

## CULTURAL CENTER/ LIBRARY OF NAHR IBRAHIM : A KEY ELEMENT OF SOCIAL COHESION



**INTERCULTURAL MINORITIES YOUTH**  
**COMMUNITY TRAINING DIVERSITY JOBS**  
**CAPACITY INCLUSION EDUCATION**

### 1. Context

Nahr Ibrahim is a Lebanese town located in the Byblos district. With approximately 4 000 inhabitants, the city is not only a tourist destination but also a cultural one. Recently, around 1 300 Syrian refugees have flown into the city, causing a surge in illiteracy, causing concerns about the risk of seeing the rise of a future generation full of anger, and characterised by unemployment and poverty.



## 2. Nahr Ibrahim and culture

The Municipality of Nahr Ibrahim collaborates with the public Cultural Centre to promote sustainable education, gender and non-discrimination, the rights of children, the fight against xenophobia and how to deal with strangers, the subject of accepting each other (non-racial, sectarian and social discriminations, etc...), protection of cultural heritage of each community through the protection of old houses, preservation of traditional food and the wearing of traditional clothes and customs, and by sharing traditional songs and old games.

## 3. Goals and project implementation

### 1.1. Main aim and specific goals

The aim of this project is to promote values of openness and tolerance among the Lebanese and Syrian communities in Nah Ibrahim, to improve the relationship across cultures, and to encourage peace so that the society rise on the path of modernity and modernization.

In addition to that, it aims to increase interactions between political, economic, social and cultural opinions from various backgrounds, to confront them with the knowledge and experiences of others, especially when it comes to Syrian refugees, and to promote broad cooperation among the members of society on the developmental section.

Specific goals include increasing the degrees literacy and knowledge of Lebanese and Syrian children, and fighting against ignorance, illiteracy, and violence, to turn these children into successful men and women with a healthy lifestyle. An emphasis is put on teaching the new generation about nature and protection of the environment.

### 1.2. Development of the project



### Main actions carried out

As for now, the Cultural Centre mainly conducts educational recreational activities for Syrian and Lebanese children throughout the year: activities on heritage, customs and traditions, eating, activities on gender, children's rights, environment, tolerance with others, xenophobia, memory of war, among others.

In 2010, in cooperation with the Province of Barcelona and Unities Cities and Local Governments, a Public Library Section was established within the Cultural Centre.

**IN THE FUTURE, THE PUBLIC CULTURAL CENTER OF NAHR IBRAHIM AIMS TO OFFER A GREAT RANGE OF SERVICES WHICH WILL INCLUDE A WHOLE CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL, AND PHYSICAL COMPLEX, DEDICATED TO WOMEN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ELDERLY.**

It is composed of a library (Its logo says: "A Country who Reads is a Country who Lives"), which contains around 6000 books classified according to Dewey's World, documentary, novels and children books in Arabic, English and French. They are classified according to topics (ecosystem, biodiversity, alternative energy, pollution, wildlife, medicinal herbs, agriculture ...), and include albums, storybooks and novels for children from age 4 to 14. In 2014, the library was also fully equipped with computers.

The books in the library were donated from a number of institutions: the French Institute, Sabeel Society Association, the Ministry of Culture, and Nahr Ibrahim Municipality. In addition, in August 2916, the library received 397 children books in French, Arabic and English, donated by the Italian Human Land Organization, in cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

A cooperation agreement was signed recently with the school of Mrs. Um El Nour (Al-Aqiba), and Donbosco School, to strengthen the relationship between the public library and nearby public and private schools.





In addition to the library, the centre host various types of activities, some of which are summed up below:

- **Building bridges for communication**

Lebanon and the municipality of Aubagne, in France, engaged into a cooperation between 10/2/2018 and 17/2/2018 to celebrate French and Francophone Week with children from the area, including Syrian refugees. This cooperation could take place after Ms. Katia Mahfouz took two weeks of training in public library management in several French libraries in 2012 (in Marseille, Aubagne, Aix en Provence, Martigues), during which she met with French writers (children's literature), painters, owners of publishing houses, librarians, and visited French book fairs. Since then, the relationship with the secretary of the French Aubagne Library has continued.

- **National reading week with the Ministry of Culture**

Every year, the Nahr Ibrahim Public Library celebrates the national reading week by organising various educational activities for public and private schools over a period of one month, focusing on the integration of the Syrian community within the local community.

The week's schedule included a movie on St. Marcelino, a very interesting story about an old character, Haplan that all children could enjoy, as well as workshops to turn cartoon animals into puppets and adapt the stories into a play. There were also successful lessons to teach the alphabets in a humorous way, called "Madness of Letters".

- **Language activities**

Lessons are held on the history of Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac language, and intensive courses are taught in Italian and Spanish, with a specialized professor.

- **Theatrical performances**

Theatre plays are set up on a series of topics, such as the environment, desertification, forest protection, recycling, and respect for others.



