

# A Road Map Towards a Socioeconomic Development Plan for the Union of Municipalities of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, Bekaa Governorate

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الجمهورية اللبنانية  
وزارة الشؤون الاجتماعية

In partnership with the  
Ministry of Social Affairs



UN-HABITAT



Ambasciata d'Italia  
Beirut

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# A Road Map Towards a Socioeconomic Development Plan for the Union of Municipalities of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, Bekaa Governorate

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The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) is the United Nations agency for human settlements. It is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to promote socially and environmentally sustainable towns and cities with the goal of providing adequate shelter for all. UN-Habitat's programmes are designed to help policymakers and local communities get to grips with human settlements and urban issues and find workable, lasting solutions.

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## Credits and acknowledgements

This booklet, which outlines strategic directions for the local socioeconomic development of the Union of Municipalities (UoM) of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, was made possible with the generous funding support of the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), within the scope of the project "Improving Planning Capacities for Social and Economic Local Development" implemented between 2018 and 2023 by the UN-Habitat Lebanon Country Programme in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs.

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## Foreword by the Ministry of Social Affairs

The continuous fluctuations in the economic landscape in Lebanon have necessitated governmental institutions to rethink the forgoing socioeconomic model, which is based on the philosophy of rapid and temporary crisis response. With the increased pressing needs for social protection, aid and development, this obligates us to work towards meeting the expectations and the needs of the community relying on clear and prudent strategic planning that is realistically aligned with the available resources.

The Ministry of Social Affairs holds the responsibility and commitment of conducting developmental activities at all levels through its social developmental centres (SDCs). The ministry works in close coordination with international organizations, the local community, and local authorities.

Consequently, we seek the engagement and the involvement of relevant parties in our plans and our implementation procedures with the aim to jointly measure, evaluate and report on the performance of the ministry. This confirms our commitment to social responsibility, which contributes to achieving social stability and development.

Hence, we hereby share this booklet with you to present the analysis of data collected – and subsequently validated – with the participation of local stakeholders through different tools, including a survey with municipalities and a series of interviews and focus group discussions. The expected outcome of this exercise is to improve the socioeconomic conditions of communities and those concerned within the specified economic sectors in targeted municipalities and unions of municipalities. This will contribute to securing employment, job opportunities, skills development, and an enabling environment for entrepreneurial activities. This shall be undertaken through proper municipal planning developed in partnership with the SDCs and through the pursuit of possible funding for the implementation of such projects, yet ensuring the collaboration between the Ministry of Social Affairs, civil society organizations, and municipal councils.

**Dr. Hector Al-Hajjar**  
Minister of Social Affairs

## Foreword by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation

Knowing and analysing the resources and the challenges of the territory, planning in a participatory manner among public and private sectors and civil society organizations, designing sectorial strategies at local level where local and national level stakeholders are involved and prioritizing the interventions are a milestone before any intervention.

While this booklet is produced, Lebanon is facing one of the most severe economic and social crises: responding to individual needs is crucial, yet introducing reforms based on shared and agreed strategies is fundamental to ensure sustainability avoiding continuous adaption to emergencies.

In this context, the socio-economic focus given in developing the road map of the 10 Unions of Municipalities is really relevant. The adopted approach has enhanced the dialogue among the Unions of Municipalities, the Municipalities, the Social Development Centres of the Ministry Social of Affairs, the Lebanese Non-Governmental Organisations and stakeholders of the private sector.

The road map is the first step of a process towards interventions to be realised in the short-term and others bridging with long-terms strategies, whilst strengthening, orienting, and reforming the existing national systems.

The Italian Cooperation appreciates the role of the Ministry of Social Affairs in facilitating the process in collaboration with UN-Habitat. Italy has a longstanding cooperation with the Ministry in supporting the local development and welfare system for the provision of social services.

Italy looks forward to witnessing the continuity of the undertaken initiative through the concrete actions towards a local economic development.

**Ms. Alessandra Piermattei**  
Head of Office AICS Beirut

## Foreword by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme in Lebanon

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) is pleased to collaborate with the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation to present a series of booklets that endeavours to capture the strategic directions of 10 unions of municipalities (UoMs) across Lebanon towards future socioeconomic development action planning. The directions, identified by the UoMs and local stakeholders themselves, through a bottom-up participatory approach, aim to point towards future potential socioeconomic action planning that can both mitigate and set a long-term vision for the response and recovery efforts to address the nationwide socioeconomic crisis at local levels.

At the time of writing, Lebanon continues to face numerous and deep protracted socioeconomic challenges; UoMs and municipalities are at the receiving end of their impact and equally at the forefront of a local response. These booklets compile an evidence base, as identified, and prioritized by UoMs, pointing towards the longer-term need to develop full-fledged socioeconomic action plans that target the needs of their communities across the sectors of health, education, agriculture, infrastructure, among others.

Each booklet provides findings and analyses undertaken by the local teams working at the level of each UoM related to the socioeconomic conditions of each UoM. The data and findings of the booklets were collected through a participatory approach, involving a variety of stakeholders, including the UoMs, municipalities, civil society organizations, academia, the private sector, and the Ministry of Social Affairs' social development centres (SDCs).

The booklets identify the socioeconomic strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of each UoM, and provide a baseline that can be used to guide further resource investment by UoMs, municipalities and external stakeholders. Culminating with a series of recommendations for each UoM, the booklets provide insight into which specific sectors UoMs should focus on advancing, based on pre-existing efforts made, availability of natural resources, and feasibility. If adopted, these recommendations could help lead to enhanced basic and social service provision, increased livelihood opportunities, and ultimately promote local socioeconomic development and community well-being.

UN-Habitat hopes that these booklets will be a valuable resource for UoMs as they develop and implement future socioeconomic action plans to improve the lives of their communities.

**Taina Christiansen**  
Head of UN-Habitat Lebanon Country Programme



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## Abbreviations and acronyms

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| <b>AICS</b>       | Italian Agency for Development Cooperation          |
| <b>CNRS-L</b>     | National Council for Scientific Research in Lebanon |
| <b>DEM</b>        | Digital elevation model                             |
| <b>EDL</b>        | Électricité du Liban                                |
| <b>GIS</b>        | Geographic information system                       |
| <b>MoSA</b>       | Ministry of Social Affairs                          |
| <b>NGO</b>        | Non-governmental organization                       |
| <b>PV</b>         | Photovoltaic  |
| <b>SDC</b>        | Social development centre                           |
| <b>SWOT</b>       | Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats    |
| <b>ToT</b>        | Training of trainers                                |
| <b>UN-Habitat</b> | United Nations Human Settlements Programme          |
| <b>UoM</b>        | Union of municipalities                             |

## Executive summary

The preparation of this booklet, which outlines strategic directions of the Union of Municipalities (UoM) of Qalaat El-Istiqal in Bekaa Governorate towards future socioeconomic development action planning, was undertaken as part of a series of booklets prepared within the scope of the project **"Improving Planning Capacities for Social and Economic Local Development."** The project was implemented between 2018 and 2023 by the UN-Habitat Lebanon Country Programme in close collaboration with the Ministry of Social Affairs and funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS).

The analysis and recommendations included in this booklet are a result of several meetings, interviews, focus group discussions, and brainstorming sessions conducted by the project coordinate team, which was composed of representatives of social development centres (SDCs) and UoMs, in addition to a UN-Habitat team.

With the support of a local field team – also composed of representatives of SDCs, UoMs and UN-Habitat – that was involved in data collection, the project coordinate team collected and analysed data through fieldwork, which included consultative meetings and technical sessions with all relevant groups: stakeholders, experts, local activists, and individuals from various segments of the local community. The stages of data collection and validation at the local level involved collection of information about the municipalities; conducting consultative meetings, interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders and representatives of local communities; analysing the collected data through a participatory rapid appraisal approach that defined the status of different sectors; and finally, the representatives of SDCs and UoMs proposing recommendations for specific sectors to help improve the socioeconomic situation in each UoM.

In the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal, the consultations showed that the basic and social services are becoming weak due to the ongoing socioeconomic and financial crisis, and most of the sectors have been impacted in a way that the local authorities are not able to operate or to maintain effectively. To be able to improve the socioeconomic situation in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal, local stakeholders recommended to focus on the agriculture and tourism sectors. This was translated into strategic directions and a proposed road map for each of these sectors aimed at providing a vision for future action planning and interventions.

## Project overview

### Project objectives

The AICS-funded project as part of which this booklet was developed aimed to enhance the socioeconomic development conditions of local communities through strengthening the planning capacities at the level of unions of municipalities (UoMs) and municipalities, and by promoting collaboration between social development centres (SDCs) (affiliated to the Ministry of Social Affairs [MoSA]), local authorities and civil society organizations.

The scope of the project was adapted to meet the emerging needs of the country, to respond to the evolving socioeconomic, financial, and political crises crippling the country since 2019. To this end, the project's focus shifted from the initial objective of developing full-fledged strategic plans covering all sectors for the targeted UoMs to highlighting mainly strategic directions in some key sectors that can contribute to future local socioeconomic development.

### Expected outcomes

- Identification of strategic socioeconomic needs and directions for local communities, led by their respective selected UoMs, SDCs and stakeholders active at the local level, to provide a bottom-up evidence base about their socioeconomic status and development opportunities.<sup>1</sup>
- Dissemination of the produced evidence base to inform potential projects and secure further investment for their implementation by various internal and external stakeholders.

### Timeframe

The project was implemented from 2018 to 2023, during which it was put on hold multiple times during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent socioeconomic crisis.

### Geographical coverage

- Out of a total of 60 UoMs across all governorates of Lebanon that were invited to partake in the project, 38 responded and expressed initial interest in engaging in subsequent stages of the project to identify strategic directions for their future local socioeconomic development.
- Out of the 38 UoMs, 10 were eventually selected to identify strategic socioeconomic development directions, based on a number of criteria (See "Methodology" section below).

