

Lebanon

Hearing intergenerational voices through art

One of a series of ten case studies summarised in HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →

Lebanon's extremely challenging economic and political context is having serious negative consequences for its ageing population, many of whom lack sufficient support. The University for Seniors (UfS) and the GOLD Clinic (a student-led initiative to improve older people's health and wellbeing) are both part of the American University of Beirut. Since 2021, they have been working together on a project to raise awareness about why it is important to treat older people as fully contributing members of society who deserve appropriate healthcare and social protection.

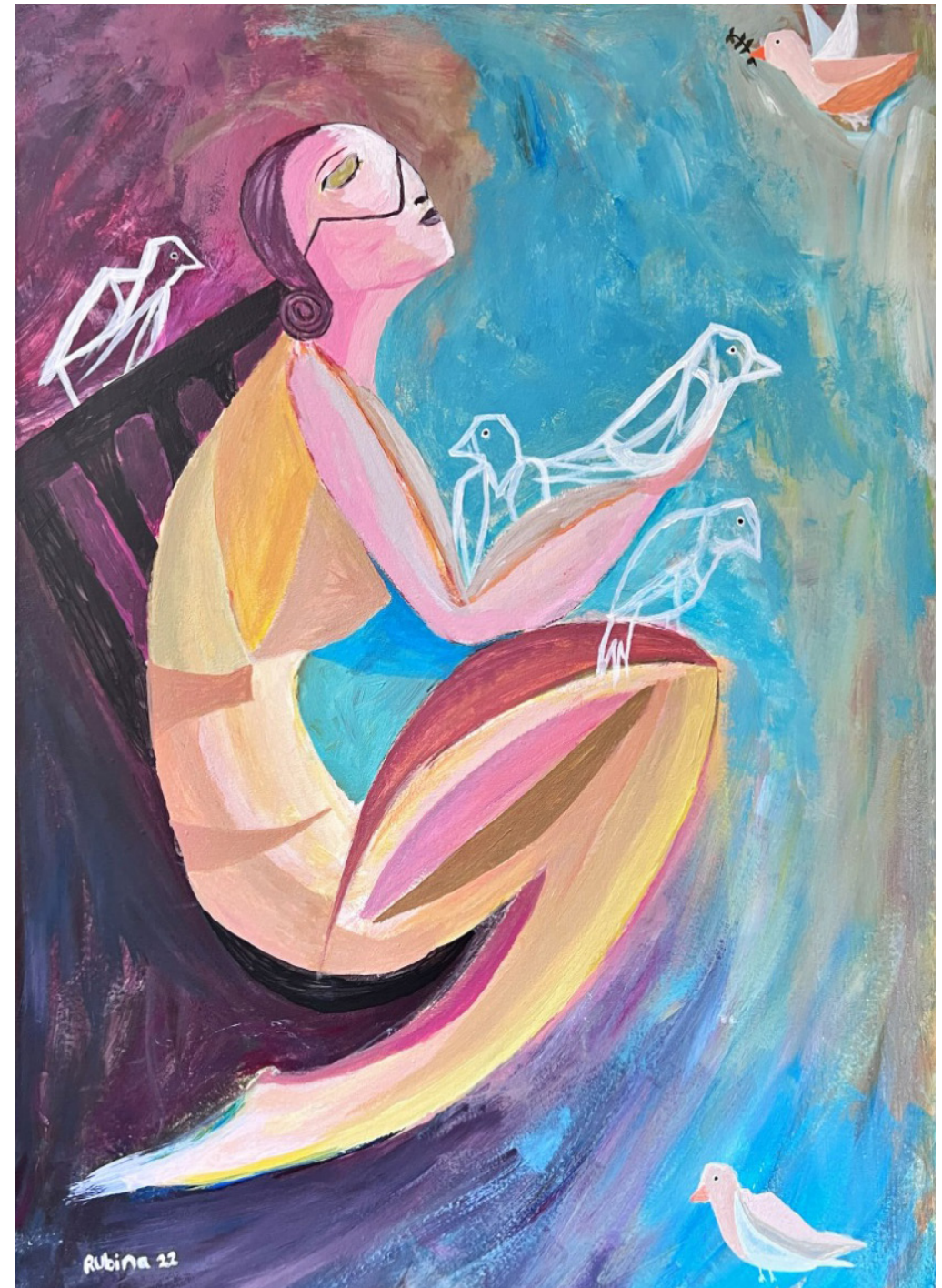
The project activities include creating art (produced by older and younger participants), organising exhibitions and selling the art to raise funds for the Clinic's activities. The initiative is co-created, right from the start (programme design and development), which gave a clear picture of the nature of participants' relationships, leading to a stronger understanding and respect for each other and a sense of common purpose through artistic expression.