- **Horse-riding festival**

This festival took place after Mrs. Katia described to the children the story of the oppressed horse and explained to them the story of the authentic Arabian horse, its distinctive physical characteristics and its ethical character: full of patience, courage, acumen and sincerity. It gathered around 150 children of all ages and nationalities.

Other activities also include: Astronomy lessons; guitar and piano lessons; computer courses; writing and scientific research workshops; help with homework and preparation to official exams for intermediate and high school students (socioeconomic courses, life sciences); celebration of national and religious holiday celebrations; exhibitions (in Arabic, French and English).

**TO IMPLEMENT THIS PROJECT, THE MUNICIPALITY AND ITS PARTNERS HAD TO OVERCOME STRUCTURAL FINANCIAL CHALLENGES, AND HAD TO FIND SOLUTIONS TO GATHER PUBLIC SERVICES IN ONE PLACE TO RESPOND MORE EFFECTIVELY TO THE NEEDS OF BOTH THE LOCAL POPULATION AND INFLUX OF SYRIAN REFUGEES.**

Specific activities also take place on Saturdays: an hour for a story, and games such as game of Arabesque, the old Lebanese, and games with Syrian-Palestinian proverbs.

The Ministry of Culture is a partner of the cultural centre since 2010. Other partners include: The province of Barcelona and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the Ministry of Social Affairs; Anna Lindh Foundation, the French COBIAC (in charge of training session), and Lebanon forums ZFD and civil peace service.

The project total budget is estimated at \$ 60,000. During its implementation, the project had to face a main obstacle: the structural budget deficit of Lebanese municipalities, and lack of government incentives and plans to support local economic activities.



## 4. Impacts

### 1.1. Direct impacts

#### Impacts on the local government

Through this project, Nahr Ibrahim was able to achieve sustainable development in the region through promoting education, culture and social activities. It has thus built the capacity to improve the quality of services for displaced Syrians. It enhanced the competence of municipal units to manage and control administrations more efficiently, and increased cooperation and coordination among the municipalities and local communities that are hosting refugees.

#### Impact on culture and on local cultural actors

This project introduced both the Lebanese population and displaced Syrian population to different civilizations, new information, new technologies, new languages, human rights, and gender equality. It brought the local communities together, by targeting especially young people, women, the elderly, and displaced Syrians.

The project improved the efficiency, effectiveness and capacity building in the field of cultural development, and improved the performance of local actors so that they can cope better with the number of Syrian refugee. It has created real opportunities for public-private partnerships in the sectors of culture, education, and social services, and helped entrepreneurs to cooperate and coordinate better, to play an active role in supporting municipalities to develop such plans and to ensure the project's sustainability.

#### Impact on the territory and population

The implementation of this project has led to the creation of 40 job opportunities, especially for women, after they followed trainings on computer skills, technical fixing, and to launch their own creations.





More than 80 Syrian children followed trainings, especially French and English classes, allowing them to enter the Lebanese school system and to follow educational programs at the same pace as Lebanese children.

Local citizens have also benefited from the services proposed by the centre, in particular the intensive technical and administrative courses that are proposed to learn how to face and respond to the basic needs of Syrian refugees. The centre activities also contributed to preserve the cultural heritage of the town, especially by raising awareness among the new generation.

## 1.2. Evaluation

The project was awarded several distinctions:

- Best Library Secretary 2012;
- Assessments from Sabeel Association and Anna Lindh Foundation;
- German Association of War Memory Writing Professionals
- Evaluation from public and private schools and from the Jbeil District Court
- Certificates from the Ministry of education
- Medals of appreciations
- In 2014, Mrs. Katia Mahfouz, the Secretary of the Public Library, was honoured by the Italian Human Land Organisation - Lebanese Ministry of Culture - Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture - Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

## 1.3. Key factors

The cooperation among all participants was key in the realisation of rights and gender equality. It also facilitated the implementation by municipalities of strategic plans to improve the long-term cooperation between active and qualified citizens in the field of local development, especially with regard to the target groups.



The fact to have created a unified public cultural centre, that encompass local social, cultural and educational activities for both local and displaced Syrian communities in a single place, was another success critical factor.

#### 1.4. Continuity

The project is continuing under the supervision of the Municipality of Nahr Ibrahim and the Ministry of Culture. It is aimed to expand further in order to become a multicultural centre, with additional activities dedicated to women education, youth and elderly population. It will offer technical classes, education, a gymnasium, a dance studio, a conference hall and social awareness's session. This is expected to create 50 additional job opportunities.

In addition to funding from local institutions, UCLG and the province of Barcelona that are dedicated to build and equip the public centre, the municipality finances the centre annual maintenance fees and equipment expenses, as well as training and workshops for the library employees, from its own budget.

## 5. Further information

Nahr Ibrahim was a candidate for the third "UCLG Mexico City – Culture 21 International Award" (November 2017 – May 2018). The jury for the award drew up its final report in June of 2016, and requested that the Committee on Culture promote this project as one of the good practices to be implemented through Agenda 21 for culture.

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