

**Speech of Mr Alexis Loeber, Head of the Cooperation Section  
at the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon**

**Launch of "Creativity and Regeneration in Mar Mikhael"**

Grande Brasserie du Levant, Mar Mikhael – 17 July 2014

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***CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY***

H.E. Minister of Culture Raymond Areiji,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The role of arts, crafts and design can be a major driving force for the urban, economic and social revival of cities or districts of cities. The example of Mar Mikhael is a good illustration of this role. Thanks to preserved traditional Beirut architecture, in the past few years Mar Mikhael managed to attract artists from Lebanon and abroad.

This consolidated the identity of the district which soon became one of the most vibrant neighbourhoods of Beirut. As a result, over the past four years, the numbers of creative companies, bars and restaurants blossomed at a fast pace.

However, such rapid growth comes with its own challenges. One of the most serious is the rapid increase in rental prices which is becoming a major factor of relocation for these companies. Such occurrence is not new in Beirut where the increase in real estate prices has already triggered massive relocation of activities to other 'less expensive' districts.

In that respect, the building where we stand today is a good reminder of how easily a flourishing business can become an industrial wasteland. On a more positive note, it also illustrates the necessity to reinvent a new story. For instance, after its industrial era expired, this place hosted numerous festivals and celebrations. Now there is a new page to write which justifies our presence today.

Many cities across the Mediterranean region experienced similar challenges. This affected not only the cities that lost their industries but also those that hosted them. In both cases, this created major changes to which cities had to adjust. Most importantly, similarities between the experienced problems do not mean that there is a 'one size fits all' solution.

However, in order to better hammer out a strategy, one solution is to learn from shared experiences, and devise 'best-practices' solutions in light of cultural and economic dialogue. This is the essence of the MEDNETA initiative: the Mediterranean cultural network to promote creativity in the arts, crafts and design for communities' regeneration in historical cities. The six Mediterranean cities participating in this initiative are representatives of the different types of challenges that cities might experience, as well as of their singular set of specific responses.

MEDNETA, with a total budget of approximately €2 million, is one of the 95 projects funded by the European Union under the ENPI Cross-Border Cooperation's Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme 2007-2013. Through this project, Gaia Heritage surveyed the neighbourhood of Mar Mikhael and identified issues with the sustainability of the endeavours of its Arts, Crafts and Design cluster.

With today's conference, covering the concept of SWOT analysis - Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats – a door will be open to artists and professionals, as well as stakeholders and decision-makers, to exchange ideas and know-how, and engage in a constructive debate. This is also an invitation to elaborate solutions that would enable Mar Mikhael to turn into a model sustainable creative district.

MEDNETA's initiative will foster cross cultural dialogue and cooperation among multiple stakeholders. In this spirit I look forward to today's successful event.

Thank you.