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Report

Enhancing Understanding and Capacity of CSOs in Lebanon to Counter Misinformation

Fadi Nicholas Nassar and Christelle Barakat

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As part of the I4C MENA Hub's objective of protecting civic spaces using innovative research and capacity-building methodologies, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS), in partnership with the I4C MENA Hub, has seen an increased campaign on civil society in Lebanon from various actors, undermining public trust in civil society organizations. The 'Enhancing Individuals' Public Perceptions of CSOs in Lebanon' project aims to empower CSOs by fine-tuning their understanding and awareness of the drivers of misinformation and defamation campaigns and the public's vulnerability to them. It also focuses on building CSOs' capacity using conventional and new communication tools to better inform the public of their achievements and push back against misinformation and negative attacks. This project builds on the findings of the 'We Act Together Campaign' that the Hub launched in October 2022.

Enhancing Understanding and Capacity of CSOs in Lebanon to Counter Misinformation

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This report is part of a collaboration between the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) and the Middle East and North Africa Hub of Innovation for Change (I4C MENA) under the project title, 'Enhancing Individuals' Public Perceptions of CSOs in Lebanon'. This project builds on the findings of the 'We Act Together Campaign' that the Hub launched in October 2022.

Introduction

The current landscape in which civil society organizations (CSOs) operate in Lebanon is marked by complexity and ambiguity. Since 2019, Lebanon has been engulfed in a relentless series of crises, including a severe economic downturn, the global COVID-19 pandemic, widespread social upheaval, and the catastrophic Port of Beirut explosion. These crises have been exacerbated by the persistent failure of the state, compelling CSOs to increasingly step into the void left behind. This report seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the intricate challenges faced by CSOs in this precarious environment.

Drawing on data from a nationwide survey of public sentiment and in-depth interviews with key informants representing CSOs across the nation, the study aims to uncover a nuanced understanding of the complex web of crises currently confronting Lebanon. Furthermore, it endeavors to formulate empirically grounded policy recommendations to empower CSOs to rebuild public trust, strengthen accountability, respond effectively to the emergent needs stemming from Lebanon's concurrent crises, and mitigate the continued erosion of confidence in public institutions.

This report is enriched by a nationwide telephone survey involving 1,200 respondents. The primary objective of this survey was to conduct a thorough exploration of public perceptions against the backdrop of Lebanon's ongoing crises. This data offers key insights into the performance of various stakeholders, including the state, international organizations, and CSOs, with the purpose of assessing their effectiveness and responses in the face of the formidable challenges confronting the nation. Within the intricate fabric of crises spanning economic turmoil, political instability, and societal unrest, understanding the public's perceptions of the roles and actions of these key players is of paramount significance. It not only enriches our comprehension of crisis management dynamics but also sheds light on the nuanced levels of trust and support extended by the Lebanese public to these stakeholders during these critical moments.

In conjunction with the survey, 30 key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted, involving representatives from a diverse array of civil society organizations, distinguished by their varying sizes, geographical locations, funding levels, and areas of specialization. This diversity underscores the comprehensiveness of the study. Notably, these CSOs exhibit a keen interest in engaging with the public through diverse

avenues, including in-person interactions and social media platforms, notably Facebook and Instagram, each catering to distinct generational cohorts. However, the persistent crisis has engendered a plethora of challenges, notably impacting their financial resources, staffing capabilities, and operational activities, largely as a consequence of rigorous donor requisites and banking constraints. Furthermore, conducting in-person programs has been increasingly encumbered.

An interesting observation among the interviewed CSOs is their approach to managing negative feedback on social media. In contrast to responding publicly to unfavorable comments, these organizations often opt to disregard, conceal, or privately address the responsible individuals, seeking to avoid amplifying the situation or unduly legitimizing negativity.

The management of social media content appears to involve a synthesis of in-house production and external outsourcing. The CSOs tend to undertake most content creation internally while delegating complex tasks such as high-quality video production to external specialists.

In the aftermath of significant events, such as the Port of Beirut explosion, CSOs displayed notable activity, encompassing functions like monitoring, humanitarian assistance provision, coordination with other entities, and the referral of individuals when their needs fell outside their mission or project scope. Nonetheless, they grappled with certain challenges, including duplicative efforts, the marginalization of particular communities, and a predilection for short-term assistance over long-term sustainability.

Notably, the interviewed CSOs assert their non-political stance, underscoring their commitment to impartially serve all members of the community and expressing their intention to collaborate with the state rather than supplant its functions. Misconceptions regarding CSO funding are prevalent, with the public often overestimating their financial resources despite the stark reality of their limited funding.

A recurrent theme emerging from the study is the centrality of trust-building with constituents. CSOs adopt diverse strategies in this endeavor, including networking with other organizations, prioritizing transparency, establishing a proven track record of integrity and accountability, and actively incorporating diverse individuals into their projects and programs. These practices collectively establish a bedrock of trust within the communities they serve, underpinning the role of CSOs in Lebanon's intricate and challenging socio-political landscape.

I Methodology

National Phone Survey

The information collection for the full scope of the study was achieved by conducting a national quantitative phone survey with a sample of 1,200 Lebanese adult respondents across Lebanon.

The 1,200 questionnaires were distributed proportionally to the number of residents in the nine governorates of Lebanon and the related 26 districts, based on the number of residents obtained from the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health Statistical Bulletin 2020.

Each governorate was stratified into districts. There was a total of 26 districts. The capital city of each district was selected for the survey, in addition to other villages, to ensure a proper representation by confession in each caza (district). Moreover, the distribution of the questionnaires by confession in each area was based on the confessional distribution of the registered number of voters in each area. This was done based on the 2022 official statistics of the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities.

Phone numbers in each caza were randomly and digitally selected. This was done by using a combined database consisting of the Ogero Telecom database for landline numbers as well as the Alfa and MTC databases for mobile numbers.

The phone survey was conducted with 1,200 respondents, following the below procedures:

- Five attempts to call each individual were made before classifying a non-response
- The calls were attempted on different days or times of the day to maximize the response rate

Once a respondent agreed to participate in the survey, the objectives of the survey were explained to them, and they were reassured of the voluntary, anonymous, and confidential nature of the survey.

Qualitative Interviews with Representatives from Civil Society Organizations

The national quantitative phone survey was complemented by thirty qualitative interviews that were conducted with representatives from civil society organizations.

The selected civil society organizations fit under one of the following three categories:

1. Civil society organizations in Beirut that have been very active in the aftermath of the Beirut port blast and whose work has encompassed advocating for accountability,
2. Civil society organizations across Lebanon that work on humanitarian assistance as well as on economic/financial support, and
3. Civil society organizations working on rights-based advocacy.

The selection was based on research that pinpointed civil society organizations either having good practices in building trust with their constituents or having had to face disinformation and defamation campaigns targeting their work or both.

The size of the civil society organizations ranged from less than ten employees and volunteers to more than 100 employees and volunteers. The majority of organizations' services extended to the local and national levels.

Civil society organizations' areas of work were varied and included access to information, anti-racism, democracy and electoral rights, environmental awareness and activism, human rights, interreligious dialogue and coexistence, legal awareness, localizing development, media freedom and rights, mental health and awareness, protection, social inclusion, social justice, transparency and combatting corruption, the rights of persons with disabilities, youth and women empowerment, and women and gender rights.

The questions that the interviewees were asked covered a variety of topics and were divided into five themes:

- Insights into communication and public outreach strategy, capacity, and impact,
- The Port of Beirut blast recovery, reconstruction, and accountability processes,
- Financial assistance to address the economic crises,
- Governance and reform,
- Misinformation, smearing, and intimidation, and
- Trust-building and response to public calls for transparency, accountability, and efficiency.

Interviewees were reassured of the voluntary nature of their participation and were given the liberty to fully or partially answer the questions asked to them or to skip answering questions that they believed did not fit within the scope of their work or that they preferred answering later in writing.

II Context

Civil society organizations in Lebanon find themselves grappling with a multitude of complex challenges. On one hand, they have been compelled to step into the void left by a faltering state, shouldering increased responsibilities in the face of crises that the government has struggled to address effectively (Fattouh, 2021). These crises range from economic hardships and political instability to public health concerns and the aftermath of catastrophic events. On the other hand, these CSOs operate within an environment marked by entrenched corruption and mismanagement, which significantly hampers their ability to fulfill their mission (United States Agency for International Development, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, and FHI360, 2022).

Positioned at this critical juncture with heightened responsibilities, CSOs have become a target of criticism from various quarters (The Pulse and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2021). This criticism often stems from disinformation, where their efforts are mischaracterized or distorted, or from genuine concerns that they may fall short of their extensive responsibilities, even when such responsibilities were not of their choosing but rather a necessity born out of the state's inability to meet the needs of the population. In navigating this challenging landscape, CSOs must contend with a delicate balancing act, seeking to make a positive impact in the face of formidable obstacles while countering both misinformation and high expectations.

CSOs also face many obstacles in light of the worsening crisis in Lebanon and security issues. Local CSOs additionally face difficulty in acquiring funding for their initiatives. Overall, today's shrinking space is a big obstacle which threatens already vulnerable individuals, notably activists, migrants, and individuals who are part of the LGBTQ community (Lebanon Support, 2021).

Indeed, in 2023, Lebanon's CSOs operate within an increasingly constricted civic environment. After enduring four years of a severe economic crisis, over 80% of the population has fallen into poverty, exacerbated by the dearth of key public services. The country grapples with electricity shortages, inflation, and internet disruptions, and brain drain has depleted crucial sectors like healthcare and education. Marginalized communities have become even more vulnerable. Journalists and activists face growing restrictions, while gender-based violence, negative rhetoric, and hate speech targeting the LGBTQ community have surged. The investigation into the Beirut port explosion remains obstructed.

Furthermore, CSOs in Lebanon have come under heightened scrutiny, driven by the surge in disinformation and concerns over mismanagement and corruption. With the ongoing crisis, Lebanese CSOs have been compelled to play a larger role in filling the void left by the state. Justin Salhani (2022) sheds light on the growing problem of disinformation in Lebanon, distinguishing it from misinformation due to its deliberate deceitful nature. Salhani points to two specific instances of disinformation during the 2019 protests and in the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut port explosion, where NGOs were unfairly vilified, accused of excessive funding, and alleged collaborations with foreign governments.

It's worth noting that the linguistic diversity of Arabic dialects complicates disinformation monitoring, particularly on social media platforms such as Facebook. Additionally, certain political factions maintain well-resourced online electronic armies that can stifle dissenting voices. This is of particular concern as interviewed CSOs have identified Facebook and WhatsApp, platforms central to their outreach, as major sources of disinformation in this context (Salhani, 2022).

Despite these challenges, non-sectarian civil society actors have managed to gain the public's trust and to increasingly call for reforms and work towards them. Additionally, throughout the years, CSOs and civil society actors have increased their collaboration with other CSOs and actors (Plan International, 2021). CSOs across Lebanon have also benefitted from several strengths which they have developed throughout the years. Indeed, The Pulse and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS)'s 2021 pilot mapping study recalls CSOs' 'well-established presence' in Lebanon, their good communication abilities, good planning and advocacy, strong community involvement, the big pools of volunteers that they tend to have, their non-sectarian nature, and their integrity.

III Research Findings

Survey Results

This section begins by presenting the findings of the survey, starting by outlining the sample description followed by defining CSOs and their responsibilities in relation to the response to the recovery and reconstruction after the Port of Beirut blast and the economic crisis and CSOs' perceived roles according to respondents. It then delves into

examining respondents' level of trust in entities that contributed to the reconstruction and humanitarian response after the Beirut Port blast and their level of trust in entities that delivered aid and assistance throughout the financial and economic crisis.

