

Applying the Regional Nature Park Charter: A Local Governance Analysis in the Villages of Jezzine (South Lebanon)

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Abstract

This article analyzes the implementation of the Regional Nature Park (RNP) Charter in the villages of the Union of Municipalities of Jezzine (UMJ), South Lebanon. The Charter, inspired by the French PNR model and officially adopted in 2018, serves as a roadmap for sustainable territorial development, addressing environmental, social, and economic priorities (Depraz & Laslaz, 2014) (Fédération des Parcs Naturels Régionaux de France, 2014). Four years after its adoption, a field-based evaluation was conducted to assess how well the objectives of the Charter have been applied at the local level. The study relies on a mixed-methods approach combining field visits, municipal interviews, and quantitative evaluation using a

structured scoring system. A total of 25 municipalities were assessed, and data were processed using Excel and SPSS software. The results reveal a strong commitment from municipalities, particularly in environmental protection, where 97% have enforced bans on new quarries and 92% have taken steps to reduce pollution around water sources. However, efforts in waste management, renewable energy, and economic revitalization remain uneven, often hindered by limited funding and institutional capacity. Social outcomes are more positive regarding youth engagement and housing initiatives, yet access to healthcare and educational services remain limited. Economically, the region continues to rely on seasonal tourism, with underdeveloped agricultural and artisanal sectors.

The findings highlight the value of the Charter as a governance tool but underscore the need for stronger technical and financial support, as well as greater community involvement, to ensure its full implementation and long-term impact. A structured evaluation grid and statistical analysis provided measurable insights into municipal performance and variation.

Keywords: Regional Nature Park, Charter implementation, Local governance, Environmental management, Sustainable development, Jezzine (South Lebanon)

* Introduction

The creation of Regional Nature Parks (RNP) is an innovative governance model for promoting sustainable territorial development by reconciling environmental preservation, socio-economic development, and community involvement (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2004; UNESCO, 2016). In South Lebanon, the Union of Jezzine Municipalities (UJM) has pioneered this approach by drafting and adopting a Charter in 2018, inspired by the French PNR framework. This Charter serves as a guiding document that outlines strategic priorities and commitments across environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

Despite the official adoption of the Charter by 25 municipalities, there is limited research assessing the actual implementation of its objectives at the municipal level. The Jezzine region, rich in natural landscapes and cultural heritage, faces growing environmental and development challenges, particularly in the context of Lebanon's political and economic crisis. As such, evaluating the local application of the Charter is essential to assess its effectiveness and identify potential gaps in implementation.

Previous studies on RNP in France and Europe have highlighted their potential in promoting sustainable development through integrated governance and community engagement (Depraz & Laslaz, 2014; Selman, 2004). However, implementation often faces challenges related to funding, institutional coordination, and varying local capacities (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2004; Lovan et al., 2004). These lessons are particularly relevant in fragile states, where decentralized governance may lack adequate support mechanisms.

This article investigates how municipalities within the UJM have applied the Charter's objectives since its adoption. It focuses on three key thematic axes: environmental

management, social development, and economic revitalization. By analyzing municipal actions, scoring their performance, and highlighting both strengths and constraints, this study aims to provide a local governance perspective on the application of a regional environmental Charter in a fragile context.

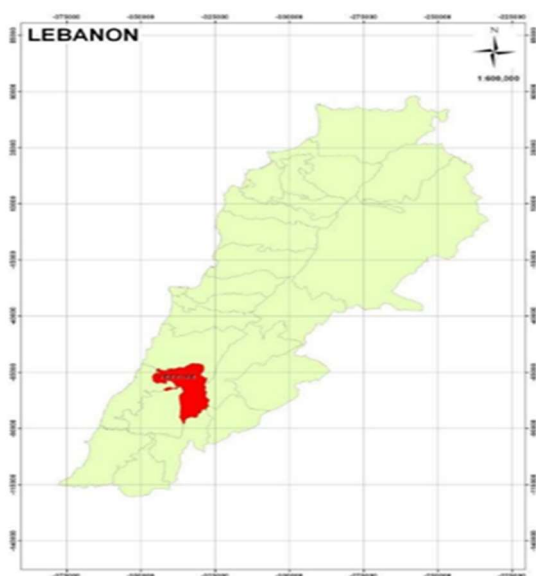


Figure 1 : Location map of Jezzine in Lebanon –

The Caza of Jezzine in red

Source: MORES s.a.r.l. 2012

*** Research Problem**

Rural areas in South Lebanon, particularly the Jezzine region, face increasing challenges related to sustainable development, including the degradation of natural resources, limited economic activity, and disparities in access to services among villages. In response, the UJM adopted the “Regional Nature Park Charter” in 2018, inspired by the

French model, as a strategic framework aimed at guiding balanced local development across environmental, social, and economic sectors.