### Beneficiaries

- Local communities, including men, women, elderly, youth, children, and people with disabilities
- UoMs
- SDCs
- Civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

## Methodology

The aim of the series of booklets produced for the 10 targeted UoMs, which this booklet is a part of, is to analyse the local conditions of these unions and study the sectors and services that are essential components within them. These booklets provide a practical framework for taking future steps towards achieving sustainable and balanced development. Thus, the booklet series is the compilation of data and analysis about needs, gaps and challenges identified by the UoMs and other relevant local stakeholders, as well as recommendations that they have outlined to inform strategic socioeconomic development directions for their respective unions. Therefore, the booklets can serve as tools for decision-makers at both the local and national levels, as well as for development agencies to build upon when preparing their national and local programmes and policies. They were hence developed as part of the system-strengthening process of the project for UoMs to start the journey of enhancing their local socioeconomic

<sup>1</sup> As explained in the "Methodology" section below, the project did not aim to produce fully fledged socioeconomic action plans. The booklets developed to summarize the produced evidence base aim to lay the foundation for the future development of such detailed action plans by respective authorities or interested stakeholders.

development planning. The booklets do not intend to present full-fledged strategic socioeconomic action plans; rather they outline the foundational elements and entry points upon which it is hoped that relevant stakeholders can continue building upon to support in future local socioeconomic development action planning efforts.

In consultation with AICS and MoSA coordinators, it was agreed to have the assessment of the UoMs focusing especially on the main productive sectors in each UoM. Hence, each of the booklets includes a general description of the state of basic and social services – the latter focusing on health, education and culture/public spaces – within the respective UoM, in addition to some recommendations for improvement of these services. For the productive sectors, each booklet includes a more detailed analysis of the state of the two sectors that were identified as key for the future local socioeconomic development of the respective UoM, in addition to more detailed recommendations and a proposed road map, based on the data collected and analysed during the field activities and in consultation with local stakeholders.

The assessment and analysis on socioeconomic development issues conducted to develop this booklet series adopted a participatory approach that focused on actively involving local stakeholders in the respective UoMs. Thus, most of the figures presented in the booklets were derived or estimated through data collected and analysed participatively with and by local stakeholders in the UoMs. This bottom-up evidence production process endeavoured to impart local knowledge for the purpose of obtaining an initial baseline regarding certain socioeconomic development matters for the respective UoM. More in-depth assessments will need to be undertaken in the future to further detail and elaborate on the data collected and analysed for the purposes of this booklet series.

In line with this participatory approach, the methodology that was used to develop these booklets included the following components and steps:

### Selection of UoMs

1. Representatives of all 60 UoMs in Lebanon were invited to an initial project introductory meeting. Out of the 60, representatives from 54 UoMs attended this meeting, which was held remotely through Microsoft Teams, as initial project mobilization took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Out of these 54 UoMs, 38 submitted “Expressions of Interest” to participate in the subsequent steps of the project. These expressions included the submission of general information about the UoMs and a mapping of existing strategic and/or action plans.
3. Out of the 38 UoMs, 21 were excluded because they had existing relevant plans and programmes supported by various international entities and donors. Out of the remaining 17 UoMs, 10 were eventually selected to develop booklets outlining strategic directions for their future local socioeconomic development, based on a number of criteria, including population density, high number of Syrian refugees, high levels of poverty, low value of annual municipal budgets, and limited or no previous financial support from donors.<sup>2</sup> Having UoMs represented from across all Lebanese governorates was also a criterion of selection. The 10 targeted UoMs include:

| Akkar Governorate | North Governorate | Mount Lebanon Governorate    | Bekaa Governorate  | Baalbek–Hermel Governorate | South Governorate | Nabatiyeh Governorate |
|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Joumeih           | Caza Zgharta      | Jord El-Aala–Bhamdoun        | Qalaat El-Istiqlal | Chamal Baalbek             | Caza Jezzine      | Iqlim El-Tuffah       |
| Jord El-Qaytaa    |                   | Chouf El-Souayjani           |                    |                            |                   |                       |
|                   |                   | Iqlim El-Kharroub El-Chamali |                    |                            |                   |                       |

Table 1. 10 UoMs selected under this project.

<sup>2</sup> This information was collected mainly through the information sheets that UoMs had previously submitted as part of the “Expression of Interest” phase explained above. Some information – mainly related to other financial support from donors – was also based on the knowledge of UN-Habitat area coordinators, as part of their regular work with UoMs.

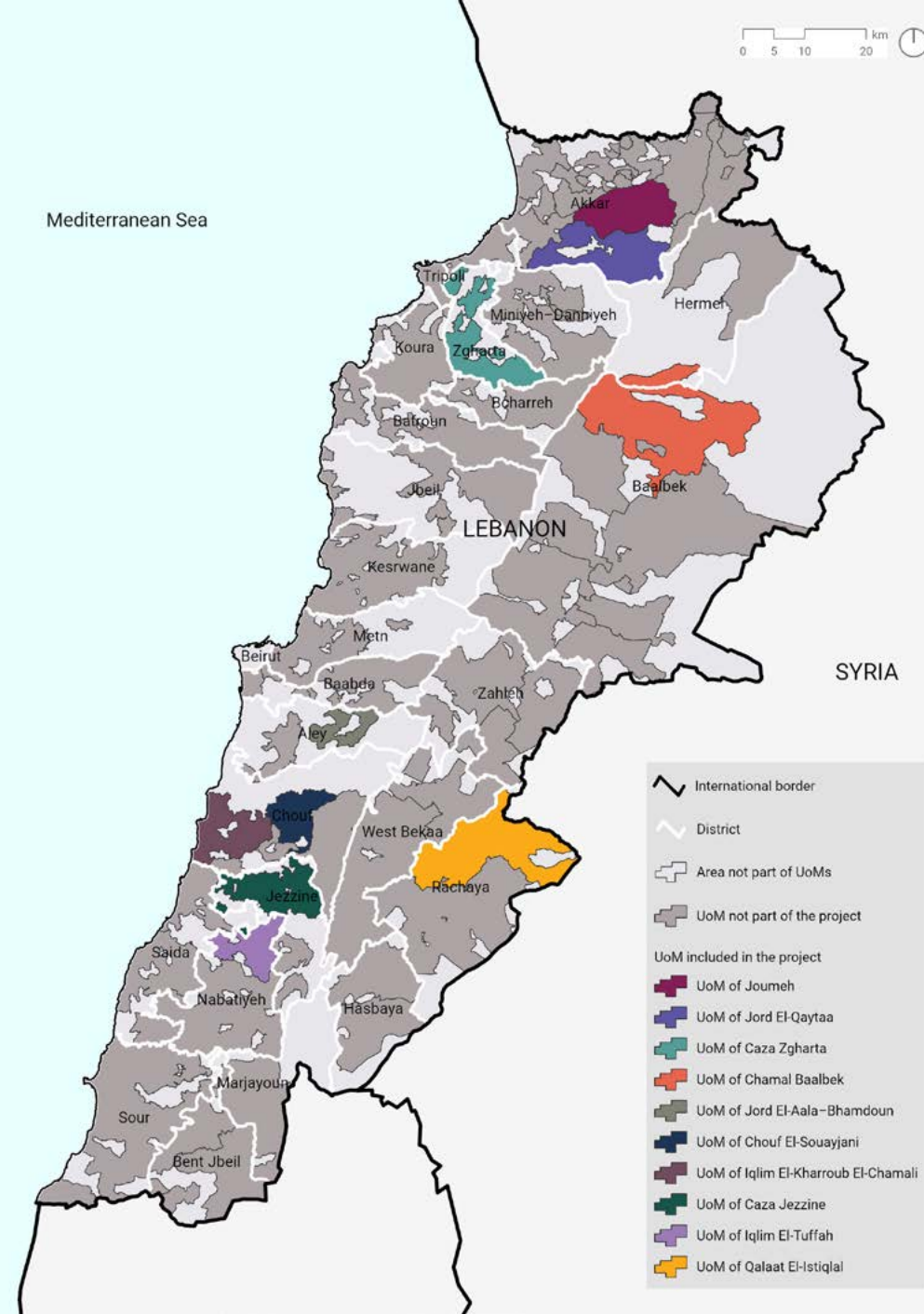


Figure 1. Location of 10 UoMs selected under this project. Source: UN-Habitat (2023).



## Preparation and training

1. A project coordination team – consisting of 7 SDC coordinators designated by MoSA,<sup>3</sup> 11 representatives<sup>4</sup> from 10 UoMs, and 8 UN-Habitat staff members – was established to lead, implement and monitor project activities and progress (Figure 2).
2. Besides the project coordination team, 10 field teams were established for each of the 10 UoMs, consisting of 10–12 individuals representing municipalities, associations, organizations, cooperatives, clubs, and educational establishments active in their respective UoM (Figure 2). Their role was to assist in collecting information related to each municipality within their respective UoM, participate in extensive consultations, and in general guide and support field-based activities.
3. A detailed training curriculum on life and technical skills was developed by UN-Habitat to conduct workshops for the project coordination team at UoM level (representatives of participating UoMs/municipalities, SDCs and UN-Habitat). In addition, survey questionnaires and templates were developed in Arabic for data collection.
4. Based on the developed training curriculum, the following workshops were conducted between 2019 and 2023:
  - One workshop was conducted to develop the soft skills of the members of the project coordination team, including on communication techniques, community mobilization approaches, meeting moderation techniques, and public speaking techniques. This included the use of a broad range of communication tools, tips and guidelines.
  - One workshop was conducted to develop the planning capacity of the members of the project coordination team, in terms of developing and rolling out the participatory field assessments, including on constituting a representative field team, undertaking stakeholder mapping exercises, etc. Participants were trained on the use of tools and templates, including different diagrams, to outline the criteria for the creation of field teams, and their respective roles.
  - Four workshops were conducted to develop the capacity of the members of the project coordination team through regular coaching and training of trainers (ToT). Topics included the following: initiating and maintaining contacts with local community stakeholders, undertaking primary and secondary data collection, documenting key gathered information and data, and carrying out data analysis. During these workshops, multiple tools were developed together with the field teams, including, among others: a municipal survey questionnaire; field assessment checklists; forms to record field observations and remarks; protocols and guidance for conducting focus group discussions and key informant interviews; problem tree analysis tool; strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis, etc.
  - Ten workshops were conducted to develop the capacity of field teams to use templates and tools to help facilitate the local stakeholders in their respective UoM to set the UoM's vision, identify its strategic directions, and prepare road maps for prioritized strategic directions and sectors for the UoM to focus on.