Additionally discussed findings include the regulation of CSOs' work in Lebanon's crisis context, the performance of the Lebanese government in managing Lebanon's crisis, and respondents' most trusted sources of political information. Respondents' familiarity with the work of CSOs in Lebanon is likewise elaborated on along with respondents' intake of online information and false news. The survey results end by offering a snapshot into respondents' perceptions of religious and politically affiliated CSOs, CSOs and political affiliation, and the performance and effectiveness of CSOs.

Sample description

The sample consisted of 1,200 respondents, equally divided by gender (50% males and 50% females). 21.3% of respondents were aged between 30 and 39 years, 20.8% were aged between 50-59 years, 20% were between the ages of 40 and 49 years, 17.7% were between the ages of 18 and 29, 16.8% were between the ages of 60 and 69, and 3.5% were above 70 years of age.

The sample was distributed proportionally to the number of residents in the nine governorates of Lebanon. The sample distribution also took into account a proportional distribution of respondents by sect.

28.8% of respondents were housewives, 25.2% were self-employed, 19.4% worked in a private company, and 14.4% were unemployed at the time of the survey.

24.3% of the surveyed households reported having a monthly income of less than 9 million LBP, 20.9% had an income between 9 and 15 million LBP, 16.5% had an income ranging between 15 and 20 million LBP, 11.5% had an income between 20 and 30 million LBP, 12.6% had an income between 30 and 100 million LBP, and 3.7% had an income above 100 million LBP. 10.5% of respondents refused to answer this question.

Defining CSOs and their Responsibilities

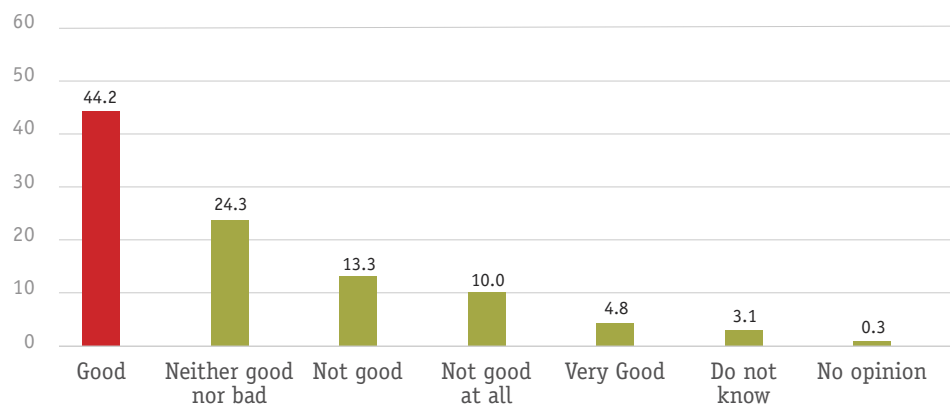
Recovery and Reconstruction after the Port of Beirut Blast and the Economic Crisis

88.3% of respondents had a negative evaluation of the government's response to the recovery and reconstruction following the port of Beirut

blast since 2020. 69.1% of respondents evaluated the government's response as 'Not good at all' and 19.2% of respondents evaluated it as 'Not good.'

Asked about civil society organizations' response following the Beirut port blast, 44.2% of respondents evaluated it as 'Good' while only 13.3% evaluated it as 'Not good,' as represented in Graph 1.

Graph 1 How would you evaluate CSOs in responding to the Port of Beirut blast since 2020? (%)

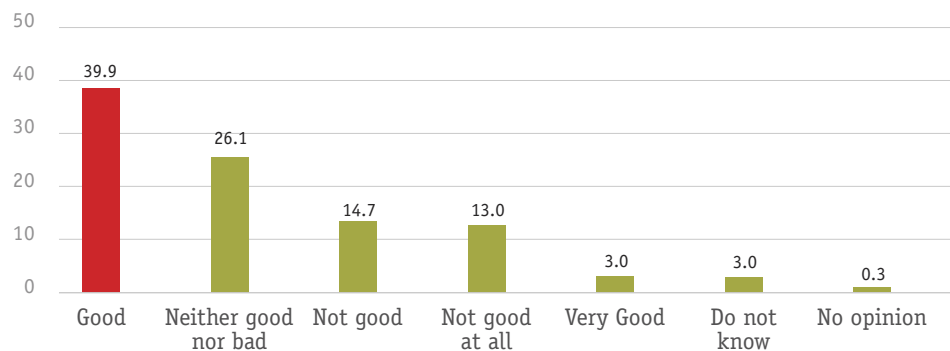


Base: 1,200

As for the government's response to the economic crisis, 92% of respondents evaluated it negatively with 72.9% of respondents classifying it as 'Not good at all' and 19.1% of respondents considering it 'Not good.'

In comparison, the response of CSOs to Lebanon's crisis was deemed 'Good' by 39.9% of respondents, whereas 14.7% of respondents and 13% of respondents respectively evaluated it as 'Not good' and 'Not good at all,' based on Graph 2.

Graph 2 How would you evaluate civil society organizations in responding to the country's crisis since 2019? (%)



Base: 1,200

Looking at the distribution of the results by governorate of residence, Akkar scored the highest (60.7%) in evaluating CSOs' response to the country's crisis as 'Good,' followed by Mount Lebanon and Baalbek/Hermel that recorded around 43% each for the same answer. Conversely, 33.3% of Beirut residents considered CSOs' response to Lebanon's crisis as 'Not good at all,' as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 How would you evaluate civil society organizations in responding to the country's crisis since 2019? - By Governorate (%)

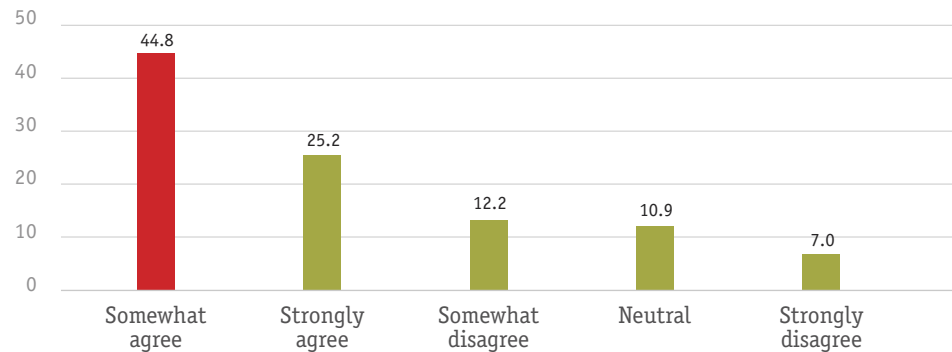
	Beirut	Mount Lebanon	Jbeil/ Keserwan	North	Akkar	South	Nabatieh	Baalbek/ Hermel	Bekaa	Total
Good	36.0	42.9	38.6	37.7	60.7	31.4	36.8	43.0	30.5	39.9
Neither good nor bad	21.6	26.4	27.1	28.0	12.4	30.0	28.4	22.6	35.4	26.1
Not good	8.1	10.7	17.1	17.1	12.4	12.9	21.1	23.7	20.7	14.7
Not good at all	33.3	11.0	11.4	5.7	12.4	22.9	6.3	5.4	11.0	13.0
Very good	0.9	2.9	0.0	6.3	1.1	0.0	6.3	5.4	2.4	3.0
Do not know	0.0	5.2	5.7	4.6	1.1	2.9	1.1	0.0	0.0	3.0
No opinion	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Perceived Role of CSOs

Respondents were asked to mark their level of agreement with four statements regarding the roles that they perceive CSOs should be playing. These statements were as follows: 'CSOs should be watchdogs and monitor the activities of public institutions and actors;' 'CSOs should advocate for core rights (like human rights, civil liberties, accountability...);' 'CSOs should deliver aid and assistance particularly to vulnerable groups;' and 'CSOs should provide infrastructure support where the government does not.'

70% of respondents agree that 'CSOs should be watchdogs and monitor the activities of public institutions and actors.' These are divided into 44.8% of respondents who somewhat agree with the statement and 25.2% of respondents who strongly agree with the statement. On the other hand, 12.2% of respondents somewhat disagree and 7% of respondents strongly disagree with the mentioned statement, as shown in Graph 3.

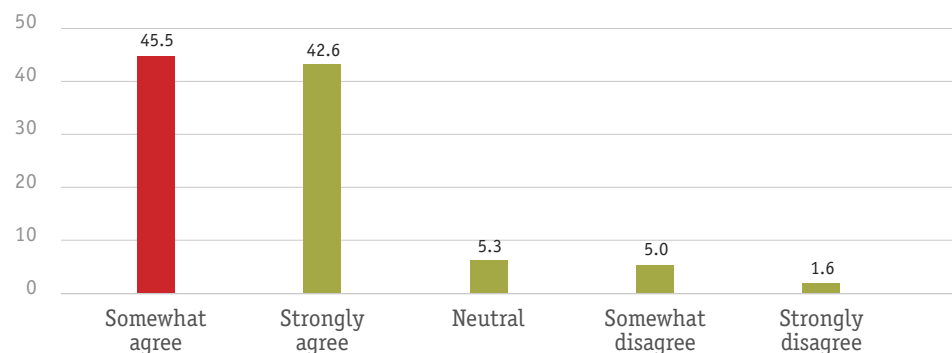
Graph 3 'CSOs should be watchdogs and monitor the activities of public institutions and actors' (%)



Base: 1,200

Additionally, 88.1% of respondents agree that CSOs should advocate for core rights such as human rights, civil liberties, and accountability. This percentage encompasses 45.5% of respondents who somewhat agree and 42.6% of respondents who strongly agree, as per Graph 4.

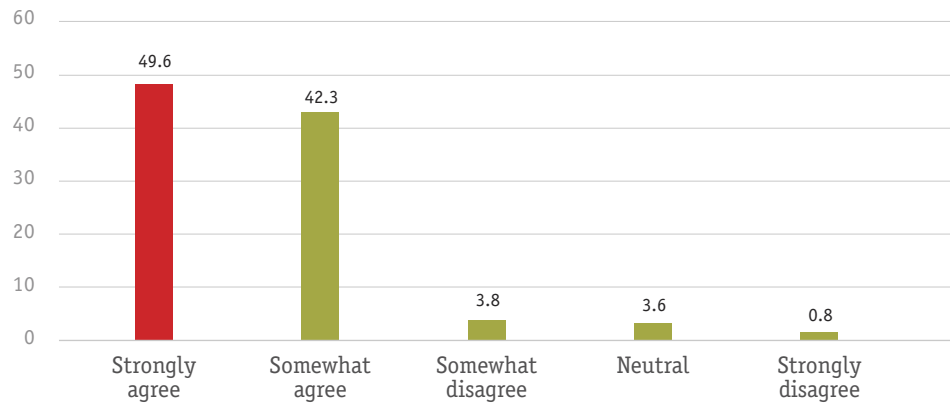
Graph 4 'CSOs should advocate for core rights (like human rights, civil liberties, accountability...)' (%)



Base: 1,200

The same goes for the statement 'CSOs should deliver aid and assistance, particularly to vulnerable groups,' where 49.6% of respondents and 42.3% of respondents respectively strongly agree and somewhat agree, according to Graph 5.

