

Digest: Solidarity initiatives and CSOs civic & operational space in Lebanon during the lockdown of January-March 2021

Lebanon Support

Abstract

This digest provides an overview of the main data trends from the 2nd iteration of a mapping on solidarity initiatives in Lebanon following the Beirut's blast on 4 August 2020. This iteration focuses on the civic space and CSOs operational space in Lebanon during the Covid-19 related lockdown and state of emergency between January and March 2021.

Data was collected by Lebanon Support between 23 January to 4 March 2021, based on a survey of 119 civil society organisations and initiatives.

The mapping is developed in partnership with the Fondation de France.

Keywords: Civil Society, Solidarity, Humanitarian Intervention, Civic Space

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Local actors, at the forefront of aid and relief efforts

The socio-economic situation in the country continued to significantly deteriorate after the Beirut port blast on August 4, 2021, and was further exacerbated by the Covid19 pandemic waves and lockdowns. The economic and financial crisis has contributed to increased pauperism with a large part of the population unable to access basic needs. In this context, and even during full lockdowns, local civil society actors remain the main responders on the ground with 45% of responders being local CSOs, 33% national CSOs (operating on a national level), 7% individual initiatives, and 2% campaigns. This corroborates the central role of local and national civil society actors who are constantly at the forefront of humanitarian responses in times of crisis.

The areas of intervention most mentioned by these actors were donating food and water (similarly to what was reported in the direct response in August in the aftermath of the Beirut port blast, see [here](#)), mental health support, child protection, and referrals.

While after the blast, data had shown a discrepancy between areas of intervention and identified priorities, this second iteration of the mapping shows that activities and interventions were more aligned

with priorities and needs on the ground.

Restrictions, constraints, and shrinking civic space

In spite of the multitude of efforts on the ground, 47% of the respondents have reported however that the civil society response was “weak”, 13.5% described it as being “average”, and only 14.5% considered it as being “good”. Civil society actors have been facing many operational and structural challenges and constraints, notably during the lockdown enforced between January and March 2021, which has significantly limited their impact and efficiency.

A civil society worker tells us: “[...]Solidarity was a boost in terms of morale indeed, and response initiatives very needed especially due to the absence of the state. But solidarity slowly dissipates, and a majority won't be able to help and support anymore (which will lead to even more vulnerability and instability). Response initiatives were also done too rapidly in some cases without proper coordination, mapping, and assessments. Dozens of people I know received support they didn't need for a long time (cash, food, etc.) while not being in need or affected.”

During the full lockdown of early 2021 in Lebanon, existing challenges and limitations to civil society work have been amplified and compounded. A majority of survey respondents mention limitations linked to bank restrictions which have affected the provision of aid and assistance (49%). Since the beginning of the acute economic crisis, banks have been imposing ad hoc measures that restrict access of account holders to their accounts in foreign currencies, add additional charges on transfers and withdrawals, in addition to only allowing withdrawals of sums in foreign currencies in LBP and at a depreciated rate. This has particularly affected the civil society sector, as a large majority of the funding CSOs receive is in foreign currencies and has been practically inaccessible to them and their beneficiaries.

Other notable limitations include mobility restrictions linked to lockdown measures aiming at curbing the spread of the Covid19 virus, such as limited access to their offices (25%), or to specific areas to access their beneficiaries (23%), or access to their suppliers (21%). The government had put in place a mechanism to counter these mobility issues, but the process of obtaining permits to circulate was particularly difficult for these actors. In this vein, over 73% of respondents believed that CSOs should have been exempted from lockdown since they are responding to urgent needs.

On February 17, the Ministry of Interior issued a request demanding access to personal data of aid beneficiaries in order to approve permits for movement for civil society actors implementing life-saving activities – the definition of which was not provided – during lockdown. UN agencies were tasked with coordinating with CSOs on the ground.

A civil society worker explains: “During lockdown, we felt even more constrained in our operational space with, on the one side, the government decision to limit operations to life saving activities, requesting beneficiaries lists which raises immense protection issues, and on the other side, some donors acting as gatekeepers, instead of supporting us and contributing to creating a more enabling environment and facilitating access to the field”.

While such practices do not only constitute a breach of confidentiality of beneficiaries that could jeopardise their protection, they also reflect on the increasing shrinking space the country has been witnessing in the past years with heightened scrutiny, censorship, and/or repression in the civil society landscape.

In addition to the state's imposed restrictions, the survey data and results also tackle the role of the international donor community in shaping the operational civic landscape in Lebanon. 75% of respondents have indicated that the funding they have received was earmarked to specific activities, projects, and programmes. While core funding provides more flexibility, which is even more crucial in times of crisis and immediate response, most of the funding is usually tied to specific projects that oftentimes have limited timeframes. This considerably dampens the impact and sustainability of the interventions as well as that of the organisations as a whole, on the one hand. This contributes to increased competition among local actors instead of encouraging cooperation and solidarity among actors in the sector.