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Rubina Sarkiss and Lein Habb El Ali/University for Seniors

What problem or issue does the project address?

Lebanon is the fastest ageing country in the Arab region, with 11 per cent of its population aged 65 or over in 2020.¹ Many young adults have left the country to find work, driven by the near-total collapse of the economy and finance system, which is further contributing to the increase in the proportion of older people in Lebanon. By 2040, the country is expected to have more older people than children, and economic resources are likely to shift from child support to old-age support.² Moreover, Lebanon has a fragmented social protection system that leaves half of its older people without any healthcare coverage and almost two-thirds without any pension.³ This lack of protection, in the context of the national crisis, leaves many older women and men extremely vulnerable.

As in many Arab countries, in Lebanon older people are highly respected. However, much of this respect is fraying, as financial hardships intensify in a context of weak social safety nets and healthcare coverage. There is even a change in how society values older people.⁴ Older people are increasingly looked upon as frail, in need of assistance and a burden on households. Their contributions to family and society (as caregivers, earners, volunteers, and sources of expertise, heritage, culture and wisdom) are often not monetised and thus remain largely invisible. This has become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, not just in Lebanon but other countries too, as older people have sometimes been treated as expendable, a burden on the economy and healthcare sector, and thus deprioritised for treatment during triage.⁵ However, by shedding light on older people and ageing, COVID-19 has also provided a unique opportunity to invest in advancing older people's rights and advocating for them to live a full and dignified life.

What is the project aiming to do?

The project aims to hold exhibitions and sell art created jointly by older people (members of UfS) and GOLD Clinic students to raise funds for further activities (including advocacy) to improve older people's health and wellbeing. Those involved in the project work together at every step, interacting and complementing each other's strengths and knowledge. Its aims will no doubt continue to evolve as the activities progress and participants give feedback.

The medium of art was chosen because many UfS members had previously taken part in 'Art of Joy' classes run by world-renowned artist **Madj Ramadan** →, which were initially face-to-face and then virtually, during COVID-19. They found the experience of expressing their emotions and feelings through art to be cathartic and fulfilling, and so suggested it as the vehicle for the project.

Beyond the immediate aims, the project intends to continue – in the words of Madj Ramadan – to:

“bring joy and happiness to older people but also connect them to younger people and share the creation of the project but also the art itself.”

Art will become both a way to connect generations, and a way for the artists to express their voice and demand that decision makers address the needs of older people for social protection at this very challenging time. As the head of the project's organising committee commented:

“The change of perception is a major part of the project and will create awareness and show people what seniors can do. The interaction with younger people is really important, and other generations have to see the value of older people.”



Miriam Ghubril and Lara Hassaniyeh/University for Seniors

1. *The National Strategy for Older Persons in Lebanon – 2020-2030*. Ministry of Social Affairs, UNFPA, ESCWA, Center for Studies on Aging, 2020.

2. Sibai AM, Rizk A, Kronfol N. 'Ageing in Lebanon: perils and prospects', *The Lebanese Medical Journal* 63:1, 2015, pp.2-7.

3. *Towards a rights-based social protection system for Lebanon. Ensuring income and dignity in older age and moving towards an inclusive and rights-based social protection system*. Center for studies on Aging, HelpAge International, 2020.

4. Sibai AM and Kronfol N. *Older people in Lebanon: voices of the caregivers*. Policy Brief, Center for Studies on Aging, Issue 1, 2009.

