



2019 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

Middle East and North Africa Region: Lebanon Country Report
September 2020

Cover Photo: As part of the USAID-supported Iraq Governance and Performance Accountability (IGPA) project, known locally as Takamul or Integration, the Iraqi Development Association organized a solid waste management awareness campaign in the Ali bin Yakteen area and souq al-Basrah al-Qadeema (Basrah Old Market), the largest market in Basrah, which is visited by thousands each day. The media, local government, and volunteers helped the campaign give away calendars with educational messages on July 1, 2019.

Photo Credit: USAID IGPA/Takamul project

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For Lebanon

September 2020

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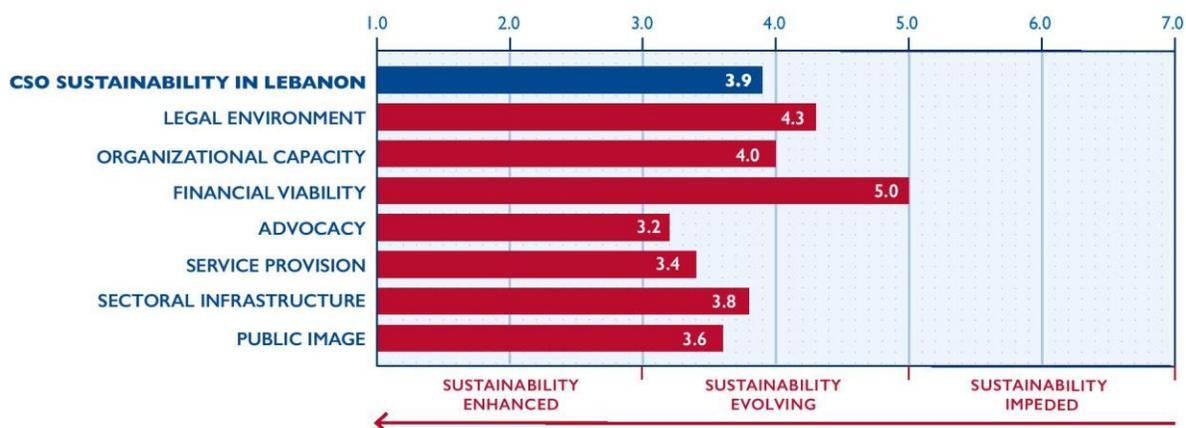
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LEBANON

Capital: Beirut
Population: 5,469,612
GDP per capita (PPP): \$19,600
Human Development Index: High (0.730)
Freedom in the World: Partly Free (44/100)

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 3.9



Several events greatly affected civic space in Lebanon in 2019. On the economic front, the banking sector was in crisis as the Lebanese pound rapidly lost value and the country was unable to pay down steep public debts. Growth in gross domestic product (GDP) dropped to unprecedented lows, and in October banks closed to prevent depositors from withdrawing cash from their foreign-currency bank accounts. In the last months of 2019, two exchange rates were in place: the official rate and a market rate that was approximately 25 percent higher. This caused the value of CSOs' foreign currency accounts to plummet and prevented organizations from accessing the funds in their foreign-currency accounts for a period of time.

During the financial crisis, the government came under intense criticism for lacking political vision, failing to introduce necessary reforms, and refusing to communicate transparently. In response, according to the 2019 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report *There is a Price to Pay: The Criminalization of Peaceful Speech in Lebanon*, powerful political and religious figures used criminal defamation laws to silence journalists, activists, and other critics of government policies and corruption. The President of Lebanon issued a circular on September 30 reminding the public of articles in the Penal Code that criminalize the dissemination of information harmful to the country's financial reputation. On October 3, former Prime Minister Saad Hariri stressed the need to increase penalties on media outlets that did not report the news responsibly.

A turning point came on October 17, when thousands of people took to the streets to express their discontent with the dysfunctional economy. For the first time in Lebanon's history, public protests united people from all sects and regions in challenging the political elite. A 2020 report published by the Maharat Foundation titled *Monitoring Freedom of Expression and Media* called the uprising a "revolution" for exceeding prevailing limits on freedom of expression and breaking through the barrier of fear of prosecution. Criticism of leaders' inefficiency and corruption became commonplace, but in many cases was met with excessive force by security forces. CSO members were among the protesters that were subject to the use of excessive force by security forces during the protests. Riot police and other security forces including the parliament police and the Lebanese Army used teargas, water cannons, and rubber bullets on crowds, and incidents of protesters being beaten indiscriminately were captured on video. Despite this harassment, protests continued through the end of the year. In response to the protests, the government resigned on October 29, and the parliament requested former Minister of Education Hassan Diab to form a new government on December 19.