Despite the official signature of the Charter by 25 municipalities, the degree to which its objectives have been implemented remains unclear, especially in the context of Lebanon’s ongoing political and economic crisis (World Bank, 2021; UNDP, 2022). This raises the need for a field-based evaluation to assess municipal adherence to the Charter and to identify variations in its implementation across different localities.

The central research problem addressed in this study is: To what extent have municipalities in the UJM implemented the RNP Charter’s objectives, and what factors influence the variation in implementation?

This study seeks to answer the following research questions: -

- 1- To what extent are the environmental, social, and economic objectives of the Charter being applied?
- 2- What variations exist among the villages in terms of implementation levels?

3- What factors have contributed to the successful application of the Charter in some municipalities?

4- What are the key barriers preventing full implementation of the Charter across the region?

We hypothesize that municipalities with stronger institutional support and greater financial capacity are more likely to achieve higher levels of Charter implementation.

*** Originality and Contribution of the Study**

This study offers a unique contribution to the field of local environmental governance (Berkes, 2004) by being the first to assess the implementation of a Regional Nature Park Charter in a Lebanese context. While the concept of Regional Nature Parks has been widely applied in France and Europe, it remains relatively new and under-researched in Lebanon and the wider Middle East. This research fills a gap by focusing on the practical application of the Charter in a rural, decentralized setting facing multiple crises.

Unlike previous studies that remain theoretical or descriptive, this research is grounded in fieldwork conducted across 25 municipalities, using both qualitative and quantitative tools. It provides a detailed evaluation of how the

Charter's environmental, social, and economic objectives are applied on the ground. The scoring system, based on a structured evaluation grid and statistical analysis, offers measurable insights into local performance and variations among villages.

Furthermore, this study highlights the role of municipalities as key actors in sustainable development and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. It emphasizes the importance of local leadership, youth engagement, and institutional collaboration as drivers of successful implementation.

By offering concrete data, field-based analysis, and policy-oriented recommendations, this research not only sheds light on the challenges and opportunities of implementing territorial charters in Lebanon but also provides a transferable model that could inspire other regions facing similar governance and environmental challenges.

*** Methodology**

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative fieldwork with quantitative analysis to evaluate the extent to which the RNP Charter has been implemented in the villages of the UJM. The research was

1- Data Collection: Field visits were carried out in all active municipalities of the UMJ. Structured interviews and direct observations were conducted in collaboration with municipal presidents and local actors. The evaluation was based on a set of reformulated objectives derived from the original Charter, adapted to reflect the post-pandemic and socio-economic context of Lebanon.

3- Data Analysis: The results were compiled using Microsoft Excel and analyzed statistically using IBM SPSS. This allowed the researcher to identify patterns, calculate average scores, and visualize performance variations among municipalities. The classification of villages into “core

RNP in JEZZINE REGION

Legend

Villages_Union

Type

PARK

VILLAGE_ZONE

0.5 1 2 3 4 Kilometers

This methodology enabled a comprehensive and comparative analysis of local governance practices related to sustainable development in the Jezzine region.

The field evaluation revealed varied levels of implementation of the Charter's objectives across the 25 municipalities of the UJM. These results are presented according to the Charter's three strategic axes: environmental protection, social development, and economic revitalization.

1- Overview by Axis: The average implementation scores by axis are illustrated in Figure 1. Municipalities performed best in the environmental domain ($\approx 70\%$), followed by the social axis ($\approx 60\%$), while economic objectives showed the lowest level of implementation ($\approx 40\%$). Figure 3 below illustrates the average

implementation scores for each strategic axis.

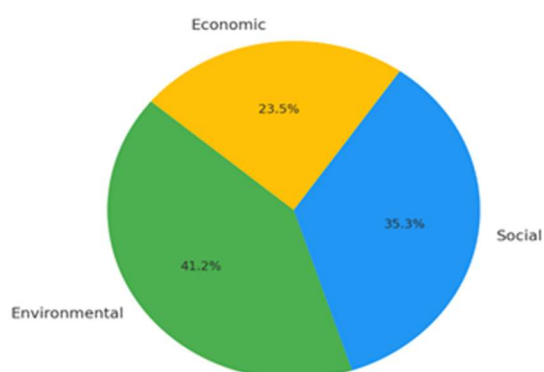


Figure 3 : Average Implementation Scores by Charter Axis

2- Key Results by Theme

Table 1 summarizes the key achievements and challenges reported across the three thematic axes.