5. Sibai AM. *COVID-19 and older people in Lebanon*. Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2020.



The project intends to use a social media campaign to reach the general public but also ministries, NGOs and United Nations agencies with its messages about older people's rights and needs for healthcare, their capabilities and potential, and the importance of different generations working together to achieve common aims.

How does the project work?

The project started fairly recently, in December 2021. The planning stages included setting up a governance structure (a steering committee and four sub-committees, on finance, logistics, organisation and media), and students participate in all committees. The processes involved in planning and implementing activities are participatory, leveraging the experience of the project team at the University for Seniors.

To apply to take part, members of the University fill out a registration form, describing the form of art they want to create (there is support for various art forms, including photography, with the support of

Jamal Saidi →, a well-known photographer, and of course, Madj Ramadan for painting). Participants receive support individually as well as collectively and agree to adhere to a code of conduct. One participant who is excited about being involved in the project and very much supports its message said:

“It is very interesting to start painting in my 50s, and explore my talent – art classes have helped us get through lots of trauma. UfS means a lot for me, as a mother, and to share art at an international level... We also wanted to show to young generations that we can do, show them we have energy and talent to do something!”

Members of UfS will not be the only artists involved. It is expected that young students will also contribute in different ways, co-creating and co-signing paintings, or playing musical instruments during the exhibition. Art offers a common language not just between generations but also across other identities such as gender, or ethnic identity and socioeconomic background.

Two very senior and experienced mentors and teachers will support participants: Sawsan Maktabi, Chair for the project but also the University for Seniors Steering Committee member and professor of English composition at the American University of Beirut; and Madj Ramadan, artist and study group leader at the University.

Their energy, commitment and passion is palpable and they will undoubtedly enthuse participants of all ages. As Sawsan notes:

“This is not a new approach for us, we have been interacting with young people as students for decades. What is new is the charitable purpose of the project.”



What changes did the project achieve?

The project is still in its infancy, but is ambitious about what it wants to achieve. It wants to:

- raise sufficient funds to substantially contribute to the financing of the GOLD Clinic;
- continue to change the lives of older people through art, which can be a form of a therapy, helping to deflect from the stress and trauma of life in Lebanon with no social protection;
- raise awareness about the unfairness of the policy and regulatory system towards older people, and change people's perceptions about older people, making a clear distinction between *growing older* and *becoming frail*, and valuing older people's contributions to society. The media is expected to play a big part in changing these age-related attitudes and social norms.

What is working well?

Again, it is early on in the project, but during the inception stage, a number of positive steps have been taken. The University project team is experienced and valued by the members of the various project committees. The project is owned by participants, but also well supported by the management and project team, who have lots of experience in project management and in getting younger and older people involved with activities. Early on, members of the steering committee (and sub-committees) addressed power relations between older members and younger students, observing that students were quieter in meetings, possibly feeling intimidated by their seniors. However, younger people maintained that their silence was a sign of their 'silent agreement' with the matters discussed.

It is clear that both generations are collaborating well and energising each other, as a student member of the logistics committee commented:

“We have very enthusiastic teams. The energy of UfS members was surprising and energising, refreshing. They also very kindly try to not overburden the students. Their energy exceeded our energy and that surprised us – after a day of class and seeing patients we were tired, but we got re-energised at the first meeting by their level of energy. Also, possibly they were surprised that we were running the GOLD Clinic so efficiently and we were so organised.”