A notable characteristic of the uprising was the emergence of new civil society groupings, especially women's groups, which were at the forefront of the protests. The lead role of women in political organization, civic engagement, and advocacy for gender justice was highlighted in a report from United Nations (UN) Women titled *Understanding the Role of Women and the Feminist Actors in Lebanon's 2019 Protests*. Activists for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and intersex (LGBTI) populations were also visible in the streets. Women's rights advocates and women journalists encountered considerable bias and threats, and LGBTI activists were the targets of homophobic statements, especially on the internet. Widespread disinformation, including photos and videos

taken out of context and fake photos, spread largely through WhatsApp with an aim to delegitimize the protests and intimidate people from participating in them.

The overall sustainability of the CSO sector in Lebanon did not change in 2019. However, several dimensions recorded change. The legal environment deteriorated slightly as registration became more difficult and the authorities cracked down on the protests. CSOs' financial viability also suffered as foreign funding declined, while the economic crisis weakened CSOs' spending power. At the same time, advocacy improved as the Lebanese people united in unprecedented protests and CSOs engaged in several successful advocacy campaigns. CSOs' public image was boosted by increased public awareness of CSO activities and media reliance on CSO expertise. CSOs' organizational capacity, service provision, and sectoral infrastructure were stable.

The CSO sector in Lebanon is diverse and able to respond to the needs of various constituencies, ranging from the provision of humanitarian aid to advocacy. CSO groups have extensive expertise in fields related to public policy and human rights. There is no accurate, up to date data on the size of the CSO sector in Lebanon. The latest official data from the Ministry of Interior indicated that there were 8,311 CSOs registered in 2015. Based on this number, experts and researchers estimate that there were between 8,500 and 14,000 CSOs in 2019, including those registered in other ministries. CSOs work at varying levels of effectiveness, with many seemingly established only for electoral or financial benefits. At a session of the Council of Ministers in May 2019, some ministers discussed the existence of fake CSOs in the country. Several media reports covered the debate, calling on the government to conduct an assessment of existing CSOs, especially those benefiting from public funds. However, no concrete steps were taken in this regard in 2019.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 4.3



The legal environment governing CSOs continued to deteriorate in 2019 as the process for registering CSOs became more difficult. In theory, the 1909 law on nonprofit organizations allows CSOs to register by notifying the government of their establishment. While most CSOs notify the Ministry of Interior of their establishment, others notify the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The ministry must formally acknowledge a new organization by giving its founders a registration receipt, which allows them to prove the organization's legal status to third parties. No data is available about the number of CSOs that applied for or received registration receipts in 2019.

The issuance of registration receipts seemed to increasingly require personal relationships with relevant authorities. For example, the women's organization Fiftyfifty, whose founder had previously worked with the minister of interior, received its receipt, while the human rights organization Almourasila, which did not have such ties, did not. Further indicating that decisions increasingly depend on the discretionary decision of the authorities is the fact that the political movements Beirut Madinati and Sabaa received receipts, but a CSO focused on people with disabilities did not. The minister of interior granted a receipt to a club of judges one day before leaving office in late January 2019, a decision that some viewed as a political move to irk politicians who were opposed to the judges club. In light of the increasing difficulties registering as a nonprofit organization, several organizations, including Seeds for Legal Initiatives, Gherbal, and Mosaique, opted to register as nonprofit civil companies with the Civil Companies Register at the Court of First Instance, which involves an easier process.

Banks introduced new procedures and capital controls in 2019 without legal authority, which made it nearly impossible for CSOs to open new bank accounts. For example, the organization Shababeek, which serves refugee Palestinian youth, was unable to open a bank account even though it had received its notification receipt. In addition, banks continue to comply with the Central Bank's directive on fighting money laundering and terrorism financing, which requires CSOs to undergo extensive screening in order to open and maintain bank accounts.

