the event.

The Partnership Forum aims to support small Lebanese NGOs by

developing and strengthening their capacities through training sessions, workshops as well as ongoing coaching and networking sessions.

“What was really astonishing is that these 34 NGOs come from all over Lebanon – Jabal Mohsen, Tyre, Sidon and Tripoli. I think the real Lebanon we are looking for has a strong and multi-locational NGO [network] benefiting our civil society,” said Ramzi El Hajj, program manager for Catholic Relief Service.

Salim Daccache, president of USJ, lauded the coaching aspect.

“The mentoring project is a unique tool that reinforces the civil society in Lebanon,” he said. This fits closely with USJ’s mission, added Daccache, who went on to applaud the Lebanese spirit saying that the country had a young spirit and vitality.

The U.S. MEPI program had helped foster the longstanding partnership between the U.S. and Lebanon in a sustainable way, Jones said. “I congratulate you on your achievements not just as civil society activists who completed this successful program but also as Lebanese citizens building a better society. I can sense the passion, the determination



Derbas, Jones and other officials participate in the donor fair in Beirut.

and the drive that you all have to succeed and to give back to your community and to your country. I salute you,” he added.

“The United States government invested in this program because we believe that a strong civil society is critical for any country’s economic

and social development,” the diplomat continued.

MEPI invests around \$13 million annually in Lebanon to build such partnerships and strengthen ties.

Social Affairs Minister Richard Derbas took the opportunity to highlight the quality of the experience in

shaping the success of the program, calling it, “a relationship where they exchange knowledge and experience.” Derbas also addressed funders saying they must feel confident in their support after seeing their donations “planted in a fertile land that will definitely produce fruit.”

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