

Strengthening Governance: The Critical Role of Boards in Lebanon's NGOs

Authors:

Ms. Ola Sarieddine, President, Pythagoras Cultural Society, together with VAB member, Rabie Jarmakani



OLA SARIEDDINE



RABIE JARMAKANI



Boards of NGOs and not-for-profit organisations in Lebanon operate under some of the toughest conditions anywhere in the world. The nation's prolonged socio-economic crisis, defined by political instability, economic contraction, banking dysfunction and fractured public institutions, has elevated good corporate governance from a procedural requirement into a frontline strategic function. In this environment, boards must apply the same disciplines expected in well-run companies: clear accountability, transparent reporting, risk oversight and principled decision-making.

A strong example from Lebanon's civil society landscape is the [Pythagoras Cultural Society](#) (PCS), established in 2016 as a Lebanese NGO registered with the Ministry of Interior. PCS advances social stability through educational and cultural initiatives, while serving as an enabling platform that mobilises Lebanese diaspora knowledge, resources and partnerships to support local communities. Guided by a belief that human beings sit at the centre of sustainable development, PCS delivers its work with dignity and professionalism, strengthening stakeholder trust through responsible stewardship. Its work is rooted in inclusive access, supporting individuals regardless of gender, religion or ethnicity, and focuses on practical pathways for self-help and quality-of-life improvement.

PCS' journey reflects a broader truth: in Lebanon, boards are not only custodians of compliance, they are also the governing stewards of mission, credibility and continuity. PCS has supported underserved children and youth; families affected by crisis and displacement (including victims of the 4 August 2020 Beirut explosion); professionals impacted by economic collapse through employability support; frontline civil defence and emergency responders through equipment and training, including the donation of 120 protective uniforms following an official call from

the Lebanese Civil Defence; and wider community beneficiaries through cultural and social initiatives. This breadth underscores why governance must be disciplined and structured: strong board oversight ensures an organisation can scale impact without losing control, integrity or stakeholder confidence. Part of this journey and continued mission includes addressing some of the conditions listed below that impact Lebanese NGOs of all sizes.

Extreme Volatility and Planning Challenges

Lebanese NGOs operate in an environment where long-term plans can be disrupted overnight. Rapid currency devaluation, intermittent public services and periodic political escalation require boards to govern with agility, balancing crisis navigation with strategy, and operational survival with mission continuity. This is corporate governance under pressure: scenario planning, delegated authorities, and clear decision rights are no longer *nice to have*.

Intense Donor Scrutiny and Accountability

With shrinking aid budgets and heightened competition for funding, donors demand robust financial transparency, strong anti-corruption safeguards and audit-ready reporting. Boards must enforce institutionalised, board-endorsed financial controls, budgets, audits, approvals, segregation of duties and documented policies, reducing reputational risk and reinforcing confidence that resources are managed ethically and effectively.

Regulatory Fragmentation and Compliance Burden

Lebanon's NGO oversight remains fragmented across ministries and local authorities. Boards must interpret and implement compliance expectations that can be inconsistent or opaque, requiring governance literacy and legal awareness. Good corporate governance means proactive compliance: documented policies, clear oversight responsibilities and regular review, rather than reactive firefighting.

Risk of Mission Drift

Funding pressures can push organisations to reshape programmes around donor priorities instead of organisational identity. Strong boards prevent mission drift by anchoring decisions in mission clarity, strategy and measurable outcomes. PCS has maintained a consistent focus on education, cultural empowerment and community resilience, while still engaging diverse partnerships and initiatives, from education access and children's programmes fundraising to employability programming such as *Free At Work* and rapid humanitarian mobilisation.

Staff Burnout and Leadership Fatigue

The protracted national crisis has strained NGO teams and leadership. Corporate governance is not just about finance, it is also about sustainability of leadership and execution. Boards must set realistic targets, promote wellbeing practices and plan leadership transitions so that impact is sustained through systems, not sacrifice.

Internal Systems and Data Limitations

Many Lebanese NGOs still operate with limited data visibility and weak internal systems. Without governance oversight, these gaps can undermine programme quality and donor confidence. Boards must champion practical digitisation, stronger tracking and reporting discipline: turning goodwill into measurable outcomes and strengthening internal accountability.

Reputational Sensitivity in a Politically Charged Context

In Lebanon's fractured political landscape, one misstep can erode years of trust. Boards must safeguard neutrality and integrity through clear codes of conduct, conflict-of-interest discipline and consistent communications governance, protecting the organisation's social licence to operate.

Conclusion: Governance Is Non-Negotiable

Despite the headwinds, NGOs in Lebanon continue to play a vital role in the fields of humanitarian support, education, cultural preservation and community resilience. Strengthening boards, through corporate-grade governance practices, risk management frameworks, financial discipline, transparent reporting and unwavering mission clarity, is no longer optional. It is a strategic imperative for survival and impact. Leadership at the board level, as seen in organisations like PCS, and its recent delivery programmes such as *Heart of the Classroom*, led in strategic collaboration with the Modern University for Business & Science (MUBS), anchors civil society's capacity to adapt, endure and foster hope amidst adversity. The programme strengthens pedagogical practice and teacher psychology and mental wellbeing to build more humane, resilient classroom environments and is designed as an evidence-based model that can be replicated at scale, with curriculum development overseen by **Dr. Rima Baz Ahmadeyi**.

To make support more structured and measurable, PCS launched an [Impact Partners programme](#) in 2025, enabling individuals and companies to contribute through tiered support as part of standard CSR commitments.

As Winston Churchill once reminded us:

***We make a living by what we get,
but we make a life by what we give.***