<sup>3</sup> Representing each of the seven governorates covered by the project.

<sup>4</sup> All UoMs nominated one representative for the project, except for the UoM of Jord El-Qaytaa, which nominated two representatives as focal points at the request of the union's president.

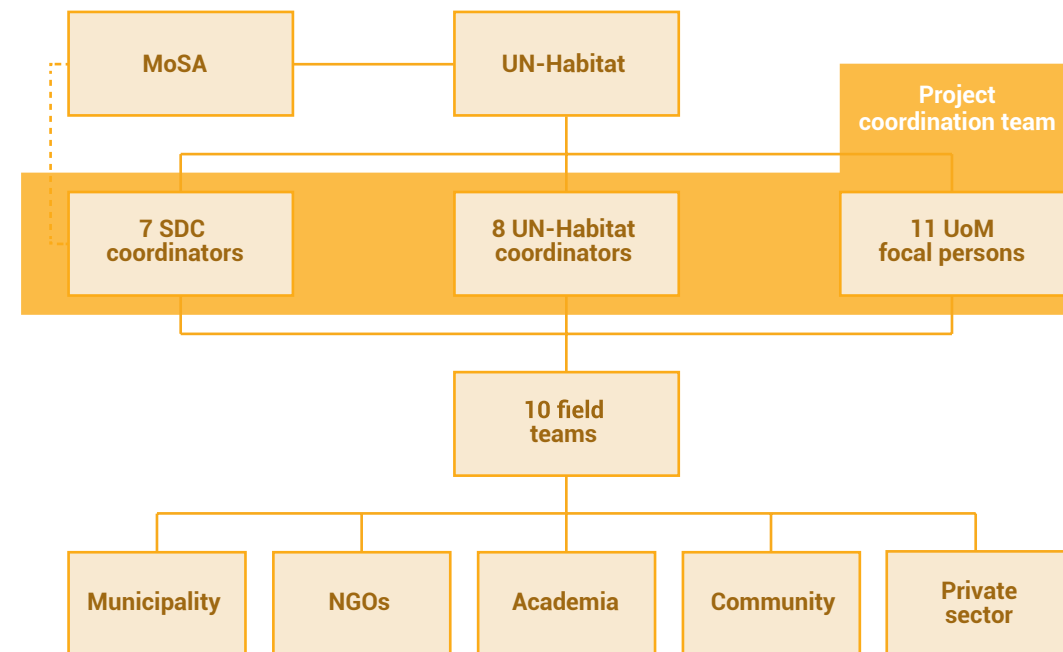


Figure 2. Stakeholders involved in the development of booklets as part of the project.

## Data collection, analysis, and validation

1. Following the workshops, survey questionnaires were filled with each of the 142 municipalities that are part of the 10 targeted UoMs. The surveys aimed to gather general information about municipalities under the 10 UoMs (e.g. population, resources, projects).
2. After filling the surveys, the project coordination team conducted 52 focus group discussions, 61 consultative sessions, and 20 individual meetings with UoM presidents. The purpose of these activities was to collect additional data from different relevant stakeholders and to discuss the situation and challenges of different sectors in the UoMs.
3. Following data collection, the project coordination team met several times to analyse the general local context as well as the services and sectors of each UoM, using the participatory rapid appraisal methodology.<sup>5</sup> Strategic directions were thus formulated to support and enhance the socioeconomic status of each union. Additionally, strengths, weaknesses and available opportunities within all sectors were assessed. Depending on the existing resources and opportunities within each UoM, specific sectors were identified in each UoM, for which clear future directions were defined.
4. With regard to maps included in the booklets, the UN-Habitat Geographic Information Systems (GIS) team supported in the production of a set of general maps for each of the booklets to depict the context, topography and land cover/land use of each UoM. The GIS team also updated the boundaries of the UoMs based on their municipal composition. This was done based on available data from the survey with municipalities, open sources, and other relevant secondary data sources.

Based on the data collected and analysed, a booklet was produced for each of the 10 UoMs, including identified and proposed strategic directions and priority interventions. Thus, 10 UoMs successfully participated in the entire process, resulting in supporting and enhancing their capacities in setting strategic directions focused on socioeconomic needs, with a view to identify evidence-based entry points to enhance the socioeconomic conditions of mainly vulnerable areas affected by the multiple crises.

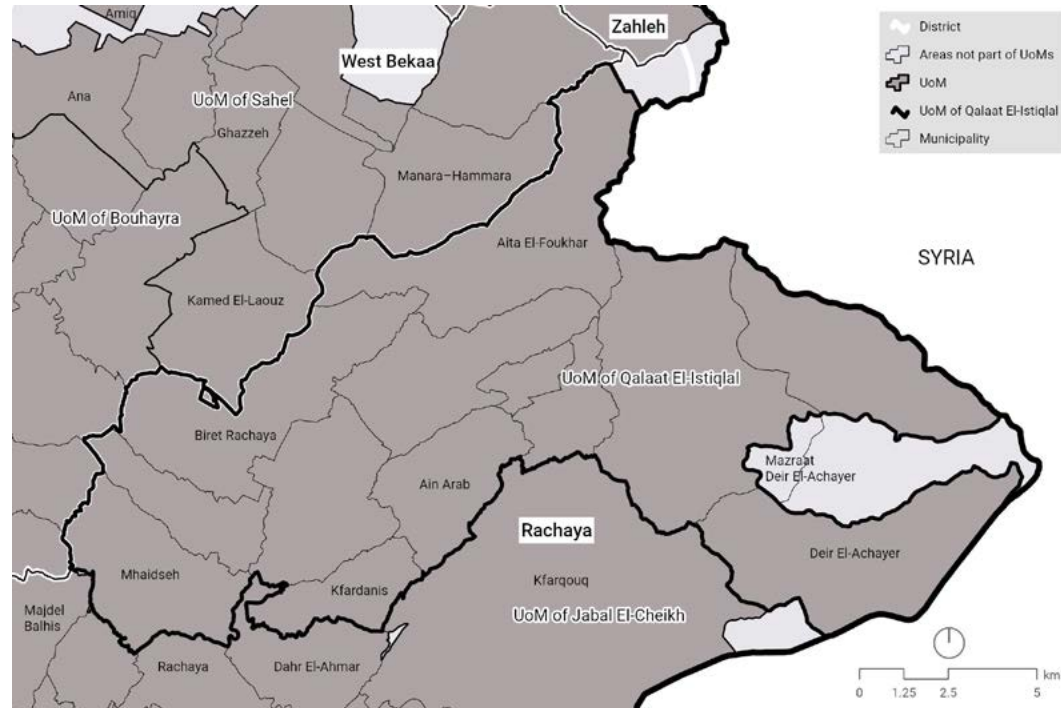
<sup>5</sup> Participatory rapid appraisal is a learning process that empowers people to conduct their own analysis to create the information base they need for participatory planning and action.

# Overview of the Union of Municipalities (UoM) of Qalaat El-Istiqlal

## Geographical location and land cover/land use

Located in Bekaa Governorate, the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal consists of 12 municipalities (Figure 3). The size of the municipal councils of the 12 municipalities varies; some have 9 members (Bakka, Haloua, Deir El-Achayer, Mhaidseh, Ain Arab, Kfar Danis), others have 12

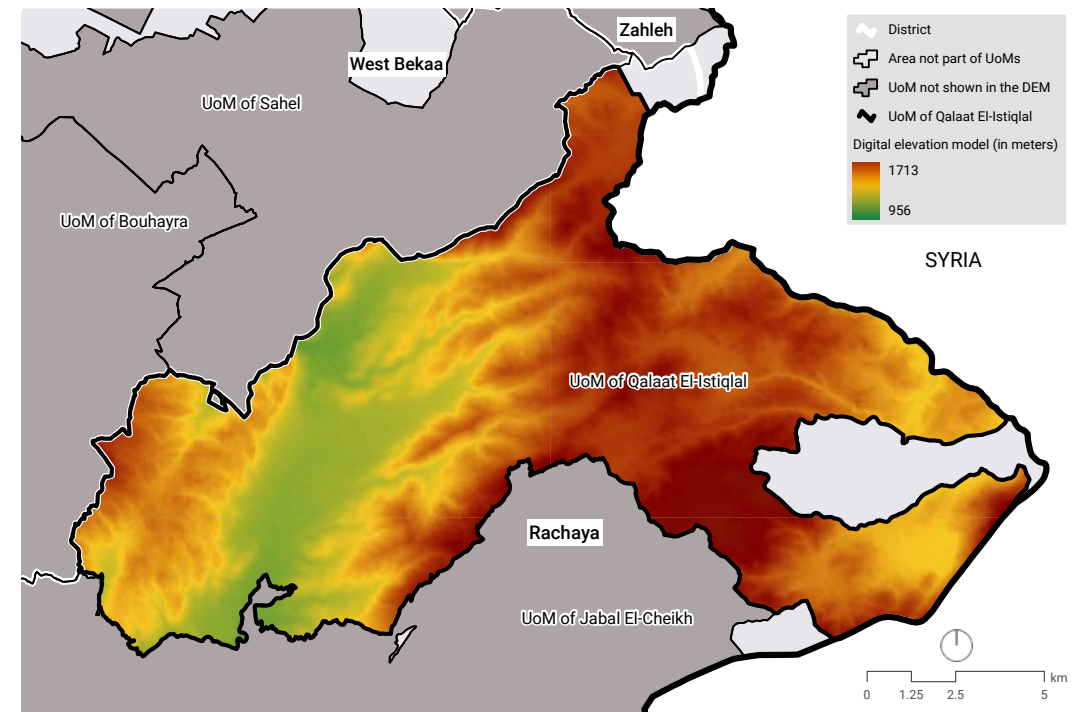
members (Yanta, Mdoukha, Aita El-Foukhar), and others have 15 members (Biret Rachaya, Khirbet Rouha, Rafid). During the course of the project, the municipal council of Khirbet Rouha Municipality resigned and has not been functioning or providing services anymore.