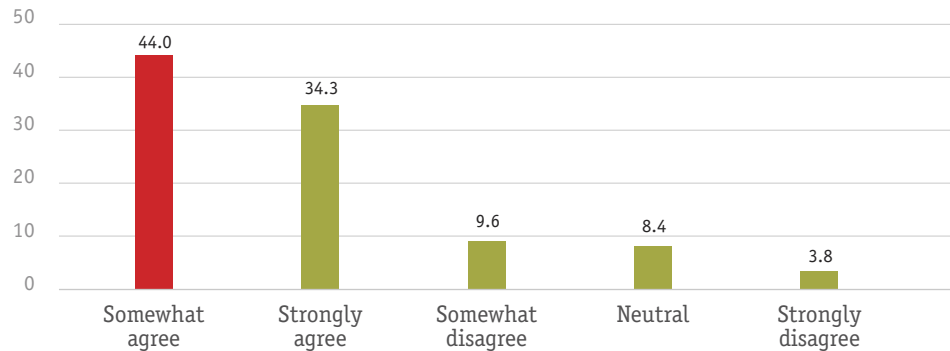
Graph 5 'CSOs should deliver aid and assistance, particularly to vulnerable groups' (%)



Base: 1,200

As for the role of CSOs in providing infrastructural support where the government does not, 44% of respondents somewhat agree with this statement compared to 34.3% of respondents who strongly agree. Only 9.6% of respondents somewhat disagree and 3.8% of respondents strongly disagree with the related statement, as seen in Graph 6.

Graph 6 'CSOs should provide infrastructure support where the government does not' (%)



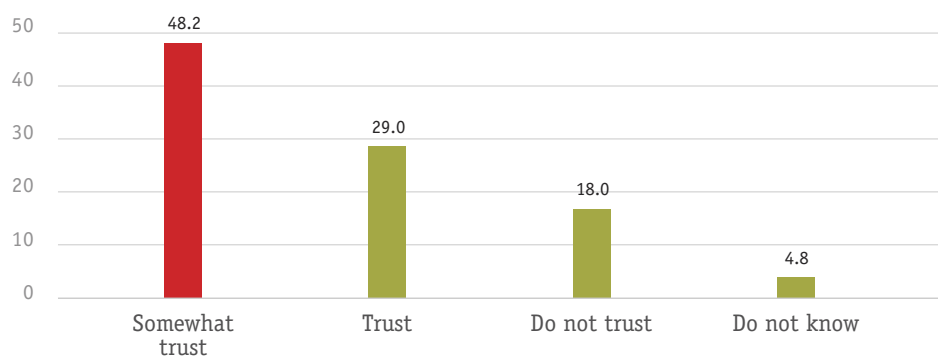
Base: 1,200

Moreover, 77% of all respondents agree that CSOs should fulfill all the aforementioned roles. Out of these 77% of respondents, 55% of respondents somewhat agree and 22% of respondents strongly agree. 12.6% had a neutral opinion. This statement showcases respondents' perceived need for a replacement for the government, which is unable to perform most of its core duties.

Level of Trust in Entities that Contributed to the Reconstruction and Humanitarian Response after the Port of Beirut Blast

When asked about their level of trust in the entities that contributed to the reconstruction and humanitarian response after the port of Beirut blast, 77.2% of respondents expressed their trust in 'local CSOs,' with 48.2% of respondents expressing some trust and 29% of respondents expressing 'trust.' Only 18% of respondents stated that they don't trust 'local CSOs,' as per Graph 7.

Graph 7 After the Port of Beirut blast, list your level of trust in 'local CSOs' who contributed to the reconstruction and humanitarian response (%)



Base: 1,200

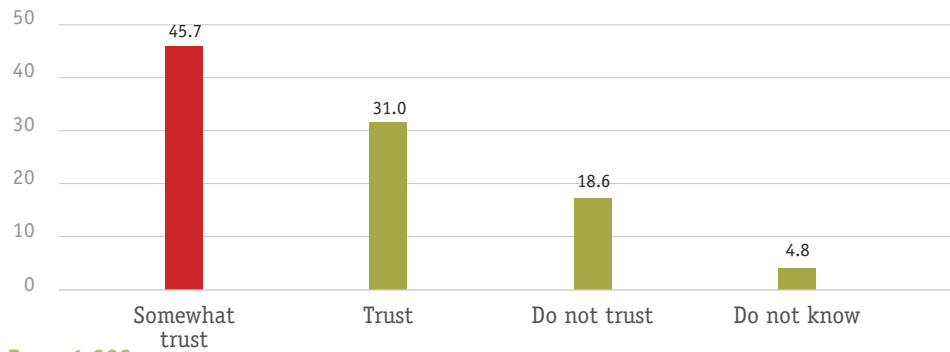
Noteworthy, is that when asked about their trust in the contribution of the government to the reconstruction and humanitarian response to the Port of Beirut blast, 87.5% of respondents expressed no trust in the government while only 2% of respondents stated that they have trust in it. Similarly, 79.7% of respondents did not trust political parties for their contribution to the reconstruction and humanitarian response and 72.2% did not trust religious institutions who participated in the response.

Level of Trust in Entities that Delivered Aid and Assistance Throughout the Financial and Economic Crisis

Regarding the ongoing financial and economic crisis, respondents were asked to rank their level of trust in the delivery of aid and assistance by some groups/organizations.

For 'local CSOs,' 45.7% of respondents reported that they somewhat trusted local CSOs' delivery of aid and assistance, followed by 31% of respondents who stated they trusted it. On the other hand, 18.6% mentioned that they have no trust in "local CSOs" in this regard, as shown in Graph 8.

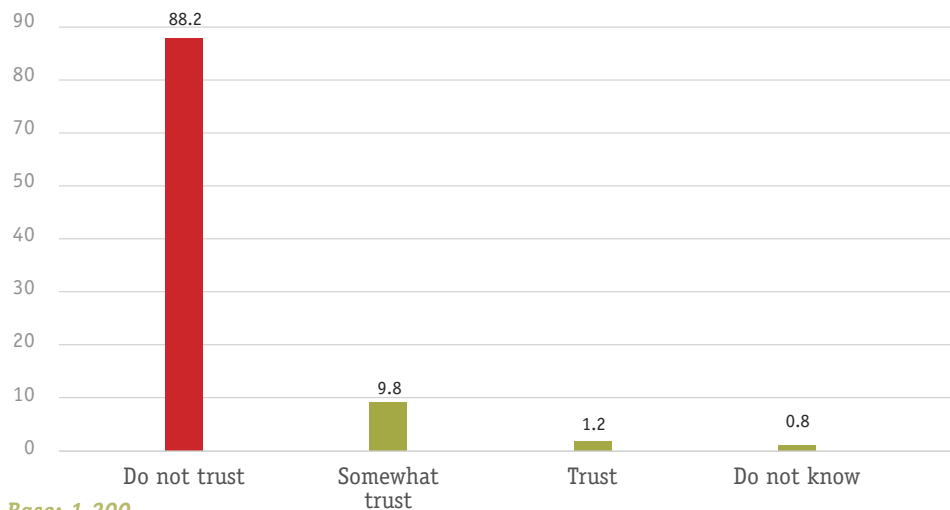
Graph 8 Regarding assistance and aid throughout the ongoing financial and economic crisis, rank your level of trust with the delivery of aid and assistance of 'local CSOs' (%)



Base: 1,200

The highest rate of lack of trust in the assistance and aid provided throughout the ongoing financial and economic crisis was recorded for the Lebanese government (88.2%), where only 1.2% of respondents trust it, as shown in Graph 9.

Graph 9 Regarding assistance and aid throughout the ongoing financial and economic crisis, rank your level of trust with the delivery of aid and assistance of the government (%)



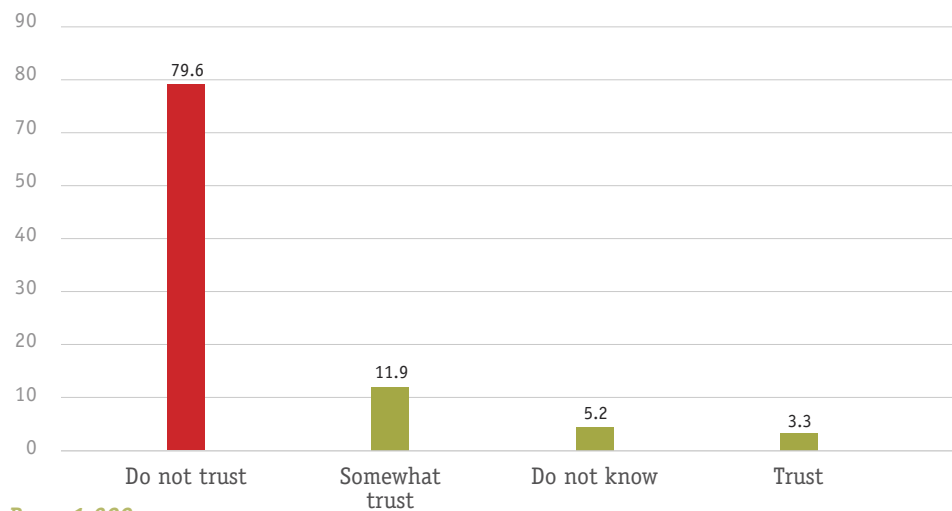
Base: 1,200

Looking at the results by governorate of residence, over 90% of respondents in all governorates don't trust the delivery of aid and assistance by the Lebanese government throughout the ongoing financial and economic crisis.

Another high level of no trust (79.6%) was recorded when respondents were asked about their level of trust in the aid and assistance provided by political parties throughout the economic crisis. Only 11.9% of

respondents stated that they somewhat trust political parties in delivering aid and assistance during the ongoing crises, while only 3.3% of respondents trust them in this process, as per Graph 10.

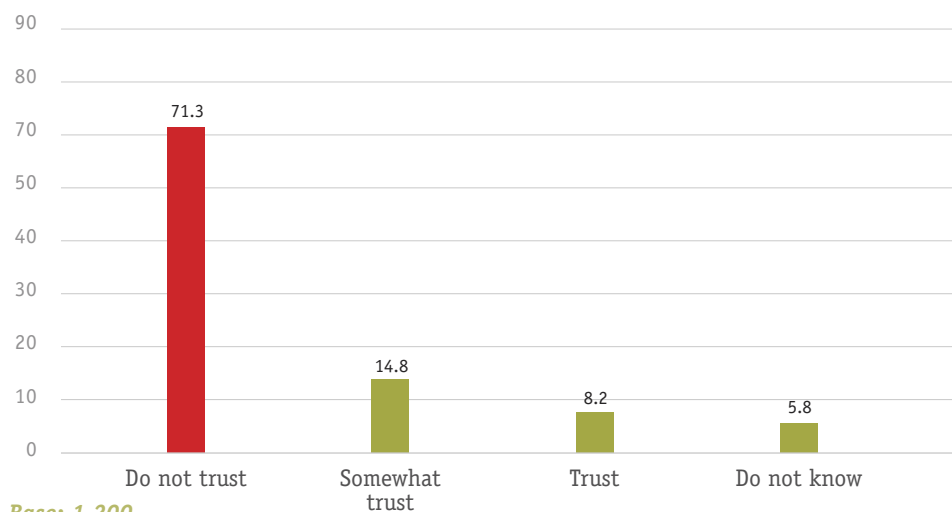
Graph 10 Regarding assistance and aid throughout the ongoing financial and economic crisis, rank your level of trust in the delivery of aid and assistance of political parties (%)



Base: 1,200

The same trend of lack of trust also applies to the delivery of aid and assistance by religious institutions throughout the financial crisis, with 71.3% of respondents not trusting them in this process. Only 14.8% of respondents expressed some trust in religious institutions' delivery of aid and assistance during the crisis and 8.2% of respondents expressed trust in them in this process.

