

5 DAYS IN BEIRUT

By Eric J. Sanders, PhD



Arriving in Beirut, seeing the organized chaos of narrow winding streets, people moving between shops and houses, construction and destruction happening simultaneously, I was reminded of other ancient Mediterranean cities I have visited. The blending of old and new and the hubbub of a densely populated area is very different from my suburban home outside Chicago, but was not unfamiliar.

This was not a pleasure trip, it was for work. I arrived to deliver a workshop on how to connect scholarship and practice and publish the results of field studies, and to give one of several keynote addresses for a conference: Research with Impact for Society and the Enterprise (RISE). While most of the participants would be Lebanese, there were many from other countries as well, including the USA, France, India, Egypt, China, and Japan. Why do we do this work? It was said best by Kahlil Gibran in his classic, *The Prophet* in 1923:

When you work you are a flute through whose heart the whispering of the hours turns to music...

And what is it to work with love?

It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth.

It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in that house.

It is to sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your beloved were to eat the fruit. It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit,

And to know that the blessed dead are standing about you and watching.

That connection between the living and the dead in a country with 6000 years of documented history is important, and carries much greater weight than it does in a young country of just a few centuries like my own. The thread that we hoped to weave was connecting the best

and the brightest in the universities of Lebanon with the firms, NGOs, and government agencies there, to help them recover from the current crises facing the area, as they have done many times over the millennia. As Gibran also noted, the deeper our sorrow, the greater our capacity for joy. There is room for great joy in Lebanon today.

THE RISE CONFERENCE

RISE was hosted by Saint Joseph University of Beirut, and organized by Pierre El Haddad, with help from Hilda Bairamian and Georges Maroun there, Rida Elias of the American University of Beirut, Omayya Kuran of the University of Balamand, Lara Khabbaz of Notre Dame University – Louaize, and many others. We opened with the workshop that I led in English on Monday, and a similar one led by Laurent Cappelletti in French on Tuesday morning (via Zoom as he was unable to travel from France as planned, and as the rest of the conference was conducted). Monday evening we had the main plenary session with speakers from most of the countries listed above, and on Tuesday we had three sets of three (total of 9) breakout sessions with 4-5 presenters each sharing their research on ways to apply existing theory to the problems of the region (often building new and better ways of using data with limited availability to build better foundations for decision making), or on developing new theory based on the work being done in practice with organizations today. Presenters ranged from an amazing 17-year-old (Elias Farah) who presented an application of artificial intelligence, to established scholars showing on topics from the power and value that women bring to leadership roles, to the impact of transformational leadership on innovation, and managing the transition to e-learning. The most important benefit of this conference was providing a forum for these wonderful researchers to share their work, gain feedback, and prepare to submit their contributions for publication in the near future, that they might have even greater impact to improve organizations and the societies in which they reside.

RISING FURTHER

The days after the conference were filled meeting with others who could help weave that connection between scholar-practitioners and the organizations they serve more effectively. First was one with the leaders of a firm and the head of a business network hoping to influence other firms and the government to build back Lebanon sustainably, with a strong focus on supporting people at all levels of economic development in the country. Next was leaders of the business programs at AUB, sharing ideas about how we work in our respective universities to build better leaders through our undergraduate and MBA programs. Then we met with an NGO that has doubled in size through the pandemic and recovery from the Beirut port explosion last year, to learn more about what they have done and how they have done it, so we can share their lessons learned. Then we met with NODE (Network of Organization Development Experts) to discuss how they could do an even better job of weaving theory and practice together with their clients, to build better organizations. All of these people and their organizations are working as Gibran described, using their knowledge with love and strength to solve the many economic and social crises facing Lebanon and indeed the entire world.

One of the highlights of my 5 days in Beirut was a morning at the National Museum of Lebanon, which has a wonderful collection of archaeological artifacts going back 6000 years, showing how Lebanon has been a trade hub from prehistoric times, through eras of control by the Phoenicians, later the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Ottomans, to the present independence – while fighting external influence from Iran, Syria, and others. This rich history imbues every aspect of the city and the nation. That was enhanced further by a visit to the Mount Lebanon area and the cedar forests there, including standing by a 2500-year-old cedar tree that was the model for the one on the Lebanese flag (see the photo above). The cedars of Lebanon have been used to build the ships that sail the Mediterranean, and the temples and castles of the region. They symbolize the nation's gifts to the world, including knowledge and skill that the people of the area added to the goods and services they have provided for millennia.

Most important, this visit was about cementing a friendship that we have built over the past three years in preparing for the RISE conference, and working to find ways to have positive impact on both society and the enterprises within it. As Gibran said about friendship:

*And in the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures.
For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.*

May the scholar-practitioners from around the world who participated in the RISE conference and the activities surrounding it be refreshed and rejuvenated, and share in the joy of the work we do to improve the world around us, through creating impact on the enterprises we serve and the society in which we live.