**Figure 3.** UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal with its municipalities.  
 Source: UN-Habitat (2023). The boundaries of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal based on its municipal composition were updated by the UN-Habitat GIS team, relying on available data from the survey with the municipalities, open sources, and other relevant secondary data sources.

The total area of the UoM is approximately 197 square kilometres. Its elevation varies from around 1,100 metres above sea level in Rafid, to around 1,550 metres at the highest point in Yanta (Figure 4). This elevation was estimated within populated towns, but at the level of

uninhabited geographical points, the elevation starts from 975 metres in the village of Falouj and reaches 1,750 metres at point known as the Radio Station in the mountain area of Deir El-Achayer municipality.

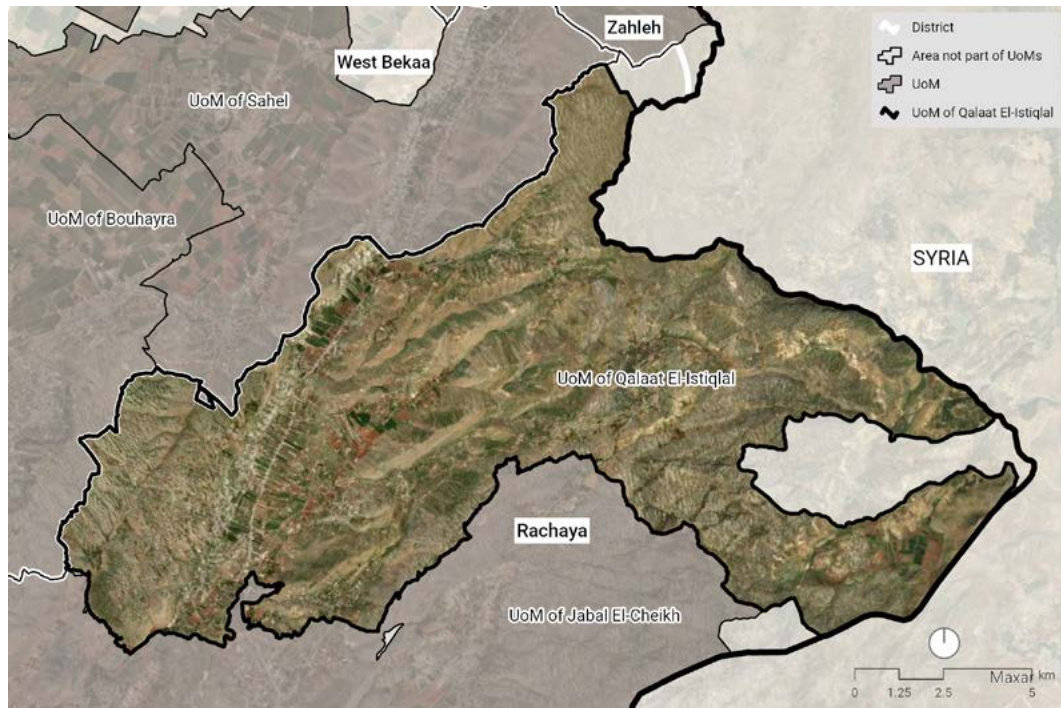


**Figure 4.** Digital elevation model (in metres) for the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal.  
 Source: UN-Habitat (2023). Digital elevation model (DEM) taken from the Advanced Spaceborne Thermal Emission and Reflection Radiometer (ASTER) Global Digital Elevation Model Version 3 (GDEM V3), with a spatial resolution of 30 metres, downloaded from the United States Geological Survey (USGS) website (<https://lpdaac.usgs.gov/products/astgtmv003/>).

The UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, whose name was chosen in reference to the historical site of Rachaya Citadel, is characterized by its distinctive geographical location, as it connects the West Bekaa District to the north (including the UoM of Sahel and the UoM of Bouhayra) with the UoM of Jabal El-Cheikh to the south (Figure 3) through the Masnaa, Rachaya and Hasbaya road. The UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal is connected from all directions to many villages and towns in the Bekaa Governorate and it can be accessed through multiple routes from the western side, via the Kamed El-Laouz–Falouj road in the town of Biret Rachaya. Its access from the northern side is through Masnaa–Rachaya main road that passes through Manara–Hammara and Aita El-Foukhar. From the southern side, access to the union is through the towns of Dahr El-Ahmar and Kfarqouq, via the Kaoukaba–Abou Arab–Mhaidseh road.

The UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal is characterized by its green nature in its valleys surrounded by mountains in Deir El-Achayer that spreads between the eastern and western Lebanese mountain ranges. The union's moderate climate as well as multiple wells and water springs foster the development of agriculture. The UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal also includes several natural reserves, including Jabal Mhaidseh, Kafar Danis, Ain Arab, Aita El-Foukhar, Haloua, Yanta, and Deir El-Achayer – the latter considered to be the largest natural reserve in the union.



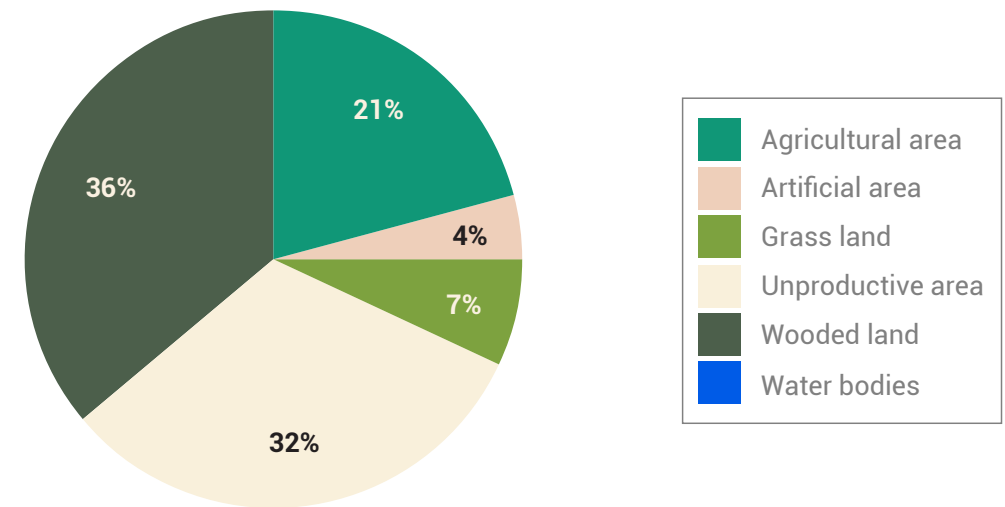


**Figure 5.** Satellite image of UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal. Source: UN-Habitat (2023). The high-resolution satellite image displayed in this map was extracted from Esri online World Imagery.

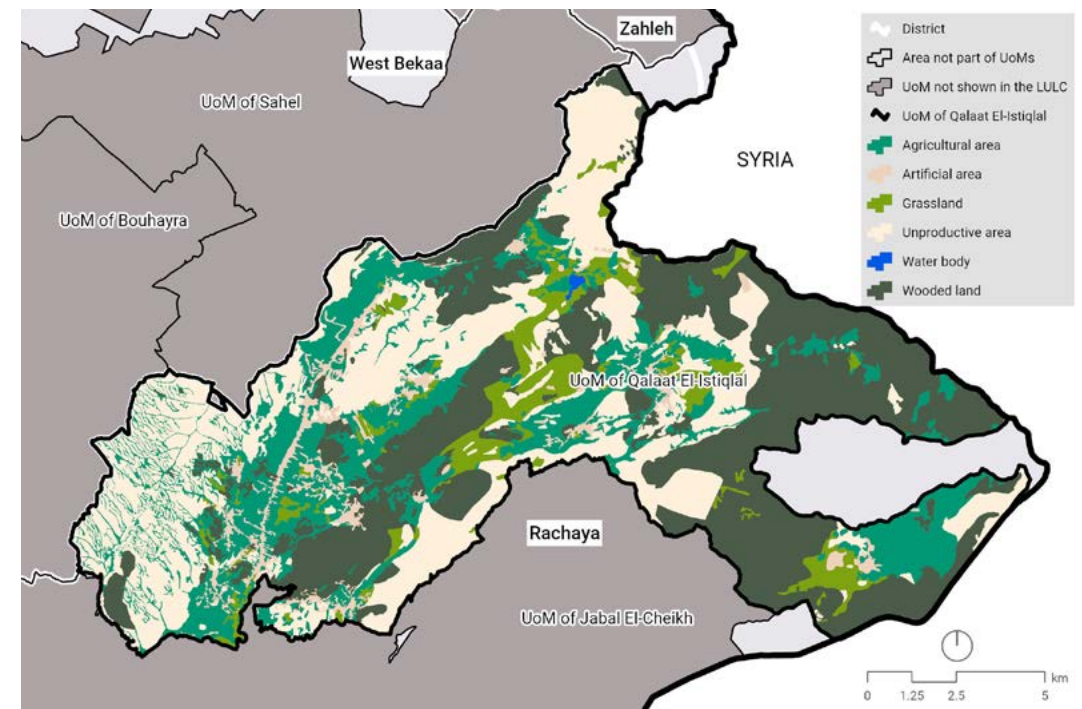
Artificial areas within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal account for 3.98 per cent (7.84 km<sup>2</sup>) of the total area, while wooded lands cover 35.53 per cent (70.02 km<sup>2</sup>) and agricultural areas span 21.46 per cent (42.3 km<sup>2</sup>). Unproductive areas (unused plots) make up 31.82 per