Graph 11 Regarding assistance and aid throughout the ongoing financial and economic crisis, rank your level of trust with the delivery of aid and assistance of religious institutions (%)

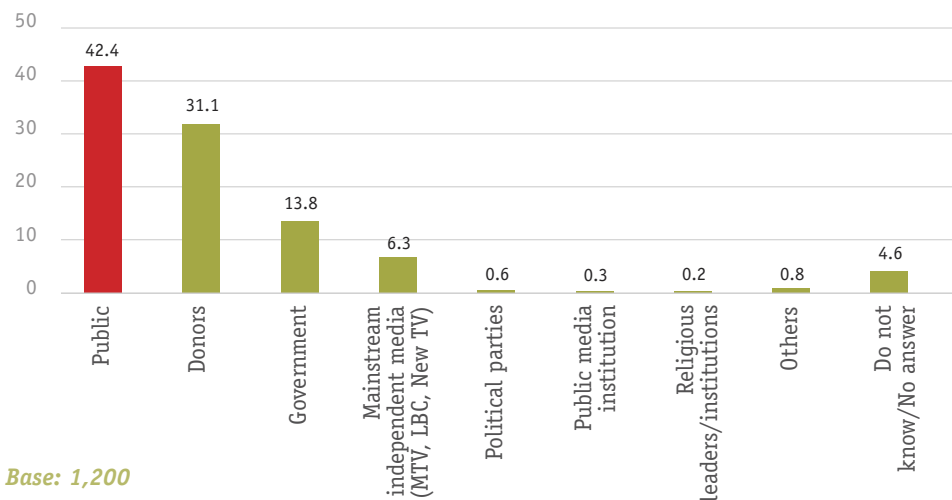


Base: 1,200

Regulation of CSO Work in Lebanon's Crisis Context

When asked who should regulate and hold CSOs accountable in Lebanon's crisis context, 42.4% of respondents believed that this is the role of the public, 31.1% believed that it is the role of donors, 13.8% believed that it was the role of the government, and 6.3% allocated this responsibility to the media. These numbers are reflected in Graph 12.

Graph 12 Who do you believe should regulate and hold accountable CSOs in Lebanon's crisis context? (%)

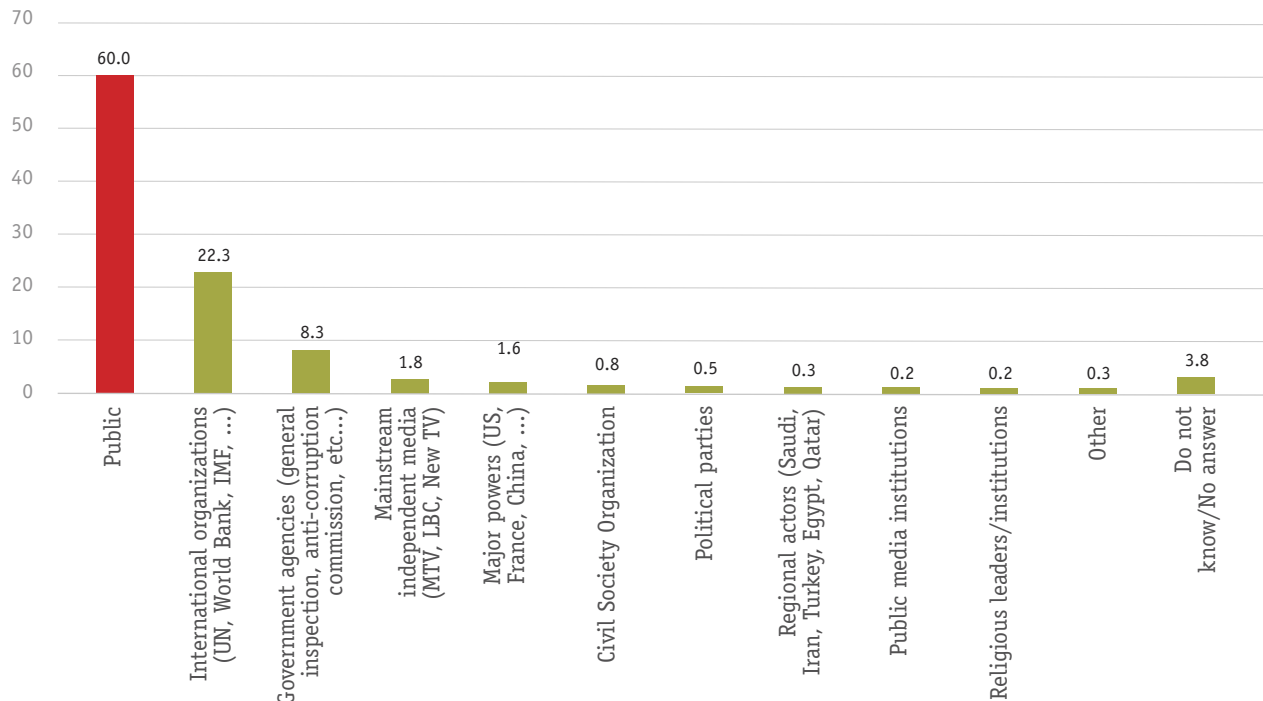


Base: 1,200

Monitoring the Performance of the Lebanese Government in Managing Lebanon's Crisis

The 'public' also ranked first on the list of entities that should monitor and hold the government accountable for its performance in managing Lebanon's crisis (60%). Percentages dropped significantly for other answers such as international organizations (22.3%) and government agencies (8.3%). A mere 0.8% of respondents believed that CSOs should monitor the performance of the government in managing Lebanon's crisis, as portrayed in Graph 13.

Graph 13 Who do you believe should monitor and hold accountable the performance of the government in managing Lebanon's crisis? (%)



Base: 1,200

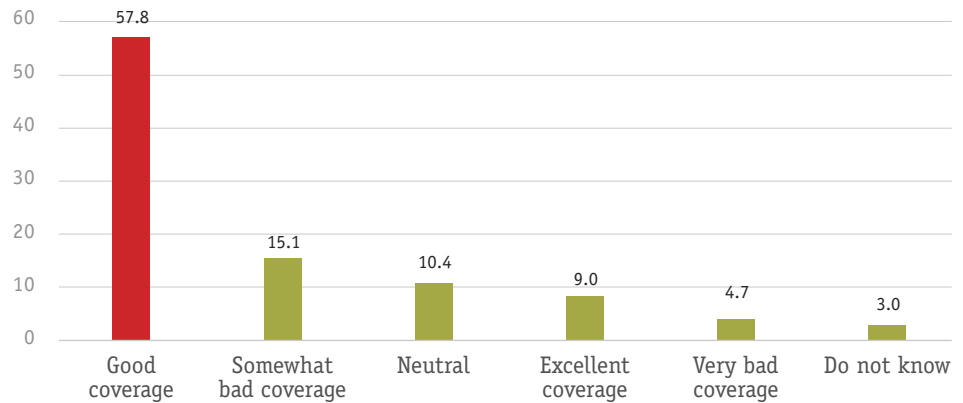
Most Trusted Source of Political Information

The Lebanese public receives the majority of its news from mainly two sources: 46.6% of them receive that news through mainstream independent media while 34.8% receive it from social media. It is interesting to note that approximately 50% of young people aged 18-39 rely on social media while more than 50% of those above this age group rely on mainstream independent media (MTV, LBC, New TV). 8.2% of respondents rely on word mouth to receive trusted political information. Partisan media outlets are trusted by only 5.6% of the general public while public media institutions scored 4%.

Respondents were then asked to assess the coverage of CSOs' work since 2019 by the various sources of political information.

As for the 'mainstream independent media' coverage of CSOs' work since 2019, more than half (57.8%) of respondents evaluated it as 'good' and another 9% of respondents deemed it 'excellent,' compared to 15.1% of respondents who assessed it as 'somewhat bad' and 4.7% of respondents who deemed it 'very bad,' as portrayed in Graph 14.

Graph 14 How would you assess the 'mainstream independent media' coverage of the work of CSOs since 2019? (%)



Base: 1,200

When asked to evaluate the coverage of social media for the work of CSOs, less than half of the respondents (46.1%) reported 'good coverage,' with 22.9% of respondents reporting 'somewhat bad' coverage, and 13.3% of respondents adopting a neutral stance. Looking at the distribution of the results by age, younger respondents aged between 18 and 29 scored the highest in evaluating the coverage of social media of CSOs' work since 2019 as 'good' (62.3%), followed by 51.4% of respondents aged 30-39 who gave the same evaluation. On the other hand, respondents aged 70 and above scored only 16.7% for the same answer.

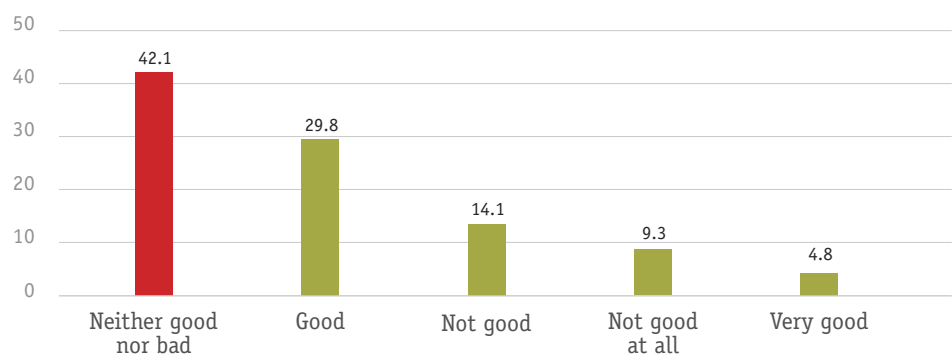
A negative trend was also recorded for the assessment of the coverage of party leaders and partisan media outlets of CSOs' work, where 28.9% of respondents assessed it as 'very bad' and 16.8% of respondents deemed it 'somewhat bad,' compared to 19.8% of respondents who assessed it as 'good,' and a mere 3.3% of respondents who considered it 'excellent.' 18% of respondents reported a neutral stance.

The word-of-mouth coverage of CSOs' work since 2019 was also assessed as 'Somewhat bad' by 33% of respondents, with 19% of respondents expressing that it was 'very bad,' compared to 21.9% of respondents who reported 'good coverage' for this source.

Familiarity with the Work of CSOs in Lebanon

When asked to describe their familiarity with the work of CSOs in Lebanon, 42.1% of respondents reported it as ‘neither good nor bad.’ 29.8% of respondents stated that their familiarity with CSOs’ work in Lebanon was ‘good’ while 14.1% of respondents reported their familiarity with CSOs’ work in Lebanon as ‘not good,’ as shown in Graph 15.

Graph 15 How would you describe your familiarity with the work of CSOs in Lebanon?