Another student summed up what many of the medical students taking part in the project feel:

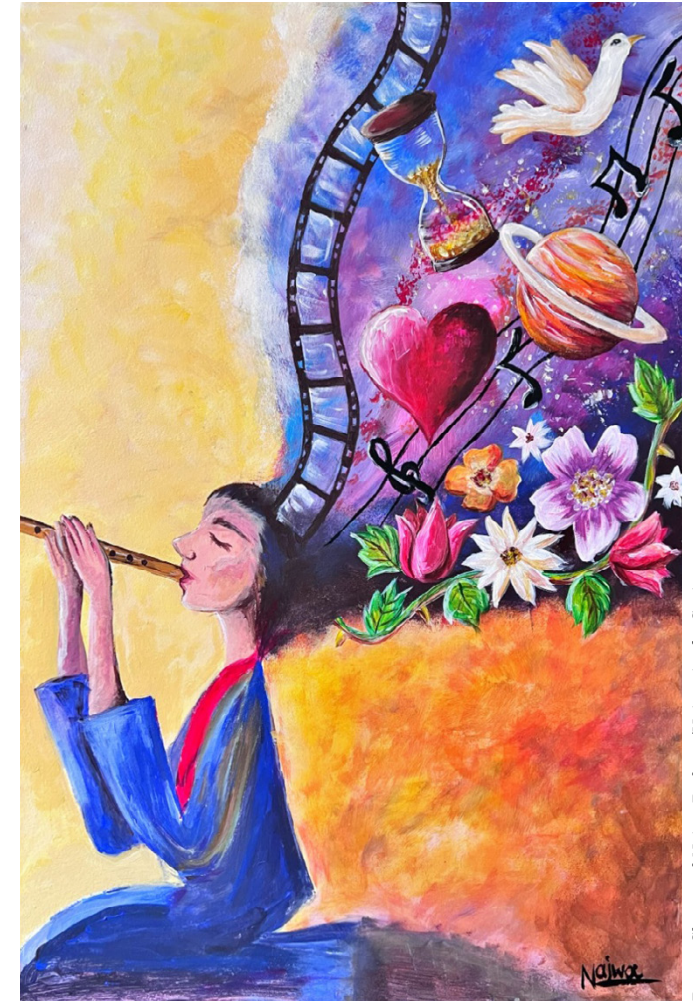
“This project and working in GOLD added something to my experience in medicine. It broke barriers with other generations. Meeting them as people, interacting in the clinic, you get to know them, their experiences, their living conditions. They tell us: ‘you listen to us, other people don’t listen to us’. Working with them we learn from them, more than we also help them medically.”

A female (older) participant added that:

“It needs time to change generations. Young generation is the hope to change the system. I changed my perception of younger people – they really want to change the system, they love their country and I feel bad for them.”

One of the other strengths in the early stages of the project is the time taken to create a common vision and align values, genuinely co-creating activities. As one participant put it:

“Success will be doing something you are proud of – those artists are proud of their work and their contribution to the charity goals... Also, if they feel they belong to society, their voice is heard – they have opinions and have important art to share. So their voices, opinions and lives matter.”



Rawaa Chaar and Najwa Radwan/University for Seniors

What could be done differently?

This project is very new to all participants and the American University in Beirut, therefore the learning at these early stages is part and parcel of project implementation, and lots of small adjustments are constantly being discussed across the organising committees. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused some challenges around the logistics of the exhibition, and how many people can be invited. These have to be worked through and communicated to all parties early on in order to manage expectations.

In terms of human resourcing, quite a few of the project participants rely heavily on two very efficient coordinators at the University for Seniors, who have many other responsibilities. It will be important to ensure a good balance between efficiency and continuing to empower all participants by distributing responsibilities.



AUB University for Seniors

What can we learn from this project?

It is almost too soon to ask this question, but there are a few early observations:

- It is important to communicate early on about how decisions are made and recognise that different age groups do things differently; they have different perspectives but also different ways of expressing their views.
- A key success factor in the project will be the role of leaders and mentors, from both generations, who have the passion to listen, bring others along and adapt, rather than just lead from the front, so it is vital that the people filling these roles are carefully selected.
- It is important, from the outset, to balance an ambitious and evolving project vision with a solid and efficient project management structure that acknowledges the limitations of some members (whether time constraints, internet access, or networking, for example) as this will mitigate any potential conflicts that arise.

This case study was developed with the support of the University for Seniors and the GOLD Clinic, both part of the American University of Beirut. It is one in a series of ten case studies, produced in connection with HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →, published in collaboration with Restless Development and in support of the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism

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