cent (62.7 km<sup>2</sup>), grassland 7.13 per cent (14.05 km<sup>2</sup>), and rivers 0.08 per cent (0.17 km<sup>2</sup>) of the UoM's area (Figures 6 and 7).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The figures are based on the land cover/land use classification system level 1, calculated by the National Center for Remote Sensing in the National Council for Scientific Research in Lebanon (CNRS-L) in 2017. According to that classification, the category "artificial areas" includes urban areas (urban fabric), activity areas (industrial or commercial area, port area, airport), non-built-up areas (dumpsites, landfills, urban extension and/or construction site, urban vacant land), and artificial, non-agricultural vegetated areas (green urban area, and sports and leisure facilities). "Agricultural areas" include field crops, permanent crops, intensive agriculture, and agricultural units. "Wooded land" includes dense wooded land, clear wooded land, scrubland, and burned wooded land. "Grassland" includes both dense and clear grassland. "Unproductive areas" include bare rocks, bare soils, beaches, and dunes.



**Figure 6.** Land cover/land use as a percentage of the total area of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal. Source: Calculation made by UN-Habitat (2023) based on the Land Cover/Land Use Map of Lebanon, scale 1:20000, Classification System Level 1, National Center for Remote Sensing, CNRS-L (2017).



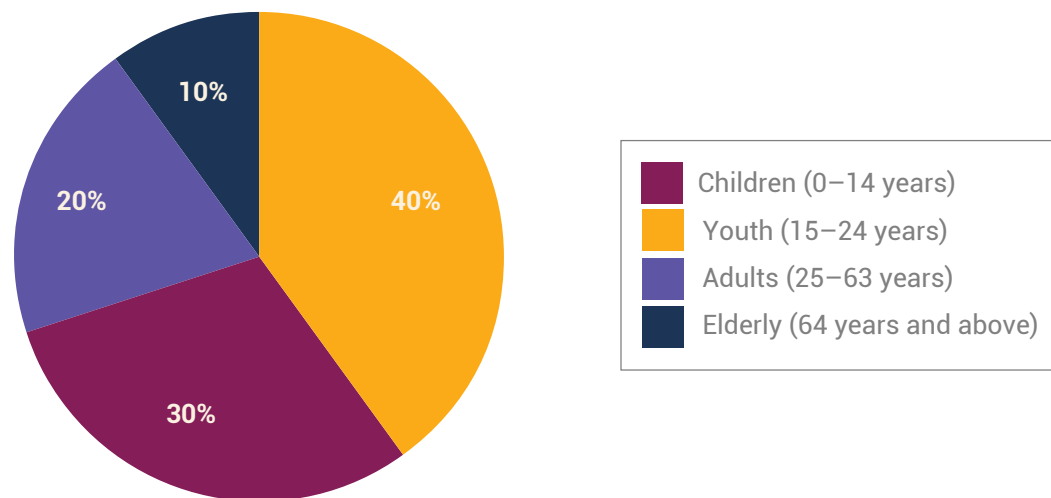
**Figure 7.** Land cover/land use within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal. Source: UN-Habitat (2023), adapted from Land Cover/Land Use Map of Lebanon, scale 1:20000, Classification System Level 1, National Center for Remote Sensing, CNRS-L (2017).



## Population overview

The total population of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal is approximately 38,300, with non-Lebanese (mostly Syrian refugees) constituting around 29 per cent, according to surveys conducted with the 12 municipalities of the union. Syrian refugees live in 12 informal tented settlements in Khirbet Rouha and 17 collective shelters located on the outskirts of the union.

The population of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal is characterized by a relatively high percentage of children and youth, collectively accounting for around 70 per cent of the total population, according to the survey filled by the municipalities' mayors (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** Distribution of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal's population by age.  
Source: Survey conducted with municipalities.

Approximately 30 per cent of the registered population in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal live outside of Lebanon – in Canada, Venezuela and Brazil – according to the survey conducted with the 12 municipalities of the union. The process of emigration started during the 1940s to escape war and poverty. It increased during the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s, with key destination countries being Canada, Venezuela and Brazil, where people emigrated with the aim of gaining more work and education

opportunities. Emigration continued to increase in the 1990s and thereafter, reaching its peak after 2019, due to the worsening economic crisis and the lack of job opportunities. Many Lebanese diasporans support their families and relatives residing in their towns of origin in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, by sending them remittances. These remittances help these families secure their daily needs, at least to a certain degree, in light of the financial challenges brought about by the ongoing economic crisis in the country.

## Basic services: Current state and recommendations for improvement

The state of basic services in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal is considered acceptable, as all services are available, although to varying degrees among sectors and municipalities. Like in the rest of Lebanon, the quality and quantity of basic services have deteriorated due to the ongoing socioeconomic and financial crisis, affecting service provision and maintenance, due to the lack of ability of local authorities to cover operational and maintenance costs.

### Water

The primary water source in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal is provided by springs and private wells in the union's towns. Five towns within the UoM depend on a solar energy (photovoltaic [PV]) systems to pump water to homes and establishments. The drinking water and irrigation networks, which are managed by the Deir El-Achayer Water Authority under the Ministry of Energy and Water, are available in most of the 12 municipalities of the union. However, these networks are old and face frequent malfunctions; they need rehabilitation and maintenance. In addition, water reaches homes intermittently due to power outages.

Within this context, the local stakeholders who were engaged in the assessment and analysis process that informed the production of this booklet recommended that the maintenance of the water networks – along with other basic services described below – is an important factor that can contribute to local economic and social development.

One key aspect that they emphasized is to improve monitoring by local administrations and the relevant ministry to preserve and protect groundwater from pollution. This can be achieved through regular examination of well and spring water. Furthermore, regular maintenance of irrigation and rainwater channels is crucial to protect them from contamination with untreated water. Local stakeholders also recommended the use of PV systems to secure uninterrupted power for the operation of water wells located in the union's municipalities.

In addition, local stakeholders argued that efforts should be directed towards reducing excessive water extraction, which has led to the drying up of many springs in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal. These springs used to provide

drinking water for residents and free irrigation water for crops. This situation has negatively affected the agriculture sector in the union, where irrigation costs now constitute more than half of the total agricultural production cost, according to information received during a consultation meeting with local stakeholders (See "Agriculture" subsection under the "Local Economy and Livelihoods: Current State" section below for more information about this sector).

### Roads and transportation

The condition of roads within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal is considered bad, as most of the main and secondary roads need rehabilitation and paving. Most of the roads also suffer from the lack of sufficient lighting during the night that need maintenance. Most roads also lack the minimum level of traffic safety, as there are no demarcation lines, traffic direction signs, and speed limits, according to mayors, the Zahleh SDC coordinator, and other stakeholders who were consulted with as part of the project. The residents rely on private transportation due to the absence of public transportation.

Therefore, local stakeholders engaged in this project considered it essential to enhance road maintenance and road traffic safety, as well as provide nighttime street lighting – such as through the installation of solar-powered streetlights – to preserve the security of towns and the safety of their residents. Such efforts could contribute to local economic and social development, they argued.

### Buildings and facilities

The structure of buildings and establishments within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal is more or less consistent, with most residential

buildings consisting of one to four floors. Like across Lebanon, many public properties and lands have been encroached upon and regulations violated during construction, particularly in markets and public squares. This has contributed to decreased mobility, high traffic and the absence of green spaces between buildings. The residential buildings and houses in the villages of the union are distinguished by the use of old brick and natural stone as construction materials. In addition, there are some informal tented settlements located on the borders of the route of Kherbet Rouha.

Non-residential buildings and facilities include industrial, commercial and touristic establishments, such as restaurants and small hotels, in addition to buildings of public institutions (municipalities, schools, etc.).

One general recommendation made by local stakeholders who participated in the project was that municipalities and the UoM could limit the unplanned urban sprawl through the development/update and implementation of a proper master plan that covers the whole UoM.

## Electricity

Public electricity supply is available in the municipalities and villages of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal. The infrastructure is in a relatively good condition, but it requires cable insulation to eliminate potential hazards. Some electrical cables have been repeatedly subjected to theft in some villages, which have now found the need for additional transformers due to the increasing population and consequently, an increase in energy consumption. Residents rely on the public electricity supply provided by the Électricité du Liban (EDL) company, in addition to subscribing to private generators and setting up solar power systems due to the long periods of power cuts. The significant shortage of transformers and encroachments on public networks result in frequent network failures and exacerbate conflicts among residents.

Therefore, to empower municipalities to contribute to local economic and social development, local stakeholders who participated in the project considered it essential

to improve the state of the electricity networks, along with other basic services, such as through the supply of additional transformers.

## Sanitation and solid waste management

According to a consultation session with relevant local stakeholders, with the exception of Yanta and Bakka municipalities, the remaining 10 out of 12 municipalities within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal are not connected to sewage networks and only have septic tanks.