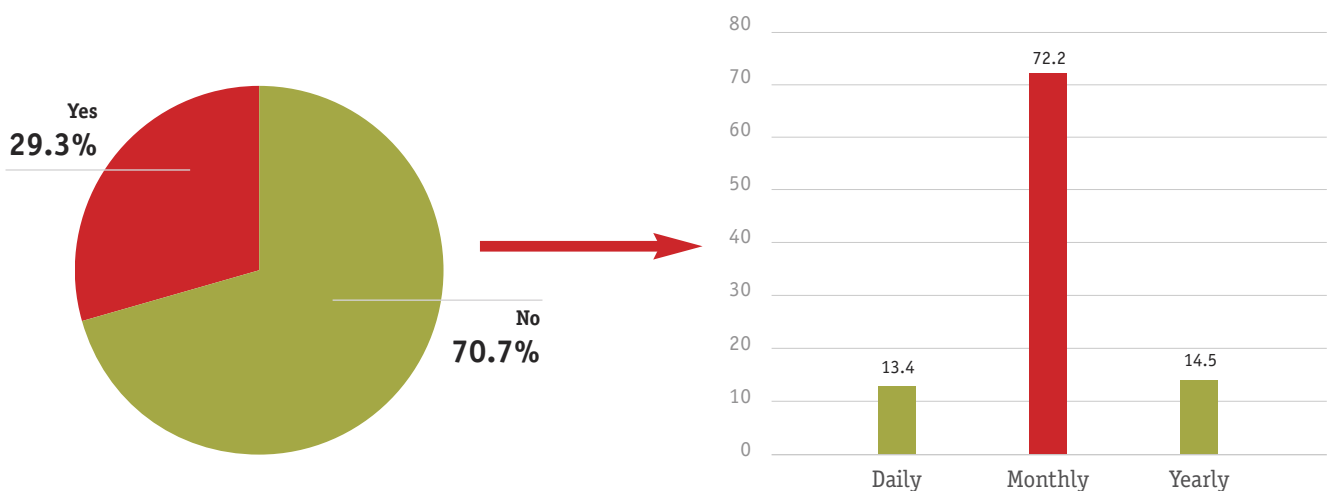


Base: 1,200

Online Information and False News

29.3% of respondents stated that they received news regarding CSOs that turned out to be false. Out of them, 72.2% reported that this occurs monthly, 14.5% stated that this happens yearly, and 13.4% mentioned that this happens to them on a daily basis, as per Graph 16.

Graph 16 Have you ever received news regarding CSOs in Lebanon that later turned out to be false? If yes, how often did it happen? (%)



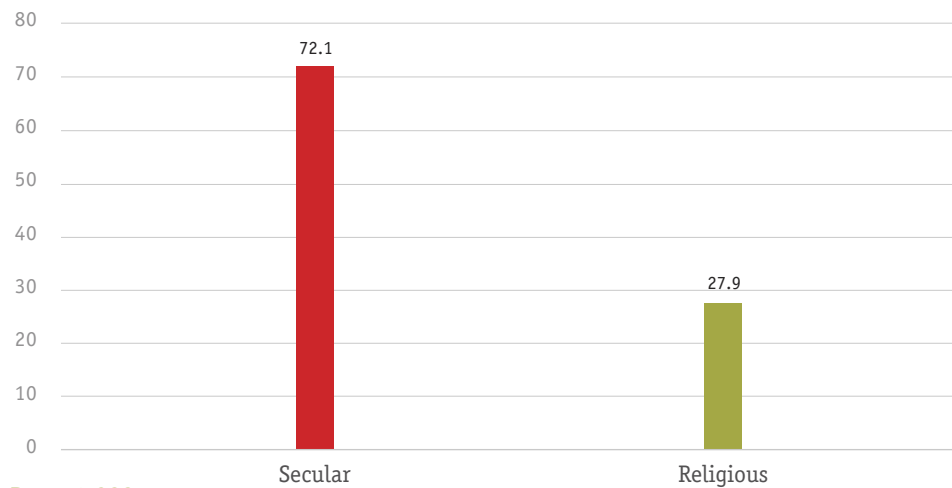
Base: 1,200

Base: 352

Religious and Politically Affiliated CSOs

72.1% of respondents preferred to engage with a secular CSO, while only 27.9% of respondents preferred to engage with a religiously affiliated CSO, according to Graph 17.

Graph 17 Do you prefer to engage with a secular or religiously affiliated CSO? (%)

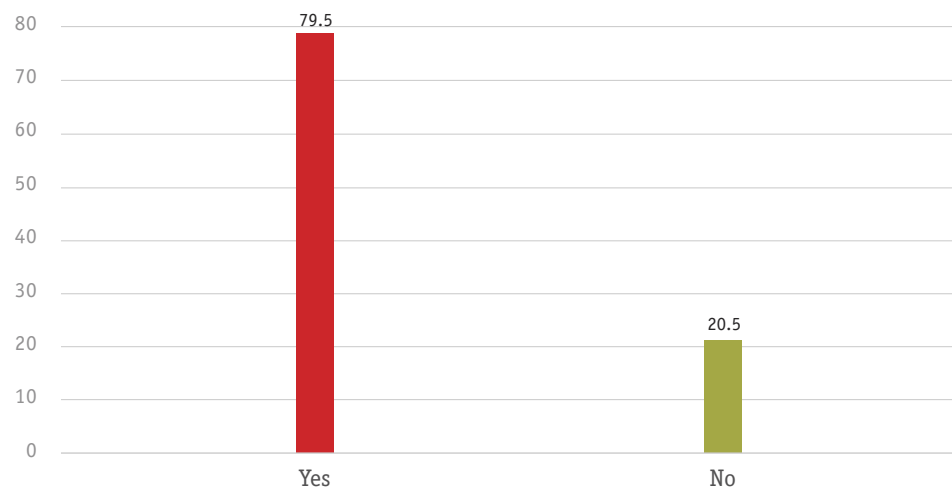


Base: 1,200

Observing the results by governorate, respondents across most governorates preferred to engage with a secular CSO. When asked if they would accept aid from politically affiliated CSOs, 49.1% of respondents stated that they would refuse such aid, while 40.3% of respondents stated that they would accept it and 10.1% reported that they may accept such aid.

In terms of receiving services from a religious CSO outside of their sect, 79.5% of respondents replied positively, compared to only 20.5% who replied negatively, according to Graph 18.

Graph 18 Are you willing to receive services from a religious CSO outside your sect? (%)

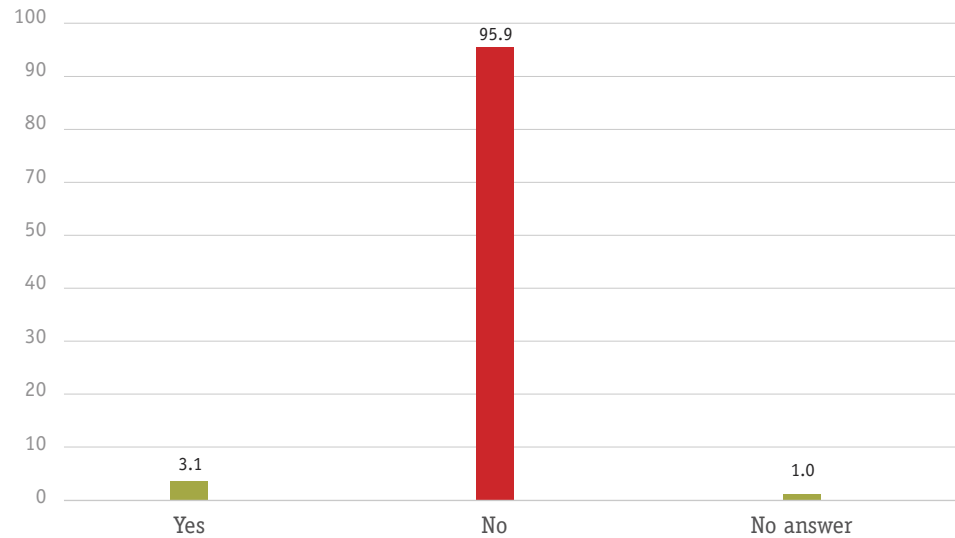


Base: 1,200

CSOs and Political Affiliation

95.9% of respondents denied having received any assistance or aid from a politically affiliated NGO, as relayed in Graph 20.

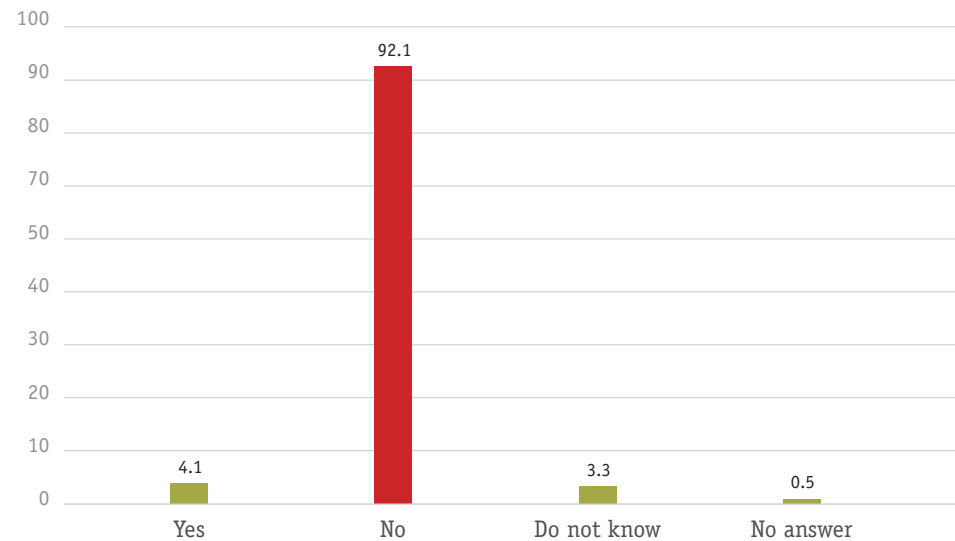
Graph 20 Have you ever received any assistance or aid from a politically affiliated CSO? (%)



Base: 1,200

It is worth mentioning that 92.1% of respondents reported that CSOs should not be allowed to have political affiliations, according to Graph 21.

Graph 21 Do you think CSOs should be allowed to have political affiliations? (%)



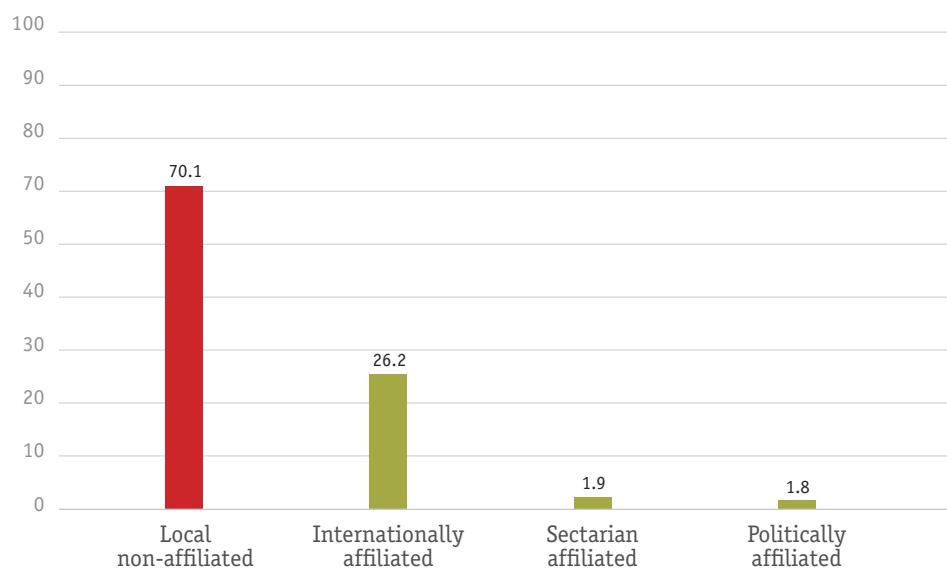
Base: 1,200

The distribution of results by governorate of residence shows a high rate of refusal across all governorates where the majority of respondents negatively answered this question. However, relatively higher rates of approval to the statement that CSOs should be allowed to have political affiliations were recorded in Jbeil/Keserwan (14.3%) and Baalbeck/Hermel (18.3%).