One respondent indeed states: "Big organisations received lots of funds, while smaller NGOs didn't receive anything. Some were forced to close, or will be closing soon."

On the other hand, earmarking funding for certain activities widens a disconnect between implemented activities, which are often based on the donors' identified priorities, and the actual needs on the ground. Data from the first iteration of the mapping (see [here](#)) shows that action was planned with no evidence-based situation assessments, as 63% of respondents had not conducted a needs assessment following the Beirut's blast on 4 August 2020, but were intervening nonetheless.

As voiced by one of the respondents: "When we first intervened after the port blast, we focused so much on food baskets, while residents had more pressing needs and some were even refusing food donations, notably the repairs and reconstruction of their homes, but we couldn't address these requests and needs. We had to show results, and report against indicators. During lockdown, this became even worse, as it became clear that it would be only a handful of selected organisations that would be able to access their beneficiaries."

Interestingly, over 32% of the respondents have described their relationship with their donors as "subcontracting", rather than based on "equal partnership". This implies that local CSOs are mere implementers of donors' agendas, although in practice, local actors have a better understanding of the local context, needs, and priorities on the ground.

Respondents have voiced their concerns about donors' practices and consider that "local & National CSOs should be involved in the strategic decisions and actions so they are effective players in the responses at all levels".

Indeed, the exclusion of local actors in strategic decision making or their mere cosmetic involvement in the consultation processes without taking into account their input considerably restricts CSOs responses and interventions which are often modeled without adapting to contextual needs.

Overall, the current crisis and responses have shed light on existing asymmetrical power dynamics

between local CSOs and the INGOs providing funds, resulting in unbalanced “partnerships”.

These factors considerably undermine the role of civil society in driving democratic change, restricting them to a service provision and implementation role.

A post-crisis cacophony: between fragmentation, duplication of interventions, and forgotten communities

The responses on the ground have been marked by a post-crisis cacophony that has led to duplication and fragmentation of interventions, rather than organised and effective actions, leaving some areas and populations under-targeted. Respondents recurrently mentioned in our survey an overall lack of coordination and duplication of services.

A respondent explains: “we weren't prepared and it was a bit chaotic - the distribution of the funds wasn't fair. There was a lot of duplication of work, with some people overloaded with services, and others overlooked .”

Programmes, projects, and interventions appear to be predominantly geared towards reporting standards and systems that are forged elsewhere, under the sacrosanct imperative of “accountability” and efficiency, indicators of success which in this case has led to the exclusion of extremely vulnerable categories and communities. For instance, a considerable 73% of respondents considered that some vulnerable groups have been overlooked by interventions, mainly persons with disabilities, the elderly, migrants and refugees, and LGBTIQ people.

Moreover, data shows a concentration of interventions in some regions such as Beirut and Mount Lebanon, while other far less targeted peripheral areas such as Akkar, Baalbeck, and Nabatieh.

As highlighted by one of the respondents: “the lack of collaboration and communication between the civil society organisations, prevented a concrete, well organised plan to reach out and assess the needs of affected individuals and regions with maximal effectiveness”.

As a result, many respondents described the interventions as “chaotic”, “scattered”, “unorganised”, “exclusionary”, and “inefficient”, highlighting the need for better coordination and enhanced data and information sharing mechanisms.

Moving forward: recentring the debate in structural factors

In addition to identifying and understanding the challenges faced by civil society actors during lockdown, the survey also sought to gauge respondents' thoughts and recommendations for a more effective emergency response. The 3 main recommendations of survey respondents were linked to 1/ enhanced coordination efforts (28 %), 2/ the development of crisis management plans and staff training (20%), and 3/ information and data sharing (16%).

Interestingly, most of the suggested recommendations focused on CSOs' own role, illustrating a tendency among actors to overlook structural issues that shape the national context, roles, and

responsibilities of other main actors in the sector such as the state or international donors.

In a country where the state has historically outsourced social issues, rights, and services to the non-profit sector and where local CSOs appear to have fallen into an “implementation trap” (see for example our previous research [here](#)), this digest aims to recenter evidence-based conversations on aid interventions in Lebanon around three main priorities:

1. Civil society actors must reclaim civil society space and role. This entails steering away from predominantly focusing on the provision of services and implementation activities, to taking back their role in observing and shaping public policies, and defending human rights.
2. Donors and international organisations must proactively adopt narratives and practices that decolonise and localise aid, and practice reflexivity notably on their own roles contributing to shrinking civic and operational space.
3. The state must reclaim and fulfill its social responsibilities, providing social rights and services, notably through a comprehensive and life-cycle social protection programme that protects all residents, specifically during life shocks such as pandemics or economic crises.