There is a wastewater treatment plant in Yanta Municipality. However, the plant operates intermittently due to constant power outages, high diesel costs, and the municipality's inability to cover the operation and maintenance expenses. Moreover, wastewater in the remaining municipalities is collected through tanks and later disposed of in areas far from residential buildings. This has contributed to the pollution of groundwater, soil, and irrigation water canals, consequently having many negative repercussions on public health, the environment, and the agriculture sector.

Thus, in general, sanitation is considered to be one of the sectors in poorest conditions, where networks and extensions to and from homes and buildings are not fully available in most villages and towns of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal. This is due to the lack of planning, enforcement of regulations, and the absence of financial capacity within the municipalities to cover the expenses of extending and connecting sewage from homes to the public network and to establish new treatment plants.

With regard to solid waste management, waste collection methods vary from one town to another within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal. At the time of writing, the municipalities have been collecting monthly fees from each residential unit (about USD 0.5), as they are unable to afford the fuel and other waste collection-related expenses in the UoM.

One key recommendation voiced by local stakeholders who participated in the project with regard to the sanitation situation was to work on

developing an action plan and to urge the relevant official bodies to create sewage networks and treatment plants in the union, adhering to scientific standards and specifications during their construction.

## Telecommunications

Cellular and internet services in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal are below average, due to

the absence of transmission signal towers to cover all parts of the towns in the union. Additionally, there is a lack of maintenance when faults occur, as well as frequent power outages affecting the transmission stations.

Municipalities and UoMs have no control on this sector, which is run by the central government through the Ministry of Telecommunications.

# Social services: Current state and recommendations for improvement

## Health care

Health-care services are available in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal. Dispensaries operate in the following towns: Biret Rachaya, Khirbet Rouha, Rafid, Deir El-Achayer, Mhaidseh and Yanta. These centres offer medical services, first aid, imaging, laboratory tests, and medications, albeit with limited capacity. Their operational expenses are funded through self-generated revenues and occasional assistance from NGOs and donors.

As for hospital care, patients need to access hospitals outside the union, in Zahleh or Beirut, because the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal lacks hospitals. Even the Lebanese Red Cross is absent.

Overall, the health-care services in the union are inadequate to meet the health-care needs of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal communities. They therefore need to seek health care outside of the union increasing the cost of medical bills, especially for patients with chronic conditions, who already have increasingly high medication costs. Additionally, the high transportation costs prevent many from seeking the health-care services they need.

Thus, local stakeholders in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal identified the need to support existing health-care facilities in the union through availing specialized medical staff, necessary equipment, and a stock of both regular and chronic medications to meet the required health-care needs of the population. In this context, they also considered it necessary to

facilitate transportation within and outside the union, enabling access to health-care services at lower cost.

## Education

There are 19 public and private schools across the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal, covering all educational stages: preschool, primary school, middle school, and high school.

Private and public secondary schools exist in Kfar Danis, Deir El-Achayer, Yanta and Rafid. In addition, there is a vocational institute in Khirbet Rouha, offering specializations in hospitality, nursing, accounting and topography. The UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal lacks universities, which puts more financial pressure on university students who are forced to go to Zahleh or West Bekaa for their university studies, especially given the lack of public transportation in the region.

Approximately 95 per cent of Lebanese students receive their education within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal as reported by the education sector stakeholders, while the rest outside of it. Educational services are available for Syrian refugee students in all the towns of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqal.

According to a consultation with relevant education sector stakeholders, the quality of educational services is generally considered good, albeit with varying degrees, which is mainly reflected in consistently positive results in official examinations. Although there are enough school premises, most of them require rehabilitation and equipment

(e.g. related to heating in winter), especially in public schools. Maintenance works in public schools are carried out through a reserved amount provided to the schools by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, in cooperation with international organizations, under the supervision of assigned teachers. Private schools have their own management boards, which manage the maintenance of premises. The UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal also lacks internet services for remote learning due to the power cuts cable theft, and the lack of regular maintenance. Residents face high school fees, particularly in private schools and institutes, including high transportation costs for students who receive education outside their towns.

the necessary facilities and laboratories is also considered as essential.

### Culture and public spaces

On the cultural front, the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal has a significant number of civil society associations and religious institutions (e.g. Dar El-Iftaa Center in Rashaya, the Religious Teaching Body in Khirbet Rouha, the Endowment Committee in Yanta, the Supreme Hope Association in Aita El-Foukhar, football and volleyball teams in Deir El-Achayer Sport Club). All these institutions play a role in engaging local communities in various social, cultural and recreational programmes and activities. However, the ongoing socioeconomic crisis has hindered the continuation of many such activities, due to the high costs associated with transportation and the necessary resources to hold these events/activities.

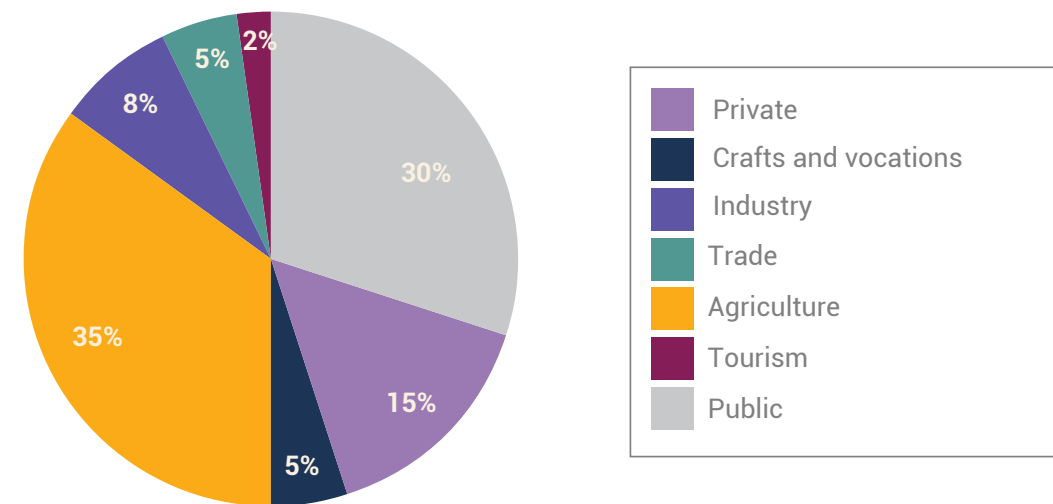
Therefore, local stakeholders noted the need to work on providing safe spaces in the union, which could also help mitigate the psychological impacts of the severe crises on local communities.

Additionally, it is recommended that efforts are undertaken to enhance the role of municipalities in supporting and empowering associations and clubs, involving them in funding and implementing cultural and social initiatives in the union, particularly addressing the needs of young people.

Within this context, local stakeholders engaged in the project argued that efforts are required to support public schools by maintaining their buildings, providing the necessary equipment, improving conditions for distance learning, ensuring fair distribution of teachers among schools, and establishing an academic training centre for teachers. Activating the cultural libraries in municipalities and creating a public library that benefits students and other interested community members are also regarded as essential steps. Furthermore, according to local stakeholders, it is crucial to work on providing subsidized transportation for students in both schools and universities, and supporting the vocational institute in Khirbet Rouha to add new specializations that align with the needs of the local job market. Equipping this institute with

## Local economy and livelihoods: Current state

This section provides an overview of the key local economy and livelihood challenges and needs in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, with a particular focus on the agriculture and tourism sectors, which have been identified through fieldwork and the outcomes of meetings and discussions with relevant parties to provide real opportunities to drive the process of socioeconomic development forward in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal. Recommendations to improve these two sectors will be presented separately in the next section.



**Figure 9.** Distribution of employment by sector in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal. Source: Survey conducted with municipalities.

### Public sector

Approximately 30 per cent of the workforce in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal is employed in the public sector, according to the survey conducted with municipalities within the union (Figure 9). Thus, this sector constitutes a significant source of income for many households in the union. Those employed in the public sector are distributed within the age group of 20 to 64 years, with the largest number being employees in military institutions, falling within the age range of 20 to 45 years. In terms of gender distribution, public sector employees are divided into 60 per cent males and 40 per cent females, according to data collected through the survey with the municipalities of the union.

Public sector employees in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal work in a wide range of institutions, including the military, internal security forces, general security, state security, as well as civil registries, Ogero telecommunication centres,

public schools, municipalities, general positions in public forestry centres, civil defence, SDCs, water establishment, power stations, etc. These institutions are located either within the union's municipalities or outside of the union; in the latter case, employees need to incur an additional financial burden related to transportation to and from their job locations.

### Private sector

The private sector represents around 15 per cent of the workforce in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, according to the survey conducted with municipalities within the union (Figure 9). It includes employment in private schools, companies, banks, restaurants and other establishments located within or outside the union. Similar to the public sector, the workforce employed in the private sector is divided into 60 per cent males and 40 per cent females.



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## Crafts and vocations

The percentage of workers in different crafts and vocations is estimated to be around 5 per cent of the total workforce, according to the survey conducted with municipalities within the union (Figure 9). In terms of age groups, it is estimated – based on survey results – that 10 per cent are below the age of 15, while 50 per cent of these workers are young (18–24) and 35 per cent are older individuals (25 and above). In terms of gender distribution, males reportedly make up the majority (80 per cent), working in construction-related fields (painting, tiling, electrics, plumbing) as well as in crafts and industries like pottery, carpentry and blacksmithing. The remaining 20 per cent are reportedly females working in private shops or in such fields as housekeeping, sewing, hairstyling, female adornment, and food manufacturing.

## Agriculture

Agriculture constitutes the most major source of income for families in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, as about 35 per cent of the total workforce works in this sector, the majority (90 per cent) of whom are males, according to information from the union president and the survey filled out by the municipalities. In terms of age distribution of the workers in the agriculture sector, 20 per cent are estimated to be young (15–24), 65 per cent adults (25–63), and 15 per cent elderly (64 and above), according to the survey.