Performance and Effectiveness of CSOs

The perception that CSOs should not be allowed to have political affiliations was further confirmed when respondents were asked to rank by order of preference their trust in various CSOs. The highest level of trust was accorded to local non-affiliated CSOs (70.1%). Percentages dropped significantly for other CSOs, reaching 26.2% for internationally affiliated CSOs, 1.9% for sectarian affiliated CSOs and only 1.8% for politically affiliated CSOs, as evidenced in Graph 22.

Graph 22 Rank in order of preference the degree of trust in CSOs (%)



Base: 1,200

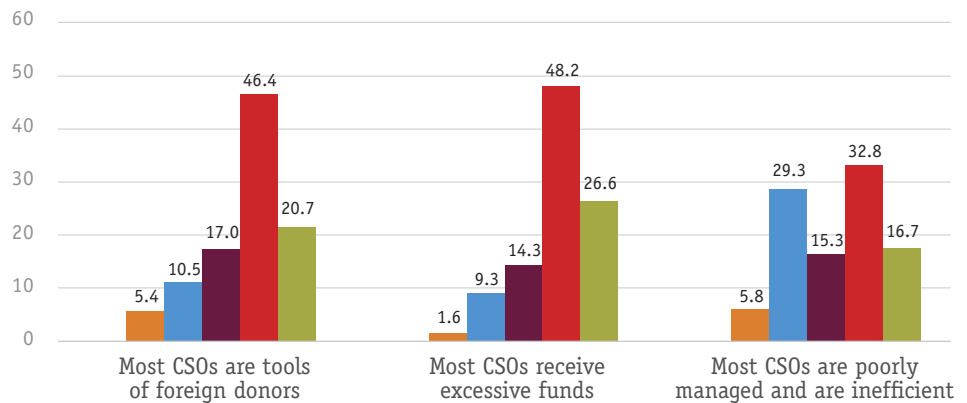
Finally, respondents were asked to give an assessment of the effectiveness and performance of CSOs.

In this context, the highest rate of respondents reported to 'somewhat agree' on most of the negative statements related to CSOs, such as:

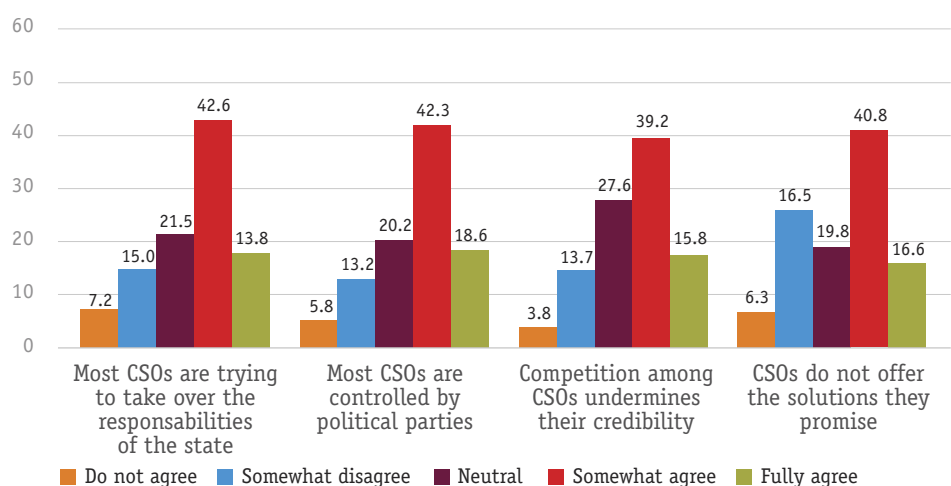
- Most CSOs are tools of foreign donors (46.4% of respondents)
- Most CSOs receive excessive funds (48.2% of respondents)

- Most CSOs are poorly managed and are inefficient (32.8% of respondents somewhat agreed versus 29.3% of respondents who somewhat disagreed)
- Most CSOs are trying to take over the responsibilities of the state (42.6% of respondents)
- Most CSOs are controlled by political parties (42.3% of respondents)
- Competition among CSOs undermines their credibility (39.2% of respondents)
- CSOs do not offer the solutions they promise (40.8% of respondents)

Graph 23 After 2019, the port blast, and the economic crisis, how do you evaluate your response to the following statements on your perception of the role and performance of CSOs? (%)



Base: 1,200



Base: 1,200

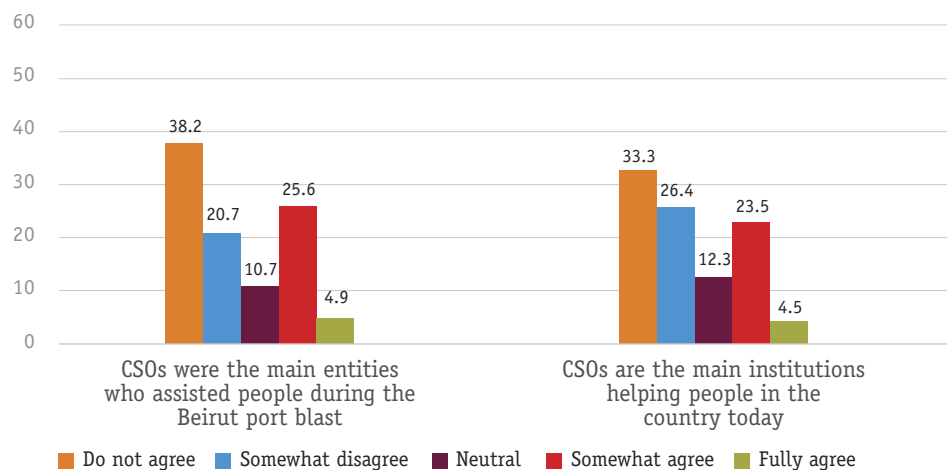
Two exceptions were recorded in this context for the following statements:

- Most CSOs are corrupt (31.3% of respondents somewhat disagreed versus 30.2% of respondents who somewhat agreed)
- CSOs are changing our way of life and have an ideological agenda (32.7% of respondents were neutral versus 31.5% of respondents who somewhat agreed).

Respondents were then asked to evaluate their response to another set of statements (of favorable dimensions) on their perception of the role and performance of CSOs after 2019 and following the Beirut port blast and the economic crisis.

When asked to evaluate their perception of whether CSOs were the main entities who assisted people during the Beirut port blast or whether CSOs were the main institutions helping people in the country today, 38.2% of respondents and 33.3% of respondents respectively reported not agreeing with these statements.

Graph 24 After 2019, the port blast, and the economic crisis, how do you evaluate your response to the following statements on your perception of the role and performance of CSOs? Favorable Dimensions to CSOs (1/2) (%)



Base: 1,200

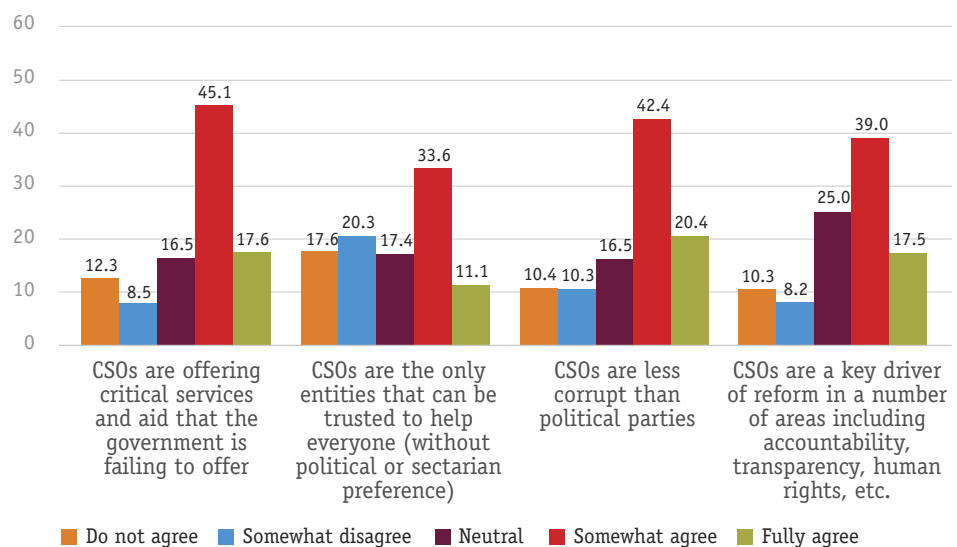
45.1% of respondents reported to 'somewhat agree' that CSOs are offering critical services and aid that the government is failing to offer.

The same trend applies to the remaining statements in this section, where the highest percentage of responses was recorded for the 'somewhat agree' response:

- 'CSOs are the only entities that can be trusted to help everyone (without political or sectarian preference) (33.6% of respondents somewhat agree)

- CSOs are less corrupt than political parties (42.4% of respondents somewhat agree)
- CSOs are a key driver of reform in a number of areas including accountability, transparency, human rights, etc. (39% of respondents somewhat agree).

Graph 25 After 2019, the port blast, and the economic crisis, how do you evaluate your response to the following statements on your perception of the role and performance of CSOs? Favorable Dimensions to CSOs (2/2) (%)



Base: 1,200

Key Informant Interviews

This research also utilized Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to gain insights from CSOs. These interviews aimed to understand the efforts, perspectives, and challenges faced by CSOs, shaping public perceptions. As such, the following analysis begins by looking at the contribution made by CSOs during the Beirut Port blast and their assistance to individuals during the unfolding economic crises. It also highlights the mounting struggles that they have been battling through in light of the ongoing collapse, including the misinformation, intimidation, and defamation campaigns that they have been subjected to or that they may be vulnerable to.

This section also delves into the ways in which CSOs have handled these campaigns and how they have strived to build trust with their constituents throughout the years. This includes maintaining active communication with their beneficiaries and constituents both online and offline. Stemming from their experience in building trust with

constituents, CSOs also offered their thoughts on the ways in which the government could better govern Lebanon.

The Port of Beirut blast recovery, reconstruction, and accountability processes

Interviewed CSOs stressed how their staff felt deeply impacted by the Beirut port blast and how it touched their common Lebanese identity. They all expressed a desire and willingness to help in whichever way they could.

For some CSOs, the blast disrupted their work because their offices were impacted, or their staff were injured, or they had family members in Beirut. Many CSOs recalled receiving calls from beneficiaries or other individuals needing help. CSOs' priorities were to check up on their beneficiaries living in the impacted areas, assess the general situation, context, needs, and resources, and help out.

Their initiatives were varied and catered to diverse needs. They gathered as many volunteers as they could and published additional calls for volunteers on their social media pages and in WhatsApp groups. Many CSOs distributed hygiene kits, food, medicine, and furniture. Some of them focused on the rehabilitation process, which included upcycling furniture and recycling wood and glass. Others attempted to provide shelter for those whose homes were destroyed, created soup kitchens, established mobile clinics, and provided psychological support.

Thinking about the most vulnerable who now had to fight off an added layer of vulnerability, some CSOs mentioned creating cash-for-work programs prioritizing female-led households and widows. Disability rights were at the forefront of other CSOs' minds, noting the need to document new cases of disability. The same is true for migrant workers who were injured or deceased due to the blast. Supporting small and medium-sized businesses and craftspeople was another area of focus for some CSOs.