Axis	Average Score (%)	Key Achievements	Main Challenges
Environmental	≈ 70%	Ban on new quarries (97%), water protection (92%), forest control (89%)	Waste sorting (25%), solar lighting (31%), plastic bans (11%)
Social	≈ 60%	Youth engagement (71%), housing access (69%)	Limited health services (35%), weak elderly care (41%)
Economic	≈ 40%	Festivals (63%), monument lighting (70%)	Underdeveloped tourism (43%), agriculture (39%), industry (33%)

Table 1 : Summary of Charter Implementation by Axis

3- Municipal Performance Variation: High performers included villages like Jernaya, which scored over 13.5/20 due to strong youth engagement and close cooperation with the UMJ. Lower-scoring municipalities faced financial constraints or governance issues,

particularly in implementing economic initiatives. Core Park villages generally performed better than those in the transition zone, suggesting stronger integration into the Charter process.

* Discussion

The results of this study reveal both encouraging progress and critical gaps in the implementation of the RNP Charter across the municipalities of Jezzine. The environmental axis showed the highest levels of application, followed by the social and economic axes. These variations are closely linked to differences in financial capacity, institutional support, and local leadership.

1- Strong Environmental Engagement: Municipalities demonstrated a clear commitment to protecting natural resources, particularly by enforcing bans on new quarries and implementing water source protection measures. This reflects a heightened awareness of environmental issues among local authorities and the tangible support provided by the UJM. However, certain objectives, such as waste sorting and renewable energy, were less implemented due to limited budgets and technical constraints.

2- Uneven Social Outcomes: Social initiatives, especially those targeting

youth engagement and housing for young families, received moderate attention. Some municipalities excelled due to strong local leadership and active collaboration with civil society. Nevertheless, structural deficits in healthcare and elderly services remain a concern. These weaknesses point to the need for state support and integrated planning to reinforce the social pillar of the Charter.

3- Economic Axis: The Most Fragile Pillar: The Charter's economic objectives were the least implemented. While some municipalities organize cultural events and improved public lighting, the tourism sector remains seasonal, and the agricultural and artisanal sectors are largely unsupported. The ongoing national economic crisis and the absence of public-private partnerships have further limited the potential for local economic revival.

4- Geographic Disparities: Municipalities located at the core of the park generally performed better than those in the transition zone. This can be attributed to closer institutional ties with UJM, stronger ecological identity, and better access to environmental programs. Transition zone municipalities, by contrast, appeared more isolated and

less mobilized around the Charter's vision.

5- Implications for Local Governance: These findings underline the importance of empowering municipalities as key actors in sustainable development (Bulkeley & Kern, 2006; Ostrom, 1990; Lovan, Murray, & Shaffer, 2004). While the Charter provides a coherent and visionary framework, its success depends on multi-level governance, adequate funding, and ongoing technical accompaniment. Similar findings have been reported by UN-Habitat (2023), which emphasized the need for decentralized funding and technical capacity-building in fragile governance contexts like Lebanon. The experience of Jezzine offers valuable lessons for other regions in Lebanon seeking to implement participatory environmental governance models.

This study has several limitations. First, the scoring relied partly on self-reported data from municipal representatives, which may introduce bias. Second, some municipalities lacked up-to-date documentation, limiting data completeness. Finally, the post-crisis Lebanese context adds instability that may influence implementation outcomes beyond local control.

* Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the extent to which the Regional Nature Park Charter has been implemented across the municipalities of the UJM. The findings reveal that while the environmental axis has been widely adopted, particularly in areas related to quarry regulation and water protection, the social and especially the economic axis remain only partially implemented. The variation in performance between municipalities reflects deeper structural challenges, including limited funding, lack of technical resources, and uneven levels of engagement with the Charter's vision.

Despite these constraints, the Jezzine experience demonstrates that local governance can play a central role in advancing sustainable development goals when municipalities are equipped with a clear strategic framework and supported by coordinated institutional structures. Recent research confirms that local governance structures in post-crisis Lebanon often struggle to operationalize development frameworks without external support (El-Kak, 2024). The Charter has proven to be a valuable tool for guiding municipal action,

encouraging civic participation, and preserving natural heritage (Selman, 2004).

1- Key Recommendations

The following table summarizes the key recommendations of this study.

Recommendation	Responsible Actor	Priority Level
Provide technical training to municipalities	UJM, NGOs	High
Establish regional grant mechanisms	Ministry of Environment, donors	High
Promote inter-municipal cooperation	UJM, local mayors	Medium
Engage youth and civil society	Local NGOs, schools, parishes	High
Set up monitoring and evaluation tools	UJM, independent experts	Medium

By building on the progress made and addressing current weaknesses, the Regional Nature Park Charter can serve as a replicable model for other Lebanese regions seeking to link nature conservation with local development through participatory governance.

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