Most agricultural areas in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal are privately owned and sporadically located across the union. The estimated area of agricultural lands is about 42.3 km<sup>2</sup> (21.46 per cent) of the union's total area (Figures 6 and 7). Various crops are cultivated, including apples, beans, cabbage, cauliflower, cherries, cucumbers, grapes, olives, peaches, pears, peas, potatoes and tomatoes. Most crops are cultivated in the plains of Biret Rachaya, Yanta and Deir El-Achayer.

Beekeeping is also a popular sector in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal. In addition, livestock farming is practiced in 95 livestock farms in the UoM.

Many farmers who participated in consultative meetings conducted during the project mentioned that the main challenges in the agriculture sector include the reliance on

traditional irrigation methods, drying-up of springs, the need to transition to rain-fed agriculture, etc. Additional challenges include the high costs of seeds, fertilizers, advanced irrigation system, and marketing (sales, packaging, branding, etc.). Moreover, there is water scarcity during the summer season and a lack of crop diversification.

## Industry

In the absence of large-scale factories and/or production plants, only a small percentage of workers are engaged in the industry sector in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, reaching a maximum of 5 per cent of the workforce, according to the survey conducted with municipalities within the union (Figure 9). The primary industries are focused on the production of cheese and other dairy products (e.g. *labneh*), as well as that of food items.

As mentioned in a consultative meeting with relevant stakeholders in the union, the industry sector faces challenges due to frequent power outages, transportation costs, the need for machinery development and modernization, and competition from imported foreign goods.

## Trade

Commercial establishments are present in most municipalities of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, with the majority being small-sized businesses. There are around 295 shops in the union, mainly including clothing retail shops; supermarkets; butcheries; bakeries; fuel stations; and shops selling vegetables, building materials, agricultural products, furniture, electronics, etc., according to a consultation meeting with relevant stakeholders.

The trade sector faces similar challenges to those of the industry sector, including persistent power outages – leading to spoilage of perishable goods at times and increased energy costs for private generators in some cases – and competition from imported foreign goods. Other challenges within this sector include decreased sales due to the reduced purchasing power of customers and noticeable investment decline as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing economic crisis, and exchange rate volatility, impeding proper pricing aligned with costs and purchasing power.

## Tourism

According to a consultation meeting with stakeholders, relatively low revenues are generated from tourism activities, and tourism does not constitute a good source of income for families in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, as about 2 per cent of the total workforce works in this sector, despite the presence of 18 archaeological sites and several religious shrines. In addition, there is an ancient Roman temple located in Deir El-Achayer, which should be flagged on the national tourism map due to its historical and archaeological importance.

Municipal leaders and stakeholders within the union explained the shortcomings in the tourism sector by highlighting the inadequate infrastructure and the lack of an effective communication and marketing plan for the union, both at local and national levels, which could guide advertising and promotion of as well as investments in tourism projects.

## Remittances from abroad

According to the survey with the municipalities, around 30 per cent of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal's registered population have emigrated over the years. Not all expatriates come from affluent backgrounds; some are well-off, while others are self-sufficient and able to support themselves and their families. The overwhelming majority of expatriates provide financial support to their families and relatives, especially considering the ongoing socioeconomic crisis.

Some expatriates support local authorities by funding municipal services due to the inability of the state to afford them in light of the Lebanese currency devaluation. These services include waste collection and transportation; support for municipality-owned electricity generators by purchasing fuel; aid to the poorest families in the municipalities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic; and purchase of chronic medications for patients due to shortages and price increases.





## Recommendations for sectors identified as key for future local socioeconomic development

Based on the consultative meetings and workshops held with representatives from municipalities within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, there was consensus on adopting the following vision for local socioeconomic development:

**“ Qalaat El-Istiqlal: an area boasting a vibrant youth population, that enjoys a diverse and robust agricultural and good-quality industrial sector, and is unique in its rural and eco-tourism sectors. ”**

To achieve this vision, it was recommended that municipalities, civil society, and the private sector must come together, along with local communities, working collaboratively to foster local socioeconomic development based on the union's assets and available opportunities. According to the results of the process followed during the project within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, it was suggested that there should be a focus on developing the agriculture and tourism sectors due to the available human, natural and material resources that can be harnessed and enhanced.

Working towards achieving agricultural and tourism development necessitates creating a road map for each sector (see the subsections “Proposed Agriculture Sector Road Map” and “Proposed Tourism Sector Road Map” below) that includes multiple stages to be implemented within a logical timeframe and according to the availability of funding. The road map for both the agriculture and tourism sectors was envisioned to encompass strategic interventions linked to four key factors or aspects:

1. Infrastructure
2. Existing institutional framework
3. Natural resources
4. Local human resources

The below section includes an overview of the identified strategic directions for the available productive sectors within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, with a focus on the agriculture and tourism sectors, both of which present opportunities for sound local socioeconomic development. These directions have been identified and proposed based on the analysis of the existing situation of these sectors presented in the previous section, which relied on information provided from different local stakeholders through a participatory approach.

As for other sectors (such as industry, trade, and crafts and vocations), they will certainly continue to play a role in the socioeconomic development of cities and towns of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal. However, local stakeholders engaged in the project considered that these other sectors can also be developed in a manner that aligns with the vision and directions of the union with regard to agriculture and tourism. The industry sector, for example, can contribute to enhancing the agriculture and tourism sectors by playing a complementary role. Thus, local stakeholders involved in the project considered it crucial to work on safeguarding the small industries present in the union and developing certain manufacturing crafts through specialized training to enhance competencies and skills. This requires securing alternative and cost-effective sources of electricity, supporting industry owners, protecting local production from competition, and securing markets for both local and international distribution of the products.

To activate the trade sector, local stakeholders participating in the project argued that it is essential to encourage investment in the sector to attract young individuals and discourage their migration. They identified a need to protect small- and medium-sized commercial establishments in the union. Furthermore, they proposed promoting individual online-based trading initiatives; incentivizing youth and women to establish small commercial projects through networking and coordination with organizations working in this context; and training traders in the union on the fundamentals of sales, purchasing, marketing, feasibility study for their projects, and development of income-generating ventures. They considered such steps as helpful to create and provide employment opportunities for the youth of the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal.





If the union and the relevant municipalities prioritize the development of the agriculture and tourism sectors, it is imperative that other essential social and basic services are also available. These services help retain Lebanese citizens in their towns and villages and attract other groups to work in the mentioned sectors. Moreover, if the union intends to attract investments from outside the region, it is

essential that basic services like roads, water and electricity are available. Additionally, it is crucial to enhance health-care services in existing centres and clinics by supplying them with medical equipment and medications, in addition to supporting them with a complete emergency response plan. A sustainable plan should also be implemented for solid waste management throughout the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal.

## Agriculture

As shown above in the presentation of the current state of sectors within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, including their available resources and potential opportunities, the agriculture sector presents a significant and real opportunity for the union's inhabitants to improve their economic situation and increase employment opportunities for both the youth and families. While many families engage in agriculture as a non-professional practice, considering it as a secondary and additional source of income, certain interventions, programmes and projects can lead to a qualitative leap in this sector. This requires the concerted efforts and capabilities of municipalities, civil society institutions, and the private sector, as well as funding from donor organizations, in order to enable the work towards achieving sustainable agricultural development.

According to local stakeholders engaged in the project, the process of developing the agriculture sector requires interventions at the infrastructure level, such as opening and rehabilitating agricultural roads that enable people to access and cultivate their lands. Water was also considered as a fundamental element for agricultural development, which necessitates municipalities and other relevant entities to work on protecting groundwater, increasing water reserves, establishing modern irrigation systems, and striving to conserve rainwater. This includes recycling used household water and encouraging farmers to use treated wastewater for irrigation. It was also suggested to supply agricultural lands with irrigation water by supporting the cost of water pumping from municipal and public wells, as many farmers cannot afford the irrigation costs. Local stakeholders also argued that it is essential to consider and work towards finding alternative means of obtaining irrigation water. This could

involve capturing winter water in ponds or reservoirs, adopting drip irrigation methods, and creating reservoirs to collect rainwater in strategic locations, such as agricultural areas.

At the level of human resources, local stakeholders who participated in the project considered it important to activate existing agricultural cooperatives (such as for beekeeping and livestock), train farmers and strengthen agricultural guidance, and empower farmers with modern agricultural knowledge and technical expertise. Supporting farmers in marketing their agricultural products by facilitating the source-to-market connection, training livestock breeders to produce and use locally produced fodder to reduce imported feed consumption, and taking steps to improve animal health were highlighted. The opportunity to train unemployed youth in agricultural skills to provide them with employment opportunities and contribute to reducing delinquent behaviour was also identified. It was argued that these steps can contribute to stimulating and developing agricultural and animal production. Additionally, technical programmes offered by donor organizations and relevant official institutions, such as ministries, were regarded to play a crucial role in these efforts.

To invigorate the agriculture sector, local stakeholders considered that it is also important to create a brand for packaging and exporting local agricultural products nationally and internationally. Moreover, according to local stakeholders, it is essential to introduce food products that align with the union's nature and characteristics. Furthermore, considering the use of renewable energy sources was highlighted to help mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Local stakeholders also emphasized the necessity of focusing on animal husbandry by activating veterinary care, training farmers on administering appropriate medications, conducting regular check-ups, and ensuring the well-being of livestock. Additionally, nurturing beekeeping and conducting honey inspections prior to marketing were highlighted as crucial aspects to consider.