Among CSOs on the ground, many of them launched fundraisers and created websites to spread knowledge about the blast and ways in which individuals could donate to help relief efforts. Many of them simultaneously engaged in consultations and high-level discussions. They also joined efforts in their initiatives on the ground. They referred individuals to each other depending on the type of service that was needed. They built partnerships with each other and with other actors

to avoid duplication of efforts. They also coordinated with the Red Cross and with the army, as it was the main representative of the state on the ground.

When asked about the feedback received for their post-blast efforts, all CSOs stated that it was mostly positive. Some negative incidents did occur, but these were a minority. They included competition among CSOs, duplicated initiatives, the marginalization of certain neighborhoods, and the non-sustainability of certain initiatives in the longer run.

Reflecting on how the blast impacted their capacities and responsibilities, all interviewed CSOs expressed the weight of people's needs and expectations versus their modest abilities to help. Some of them relayed that they were not humanitarian in nature but tried to reorient part of their resources to help on the ground or they concentrated their expertise to write about the blast. Others who were humanitarian in scope shared how they did not have expertise in certain fields but were prompted by constituents to help. The insistence of their constituents and the availability of local funding to them led them to agree. This meant that they were learning on the go. They hired experts where they could or attempted to use the skills of craftspeople and small and medium businesses, while recruiting volunteers to assist.

Financial assistance to address the economic crises

Interviewed CSOs shared how the Beirut port blast came at an already difficult time due to the ongoing economic crises that Lebanon had been battling and which would be felt for years to come.

Faced with increasing needs and demands from constituents, CSOs felt even more pressure to serve their communities. Their efforts were hindered by various challenges including difficulties in getting approvals and in having paperwork completed. They were also expected to help more individuals in need while being on a tighter budget and suffering from staff shortages due to deteriorating salaries, brain drain, and high turnover rates, as their staff either went abroad or went to international NGOs.

The high prices of electricity and fuel added a layer of complexity, in addition to internet shortages impacting their ability to reach constituents and the latter's ability to reach national hotlines. Higher transportation costs translated into a reduced ability to conduct in-person events. Countrywide strikes and protests also disrupted the work of the judiciary, which is essential in case management processes.

Court order enforcement mechanisms were also disrupted as the ISF lacked funds to do so. Settling tax payments and NSSF dues became more complicated. The banking crisis further restricted CSOs' access to their own funds and made it tougher to comply with donor requests.

An added challenge was the public's deteriorating perception of CSOs who were seen as recipients of foreign funding and accused of having their own agendas. This was very disappointing for CSOs to hear and know. Unfortunately, CSOs expressed that many individuals in Lebanon do not understand how funding is used and the strict reporting, monitoring, evaluation, and audit rules that CSOs must comply with.

Financial assistance to individuals across the country came in many forms, including budget reallocations, the creation of new CSO projects, cash assistance or cash-for-work projects, one-time monetary sums, and focusing on priority projects and programs. Hotlines were deemed a priority, as well as case management, lobbying, and helping the most vulnerable and underserved communities.

Recycling or repurposing items was also a way of meeting some of the rising needs. Throughout these endeavors, CSOs insisted on the need to keep beneficiaries' data confidential and on asking for their consent before sharing anything related to them online. This was particularly important when assisting already vulnerable individuals such as widows, youth, elderly, persons with disabilities and victims of gender-based violence.

Misinformation, smearing, and intimidation

Despite their efforts to assist individuals to the best of their abilities, CSOs shared that they were prone to receiving threats and attempts at intimidation from individuals and groups within the society. When asked to elaborate on these incidents, they shared receiving threatening phone calls or messages or negative comments while on the ground. Some were also threatened by parents or family members when handling cases of gender-based violence, or working on sensitive topics such as LGBT assistance and advocacy. Some individuals even went as far as finding out who these CSOs' donors are and directly communicating with the donors. Another worrisome aspect was the misinformation that was sometimes spread about CSOs or their programming.

In facing these threats, many CSOs expressed their preference to ignore them, including misinformation. If these threats were made

online, they might sometimes hide such comments or respond to them privately, without confronting the individual and without escalating the situation. Some of them did report such comments directly to social media platforms. Very few CSOs were willing to issue a press release or to make a post about the threats and comments, because they did not want to escalate matters and give importance to negative individuals. They did however state that they would make a post to clarify information that may harm beneficiaries or constituents, or that may misguide them. Some CSOs relayed that it was their board's duty to determine the appropriate course of action and that they would follow it/implement it.

In general, interviewed CSOs preferred not to take the legal route, particularly as they felt that the majority of situations could be resolved through communication.

Insights into communication and public outreach strategy, capacity, and impact

This leads us to CSOs' communication efforts with their beneficiaries and constituents. In general, CSOs mentioned that they explained their projects to the public in different ways. These included in-person communication by going to the field, contacting individuals or having in-person events. Many CSOs also shared that they publish annual reports on their websites and email them out through their newsletters. All interviewed CSOs' communication likewise focused on the use of social media platforms, most notably Facebook and Instagram. Twitter was not very popular; even though many CSOs have Twitter pages, they rarely use them due to the political nature of the discourse on Twitter. Few CSOs reported communicating on a daily basis, with most of them attempting to communicate weekly or on a need-basis or project-basis.

Some CSOs shared that they had a media department or communication officer in charge of establishing this communication with constituents and of revisiting and implementing their communication strategy. Nonetheless, many of them relied on volunteers or other staff giving part of their time to help out with social media and communication, due to reduced funding and lack of donor funding for communication operations.

All of the interviewed CSOs stressed the importance of communication and of having communication guidelines. Nonetheless, many still needed to develop their communication strategy or were in the process of

developing it. Usually, they attempt to review this strategy either yearly, periodically, at the end of a project, or if a challenge arises tied to communication. All of them expressed an interest in receiving training in communication.

Interviewed CSOs shared that they have the capacity to produce most of their social media components in-house, with the exception of more advanced video productions that are outsourced. Many of them attempt to include budget lines within projects for this cost. Social media boosts were generally reserved for yearly campaigns or international days relevant to their work or posts that they would like to reach wider or more specific audiences.

Trust-building and response to public calls for transparency, accountability, and efficiency

While CSOs tend to communicate about their projects in various ways, including newsletters and annual reports, they were somewhat divided regarding publishing their budgets and funding online. Those who did not share such information online stressed that they were open to answering any question pertaining to budgets and that they were willing to meet with anyone with a budget-related question to go over financial and audit reports with them. They also understood how such practices contribute to trust-building with constituents at large.

Interviewed CSOs additionally shared other indicators, tools, approaches, and messages that they believe help build trust between them and the wider public. These include having a good track record of transparency, credibility, and accountability. CSOs also deemed humility to play a big part in building trust, as well as communicating in simple terms and in Arabic with various communities on a regular basis. They stressed the importance of keeping individuals aware of project progress and of using cultural data collection methods and being consistent. Fact-checking was another important element that was mentioned, as well as carefully choosing CSO staff and members as they impact a CSO's image and trust with constituents.

Interviewed CSOs also believed that the government and public administrations could learn from their practices to build trust with citizens across Lebanon. This includes being transparent, accountable, and having clear and logical budgets, as well as sharing updates, publishing budgets, responding to complaints, and investigating staff performance.

Interviewed CSOs also shared that fostering more transparency, accountability, and efficiency in their work and in the government's work can be done by being more involved in social media, routinely publishing reports, asking constituents for opinions and thoughts, and making the public more aware of processes that CSOs and the government must go through when implementing projects.

CSOs also spoke positively about networking with other CSOs and organizations to elaborate collective actions and strategies, share information, and build trust among them. This also applies to the government.

Governance and reform

CSOs were additionally asked several questions pertaining to Lebanon's governance and reforms tied to the government and to public administrations. Networks were seen as a positive means of collectively pushing for reforms on certain topics. Access to information was also deemed an important means of initiating the first step in advocating for reforms.

Overall, all CSOs aspired to see a reformed and strong government able to carry out its duties with the support of CSOs. The interviewed CSOs did not have any ambitions to replace the government but felt compelled to carry out their work, which should have been naturally delivered by the government.

That said, they examined current obstacles to implementing the needed reforms to strengthen the government and public administrations. CSOs identified corruption, fraud, nepotism, and having the same people in power as main causes of governmental weakness. They also stated that lack of funding, difficulty in changing mindsets, and lack of political will further aggravated attempts to implement needed reforms.

CSOs were particularly worried about the current state of the banking and education sectors and the impacts that these have had and will continue to have on their work and on the future of the country. CSOs asserted the need for the government and public administrations to strategize and prioritize matters, as well as innovate and collaborate with them and other actors. They also stressed the need for the international community to pay attention to Lebanon and give it a higher priority in the international agenda.

CSOs still retain some degree of hope in seeing a reformed government, but that hope is fading as time passes by. Indeed, when asked about

examples of a symbiotic relationship between public institutions and CSOs since 2019 that has achieved positive results, it was difficult for them to think of such an example. They did eventually manage to remember good collaborations or initiatives.

Throughout the interviews, CSOs reaffirmed their apolitical nature, stressing their secular orientation and their devotion to serving the community. They did however deem it important to maintain open communication channels with government and parliament members, because they are in power and can impact public policies.

IV Implications and Takeaways

The results of the poll offer a nuanced and insightful perspective regarding the ongoing crisis in Lebanon, with economic challenges, political affiliations, and institutional trust intersecting in complex ways. The takeaways from Key Informant Interviews complement the survey's findings, notably by offering the perspective of civil society organizations on a number of topics and themes. A detailed analysis of the key takeaways follows:

Economic Crisis and Coping Strategies

The fact that nearly a quarter of the survey respondents (23.8%) reported job loss within the past year underscores the severe economic consequences faced by a significant portion of the population. Another 10.8% of respondents endured substantial delays in receiving their salaries, indicating the deep-seated financial strain on livelihoods.

The coping strategies adopted by respondents, such as cutting back on food consumption, skipping meals, postponing medical visits, and delaying the purchase of essential medicines, reflect the extensive impact of the economic crisis on daily life, where individuals are making difficult sacrifices to manage their economic hardships.

Civil society organizations were likewise negatively impacted by the crisis. This came in the form of reduced funding, staff shortages or high staff turnover rates, and difficulties in completing official paperwork and banking transactions. This impacted their reporting to donors, inducing mutually felt frustration. As a consequence of the crisis, CSOs also had to cut some of their programming or to reevaluate their priorities and adapt to changing circumstances. They mentioned feeling increased pressure from constituents to help and give, whilst

they had limited budgets and capacity to do so. This further exacerbated negative public perception toward CSOs and their trustworthiness and transparency.

Political Affiliation

The vast majority of CSO representatives interviewed stressed their apolitical nature and their hard work to remain apolitical. Staff were free to hold their political beliefs within their personal lives but were expected to serve everyone equally and to maintain the apolitical nature of the CSO during their work hours.

Government's Response and Trust Issues

Public evaluation of the government's management of post-Beirut blast recovery and the economic crisis was predominantly negative, revealing a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with official responses.

While interviewed CSOs played significant roles in responding to the Beirut port blast, they all perceived NGOization as bad, and they stressed not wanting to replace the state. On the contrary, they saw their work as being temporary until the state could rise back on its feet and they could go back to supporting it. They additionally mentioned that reforms and restructuring were needed.

Role of Civil Society Organizations

Public sentiment underscores the crucial role of CSOs in addressing the crisis. Respondents expect CSOs to serve as watchdogs over public institutions, advocate for fundamental rights, deliver aid, particularly to vulnerable groups, and provide infrastructure support when the government falls short.

The interviewed CSOs felt overwhelmed by rising public expectations, particularly in light of reduced funding. They stressed that they were doing their best to manage expectations, and many of them mentioned referral systems they had in place to meet constituents' needs that did not necessarily align with their own programs and areas of work.