From the above recommendations, it is evident that opportunities for agriculture sector development are available within the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal. Local stakeholders engaged in the project argued that it is essential for all municipalities and relevant stakeholders in the union to work collectively and coordinate their efforts. To initiate this process, it was suggested to establish an entity or committee of agricultural stakeholders at the union level. This entity should include representatives from municipalities, agricultural cooperatives,

civil society associations, farmers and the private sector. This entity was envisioned to be responsible for creating a road map for local agricultural development, built upon multiple and progressive stages. Each stage would involve a set of programmes and interventions that address agricultural infrastructure and human skill development, considering a logical timeline. This entity should also engage with governmental, non-governmental and international supporting organizations to disseminate and promote the agreed-upon road map and priority projects. This entity could establish subcommittees to facilitate communication with a broader range of supporting entities.

Local stakeholders also argued that agriculture can play a fundamental role in boosting the tourism sector, focusing on restaurants that can benefit from the region's production of staple and renewable crops.





# Proposed agriculture sector road map

| Level of difficulty to implement | Budget to implement |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| High                             | High                |
| Moderate                         | Moderate            |
| Low                              | Low                 |

Short time to achieve

- Establishing an agricultural committee within the UoM to engage with stakeholders
- Activating coordination and collaboration between relevant ministries and municipalities

Medium time to achieve

Relying on solar energy as a source for operating wells for irrigation

Enhancing the work of agricultural cooperatives and activating their role

Training youth and women on agricultural topics and modern techniques

Guiding youth to reduce migration

Activating the relationship with expatriates and involving them in financing and marketing projects

Collaborating with ministries and municipalities to establish a sustainable plan for infrastructure maintenance

Building a strong relationship with the Ministry of Agriculture and enhancing collaboration

Collaborating with civil defence and other relevant authorities to develop and implement a comprehensive plan for fire prevention and control

Training residents on food processing and home-based food production

Activating agricultural guidance and training

Providing clean water for irrigation

Involving local development-oriented NGOs in the collaboration process

Activating municipal and central government accountability to halt encroachments on public properties, forests and woodlands through stringent monitoring, legal measures, and imposing penalties

Conserving the natural resources in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal and leveraging their potential for sustainable development

Developing and implementing awareness campaigns to encourage residents to engage in agricultural work

Constructing and maintaining agricultural roads

Establishing relationships with existing technical institutes to facilitate agricultural research initiatives

Protecting groundwater from pollution

Developing and implementing advertising and media campaigns to highlight the importance of agricultural products in the union

Treating sewage water and using it for irrigation of specific crops

Working on establishing new specialized agricultural and livestock cooperatives

Preserving soil by establishing proper waste disposal sites

Encouraging youth to participate in agricultural cooperatives and enter the job market

Establishing modern irrigation systems for agriculture

Establishing relationships with donor organizations to secure funding and resources for the implementation of projects, ensuring successful collaboration and project execution

Creating reserves to preserve natural resources

Preventing the disposal and burning of waste on agricultural lands

Integrating the use of modern technology in agriculture

Striving to establish centres for agricultural training and guidance

Developing and implementing municipal regulations to conserve resources and natural areas

Long time to achieve

## Infrastructure

## Institutional framework

## Natural resources

## Human resources

## Tourism

The above analysis of the current state of the tourism sector in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal has shown that the sector does not play a fundamental role in the local economy, though it has the potential to do so if the necessary investments are made and steps are taken, given the presence of touristic sites in the union. The towns and villages of the UoM are a hub to many important archaeological, historical and religious sites. The union is also rich with forests. In addition, many of its residents possess skills in agriculture and agrifood production, which can enrich the local economy with agricultural products; this may attract tourists interested in home-made food products and rural life experience in general.

One key step identified by local stakeholders involved in the project was maintaining and protecting of natural reserves within Deir El-Achayer. Moreover, they recommended that it is necessary to activate ecotourism by protecting the existing forests and promoting the sites that have high environmental importance through media campaigns. The preservation and promotion (also through media campaigns) of archaeological, historical and other cultural sites were also highlighted. Moreover, local stakeholders emphasized the importance of working on providing basic tourism infrastructure, such as creating guesthouses.

Additionally, local stakeholders argued that it is necessary to build and empower local capacities to keep up with the process of revitalizing the tourism sector, which entails training human resources, especially the youth.

An important initial step that was identified by local stakeholders was for the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, in collaboration with civil society organizations, to seek funding, not necessarily large in scale, to develop a realistic tourism plan based on the available resources mentioned above. The plan should propose a realistic timeframe, considering the existing challenges in terms of infrastructure and institutional framework, as well as the required duration for capacity development. Moreover, the plan must include a fundamental aspect that focuses on formulating appropriate policies and legal frameworks for preserving natural and heritage resources. The plan must include sufficient flexibility to allow for its implementation

in multiple stages, based on priorities and the available financial resources for all interventions. It should also take into consideration the economic and financial conditions prevailing in Lebanon.

Local stakeholders engaged in the project argued that while preparing the strategic tourism plan, the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal, in collaboration with the public and private sectors in the union, can initiate some activities and interventions that can stimulate the tourism sector, such as:







- Establishing a tourism committee that includes representatives from municipalities, the union, civil society and youth associations, as well as other interested parties, whose task will be to coordinate and communicate with relevant entities in the tourism sector. The committee can also engage with expatriates and seek funding for small projects.
- Identifying and mapping natural, heritage, cultural and historical tourist sites. University graduates proficient in GIS can be enlisted for this purpose.
- Working on promoting the union through the media and positioning it on the national tourism map. University students and some commercial institutions can be involved in creating a tourism marketing plan (posters, brochures, advertisements on TV and social media).
- Encouraging municipalities and local associations to establish and maintain walking trails within forests and woodlands.
- Creating guesthouses, especially in homes that have unused rooms.
- Reviving and developing the local cottage industry, as well as agricultural and food manufacturing.
- Activating cultural, recreational and sports activities in the union and organizing annual festivals that attract expatriates with origins from the union's towns to encourage them to invest and support the tourism sector in the union.

Besides developing the tourism sector, the importance of integrating the tourism and agriculture sectors was also highlighted.







# Proposed tourism sector road map

| Level of difficulty to implement   | Budget to implement  |
|--|--|
|  High     |  High     |
|  Moderate |  Moderate |
|  Low      |  Low      |

Short time to achieve

-  Building a strong relationship with the Ministry of Tourism and enhancing cooperation
-  Establishing a local committee within the UoM to communicate with stakeholders




Medium time to achieve

-  Maintaining roads leading to landmarks and tourist areas
-  Relying on solar energy as a source to provide energy for tourist areas and facilities

-  Enhancing collaboration between municipalities and the private sector
-  Striving to develop a tourism plan for the union
-  Involving local NGOs dedicated to local development in the tourism planning process
-  Building relationships with existing universities to support tourism guidance for university students

Long time to achieve

-  Providing basic services in the union (clean water, electricity, roads, sanitation, solid waste collection, etc.)
-  Striving to establish a fixed transportation link from major cities to the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal to promote tourism
-  Ensuring human resources for the protection and preservation of tourist and archaeological sites

-  Activating municipal and official accountability to prevent encroachments on tourist landmarks, forests, woodlands, springs, rivers, etc.
-  Building relationships with donor organizations to facilitate project implementation
-  Working on increasing and incentivizing investments in tourism projects

-  Preserving the natural resources in the UoM of Qalaat El-Istiqlal and investing in them
-  Protecting and maintaining existing rivers and springs
-  Limiting urban sprawl at the expense of areas of natural and cultural value
-  Preserving and protecting the existing archaeological and heritage sites in the union
-  Establishing reserves to conserve natural resources and attract visitors and tourists
-  Developing and implementing municipal regulations to conserve natural resources and areas

-  Training and empowering youth to provide tourism services
-  Training residents in food processing and local food production
-  Organizing regular tourist festivals
-  Preparing and implementing recurrent awareness campaigns to encourage locals to engage in the tourism development process
-  Creating and executing advertising and media campaigns about touristic sites and tourism activities in the union
-  Encouraging families to establish guesthouses and rooms to enhance local tourism
-  Activating relations with expatriates and encouraging them to invest in tourism projects

Infrastructure

Institutional framework

Natural resources

Human resources

## Conclusion

The developed road maps in the 10 booklets clearly show that advancing local socio-economic development in the 10 unions be it in the agriculture, industry, or tourism sectors is indeed a complex and lengthy process, yet not impossible. This path requires collective and proper local strategic visioning coupled with clear commitment by all stakeholders and serious efforts at different levels, in addition to significant financial resources and solid coordination local structures and mechanisms.

It is also evident from the road maps that UoMs, with the contribution from municipalities enrolled, could initiate primary steps that do not require significant funding but still support and contribute to the implementation of the overall vision on the long run.

It should also be clear to the unions and to the other local actors that the implementation of the road maps requires collective efforts from all. This includes local communities, municipalities, UoMs, SDCs, civil society organizations, and the private sector. To facilitate this collaboration, it's proposed to create a local advisory body (committee) for each identified sector. It is advised that the committee to be established by the UoM and include representatives of local public and private entities and institutions. The main role of these committees will be to lead and develop practical action plans to commence the implementation of the road map for each respective sector. Members of these committees must commit to providing the time and efforts necessary to achieve progress at the level of each sector.

The next step would entail that each committee individually contacts concerned ministries under each sector to learn more about the ministries' strategies and plans and their financial and human capacity to support and guide the union in the process of tourism, industry, and/or agricultural development, especially with regard to developing local strategies for the three sectors.

Based on outcomes of the meetings with relevant ministries, the designated committees would make the necessary contacts with relevant universities and donors to seek the potential financial and technical support aiming to developing a strategy and an executive plan for each sector.

Realistically speaking and with the commitment of local actors, the above-mentioned tasks from the creation of local committees to establishing partnerships to identifying entities supporting the development of the sector strategy, should not exceed a period of six months. The strategy to be prepared for each sector is expected to propose a detailed doable business plan with a reasonable timeline and a clear budget.