The higher level of trust accorded to local CSOs, international NGOs, international organizations, and the private sector highlights their perceived relative effectiveness in contributing to post-Beirut blast reconstruction and humanitarian efforts to respond to the economic crisis.

Conversely, the lack of trust in the government's contributions, political parties, and religious institutions is indicative of a prevailing skepticism toward these entities.

Accountability and Oversight

The public is seen as having a pivotal role in regulating and holding both CSOs and the government accountable amid the crisis. Additionally, donors are recognized for their importance in ensuring the effective distribution of aid and assistance.

CSOs relayed having a Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning department in charge of carrying out the different processes, or a Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning plan within each project that they follow and implement. They also mentioned sending regular newsletters or findings to their different constituents regarding projects and sending separate updates according to reporting requirements to donors. Additionally, regular auditing processes ensured accountability. Some CSOs mentioned that they published their budgets online while others welcomed and responded to any and all inquiries tied to their budgets, even if these were not shared on the internet.

Media and Information Sources

Mainstream independent media emerges as the most trusted source of political information, followed by social media. This underscores the critical significance of reliable information sources, especially during a crisis. The positive portrayal of CSOs in mainstream independent media enhances the public image of these organizations.

Negative assessments of public media institutions, party leaders, and partisan media outlets highlight the varying degrees of trustworthiness among different media sources.

All interviewed CSOs are present on social media platforms and active to varying degrees. Some of them mentioned posting daily or weekly, while others stated that they posted on an ad hoc basis and focused their efforts on big yearly campaigns.

Perceptions of CSOs

Respondents exhibited diverse levels of familiarity with the work of CSOs, indicating a need for increased public awareness about their activities.

Many interviewed CSOs admitted that they could do better in terms of engaging with the public, but they were simultaneously frustrated

by the rising challenges faced in organizing in-person programming, including high costs of transportation and of organizing events. Even virtual programming was deemed difficult due to the varying availability of electricity and internet.

Skepticism toward online information sources and the prevalence of false news, both in general and regarding CSOs, reveal the challenges of misinformation and disinformation in the current media landscape.

Preferences and Aid

Respondents generally prefer to engage with secular CSOs and express reservations about accepting aid from politically affiliated CSOs, particularly if they are associated with parties for which individuals did not vote.

A couple of interviewed CSOs shared that they were approached by beneficiaries, constituents, and individual donors who asked them to be involved in certain aspects of the reconstruction and humanitarian assistance processes. This is because they deemed them to be trustworthy and believed in them, particularly given these CSOs previous positive interactions and their good track record/history of integrity.

Foreign Aid and Political Affiliations

Foreign aid primarily stems from International NGOs and Foreign Government Aid Agencies, with this aid is generally viewed as 'somewhat satisfactory' by individuals interviewed for this study.

A majority of respondents rejected aid from politically affiliated NGOs, underscoring the public's desire for non-partisan humanitarian efforts.

The vast majority of CSO funding comes from international donors, with limited percentages of funding coming from private actors/donors. While unprompted, many CSO representatives stressed that they would not accept funding tied to political parties.

Public Trust in CSOs

The opinion survey demonstrated an overall trust in 'Local CSOs,' 'International NGOs,' 'International Organizations,' and the 'Private Sector' that contributed to the reconstruction and humanitarian response after the Port of Beirut blast. High percentages of 'No trust' were expressed towards the Government's contribution, that of political parties, and religious institutions.

Out of those who reported damaged property following the Beirut port blast, only 34.3% mentioned that the government paid visits to assess the damage. High trust was demonstrated to the delivery of aid and assistance by international NGOs, followed by that of international organizations, then local CSOs.

While some reservations were expressed regarding certain aspects of CSO operations, respondents generally concurred that CSOs play a pivotal role in driving reform in areas such as accountability, transparency, and human rights.

Public Perceptions on CSO Roles

Respondents did not identify CSOs as the primary entities that provided assistance during the Beirut port blast, nor as the predominant institutions helping people in the country today. Yet, seemingly in contrast, respondents largely allocated higher trust in CSOs. Given their significant and well-documented role in the Beirut port blast recovery, this suggests that there may be room for CSOs to enhance their visibility and impact.

During the key informant interviews, CSOs stressed their work on the ground following the Beirut port blast, often not leaving them time to use social media to promote their efforts and to advocate for accountability. Their priorities were in aiding those in need, referring them to other organizations if needed, and coordinating aid efforts. Some CSOs did not want to advertise their efforts on purpose because they felt that it was their human duty to help. Others resorted to the internet and social media to crowdfund for rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts on the ground and to refer individuals to trustworthy organizations they could donate to.

In conclusion, these findings present a comprehensive and layered view of Lebanon's multifaceted crisis. Economic collapse, political affiliations, and public trust in various actors are central themes. These insights provide valuable guidance for policymakers, organizations, and stakeholders engaged in addressing the crisis and steering Lebanon toward recovery and reform.

V Recommendations

For Civil Society Organizations

Transparency and Building a Good Track Record

CSOs should be transparent in their communication with constituents, notably by regularly responding to individuals, sharing annual reports and information tied to the CSO's projects and communicating through social media and through face-to-face interactions. CSOs should also strive to create physical and virtual means for constituents to share their feedback with them in anonymity. This includes having physical complaints or feedback boxes at the CSO's working space where individuals can write their feedback and deposit it in confidence, as well as an anonymous online feedback form or hotline to receive complaints.

Older and more established CSOs have stressed the benefit of having a proven track record of transparency and have urged newer CSOs to build these practices to foster more credibility. Consistency in practices and approaches is an essential linked element.

Fighting corruption, embracing financial transparency, and developing/implementing internal good governance likewise help CSOs reshape public trust and perceptions and reinforce their public image (Innovation for Change MENA Hub and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2022).

Designing New Outreach Mechanisms

CSOs should design new and creative outreach mechanisms that allow them to keep the public informed of their work (Innovation for Change MENA Hub and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2022). Going beyond informing the public, these mechanisms would also enable CSOs to be more inclusive of vulnerable groups, at-risk populations, and individuals living in remote areas. They can additionally leverage these mechanisms to create opportunities for their constituents and beneficiaries to partake in policymaking.

Directly Communicating with Constituents and Using Simplified Language

Several interviewed CSOs cited the merits of going to the constituents and making them part of the process from beginning to end, being humble, and knowing the constituents, the beneficiaries, and the context. Part of this point revolves around keeping individuals updated

about the different stages of implementation within projects and choosing to speak in simplified terms versus using jargon and acronyms, as well as favoring the use of Arabic within Lebanon instead of using foreign languages. Another linked element is favoring the use of context-specific and cultural data collection methods versus Western methods.

Carefully Selecting CSO Members and Staff

A CSO's members and staff are part of its identity and reflect its image to others. As such, it is important for CSOs to select members and staff that embrace their values and embody the beliefs and practices followed by the CSO. This goes beyond branding, as individual actions can either reflect positively or negatively on a CSO's mission and track record.

Explaining CSO-Specific Processes and Challenges to Constituents

Many individuals distrust CSOs because they are unaware of the complexity involved in securing grants, implementing them, monitoring and evaluating them, and meeting donor requirements throughout the process. They are also unaware of the strict rules and auditing requisites. As such, explaining these processes in a simplified manner to the public and making them aware of them can contribute to building more trust between them and various CSOs.

This concurs with the recommendation found in the 'Survey of Public Opinion of Civil Society Actors' by Innovation for Change MENA Hub and the Gulf Centre for Human Rights. CSOs should also share their challenges with the public, as well as the risks that they face. In doing so, CSOs enable the public to become a better ally to them and their causes.

Multileveled Networking Among CSOs and with Other Actors

Joining already established networks with other CSOs and actors, including the private sector, the media, youth, and donors, or creating such networks can help coordinate joint efforts, avoid duplication, and lead to collective actions, strategies, and synergies among CSOs and other actors. Taken together, these help build and reinforce trust among CSOs and can allow them to develop ways of strengthening trust with the wider public. It can also aid them in collectively dispelling misinformation, disinformation, and countering defamatory campaigns.

For the Government and Public Administrations

Fostering Increased Transparency and Access to Information

All interviewees cited the need for the government and public administrations to be more transparent in their practices vis-a-vis the population. This includes publishing budgets and documents, responding to access to information requests within the time limits set by the law, and holding themselves accountable by admitting past mistakes and laying out potential solutions. This contributes to creating a safe civic space that is a prerequisite to CSOs reaching out to individuals.

Learning from CSOs and Including them in Government

CSOs have long served as complementary entities assisting the government, considering its limited capacities. The government and public administrations can learn a lot from CSOs not only when it comes to building trust and fostering transparency, but also in regard to optimizing processes. CSOs, for their part, are willing to support in this process, particularly as they believe that the government and public administrations should be the first and foremost providers of assistance to individuals. As such, incorporating CSO representatives at different levels in regular government consultative processes can have a positive impact and enable government to benefit from their unique skills.

Responding to Complaints, Dispelling Misinformation, and Investigating Staff Performance

The government and public administrations should strive to develop mechanisms to receive complaints from citizens and residents. They should also take appropriate courses of action to address these complaints as well as inform individuals of these actions. They should also be active in dispelling misinformation or disinformation. Social media can be used to this end to reach a wider audience in an efficient and non-costly manner. Other organizations, including CSOs, can amplify such efforts and share corresponding posts.

Moreover, if the government and public administrations receive negative feedback regarding civil servants' performance, they should investigate this and hold the relevant individuals accountable in case of foul play. They should additionally train and retrain their staff in handling such complaints.

Easing Paperwork Processes for CSOs and Brainstorming Solutions with Them

Among the challenges they experienced, interviewed CSOs mentioned the difficulty of getting official paperwork done, including taxes and NSSF dues, because of the strikes in public administrations. This resulted in them having to pay fines due to delays in submitting this paperwork. The government and public administrations should investigate this and ease the process of filing such paperwork or digitizing it, if possible. This can be done with the help of specialized CSOs. Joint brainstorming exercises between CSOs and public administrations might be beneficial to develop solutions to such issues and other obstacles and challenges. Such exercises should also take place with donors to fulfill requirements that have become stringent considering the banking crisis.

For the General Public

Fact-Checking All Received Information

Individuals must actively engage in fact-checking information that they receive and consume. This includes examining the source of the information versus blindly trusting word of mouth, looking at the author's credentials, and reading through multiple credible sources to confirm the validity of the information. When receiving information regarding CSOs, individuals should navigate to that CSO's social media pages and verify if the CSO published such information. They can also call, email, message, or connect with the CSO to inquire about any information that they may doubt.

When In Doubt, Ask for Information

Instead of spreading misinformation or disinformation about suspicions that they may have regarding CSOs, individuals should first attempt to contact the CSO and ask for more information. Indeed, oftentimes, individuals feel a lack of trust in CSOs' management of their budgets or question how CSOs spend their funding. While some CSOs post this information online, others prefer not to or believe that it should be kept confidential but are willing to share such information with skeptical individuals if they ask for it. As such, exercising restraint and asking for information can be useful tools to prevent misinformation and disinformation or to dispel them.

Approaching Local CSOs and Knowing What They Offer

Individuals should strive to build a personal connection with CSOs in their locality and learn more about their programming. This can help them spread the word about their services and connect others in need to them. Additionally, individuals can volunteer to help their local CSOs. In the process, they can gain valuable skills, increase their sense of belonging, and help CSOs fill staffing shortages that they are facing in light of the crises.

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