CSOs also experienced difficulties with their operations during the year because of the involvement of the intelligence agency, General Security. For example, a CSO working on alternative political frameworks in Mount Lebanon, which prefers to remain unnamed, was informed when trying to open a bank account that a case had been filed against it with General Security. After repeated attempts to obtain information, the CSO, which was registered in 2016 but did not receive funding until 2019, finally learned that it had been accused of circulating large amounts of suspicious funds, having suspicious political relationships, and possessing electronic equipment and sensitive files, even though it had not yet received any funds when the case was filed. The organization was required to turn over to General Security photos of its activities and the telephone numbers of participants, while the founder was subject to frequent interrogations, and her personal premises were searched. The case had not been resolved by the end of the year.

CSOs must submit on an annual basis the previous year's budget along with a forecast for the coming year to the ministries of interior and finance; a dedicated individual must then follow up with the ministries. CSOs are obliged to obtain a registration number from the Ministry of Finance and present their statements of account. Civil companies have to submit their statements within two months of their establishment or are barred from operating. In accordance with a ministry decision issued in late November, the Ministry of Interior began to demand more detailed information about sources of funding and activities, which many CSOs viewed as intrusive, particularly as the law does not provide for this level of interference. One CSO founder stated that the organization was requested to leave a bribe of LBP 50,000 (approximately \$33) when presenting its yearly budget, so that the file would be accepted.

Excessive force was used against activists, including CSOs, during the autumn protests. Seven UN human rights experts confirmed in a statement on November 26 that Lebanon's security forces used excessive force and failed to protect protesters from attacks despite the peaceful nature of the protests. Security forces also took pictures and videos and asked for lists of attendees to events organized by CSOs, further intimidating participants. In addition, the authorities failed to protect the protesters. Rioters attacked protest sites in many areas, destroying tents in which public debates were conducted, without any follow-up by the authorities.

CSOs were also harassed in less violent ways during the year. A silent protest against sectarian armed conflict in a mountain village, which had been approved by the municipality, was called off after the area's main political party successfully pushed for its cancellation. CSOs working with students found it more difficult to obtain access to public schools from the Ministry of Education without the backing of powerful elites. CSOs working with refugees, including those providing medical services, faced new obstacles in their work, as local communities sought to stop projects that did not benefit them directly.

Nonprofit organizations do not have profits and therefore are exempt from profit taxes. While the law allows civil companies to have surplus that would be taxed, in practice, they are asked not to list any surplus. While the law allows CSOs to apply for exemptions from value-added tax (VAT), primarily only large CSOs benefit from this provision since the exemption requires a special audit and can take up to three years to receive. Individuals and corporations may deduct donations made to CSOs from their overall revenues from their taxable amount.

The law does not restrict CSOs' ability to solicit and receive foreign funding, conduct public fundraising, or charge for services. All funds received must be used on activities supporting the organizations' missions. A new rule in 2019 obliges CSOs to pay VAT on consultancy services that they provide outside of Lebanon, as if the services were exported products. The laws for social enterprises are complicated and do not encourage their establishment.

There is little legal knowledge about CSOs in Lebanon, and no lawyers specialize in CSO-related law. Public officials, including at the Ministry of Interior, often lack sufficient knowledge of CSOs. Given the lack of clear guidelines, a number of lawyers have reportedly suggested that bribery is the only recourse. During the protests, a committee of lawyers defended detained protesters on a pro bono basis.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.0

CSOs' organizational capacity did not change in 2019. Many CSOs, especially those located or operating in rural and secluded areas, continue to struggle to enhance their internal structures, regulations, and procedures.

CSOs are able to identify their constituencies but are often unable to respond to constituencies' needs because of limited funding. CSOs increasingly use traditional and social media to reach their constituencies. Foreign donors sometimes impose their own priorities, while domestic CSOs prefer to engage in participatory approaches to designing interventions. In addition, there have been instances in which foreign donors have taken advantage of CSOs' ties to local constituencies for their own purposes. For example, in 2019, a CSO reported that a donor had asked it to send a survey to a group of its beneficiaries without being able to see it in advance.

Some larger CSOs have clear strategic plans developed through donors' efforts to build their capacity. The plans tend to improve organizations' competitiveness in attracting international funding. Strategic planning is not common among smaller CSOs because they lack resources to allocate to planning processes. Organizations sometimes follow funding trends rather than their own missions.

CSOs are legally required to have boards of directors, but boards play a minimal role in small organizations. Small CSOs generally lack the capacity to manage projects as their teams are generally too small to adopt complex management approaches. A growing number of CSOs develop internal policies in order to meet donor requirements, although their implementation sometimes lags behind.

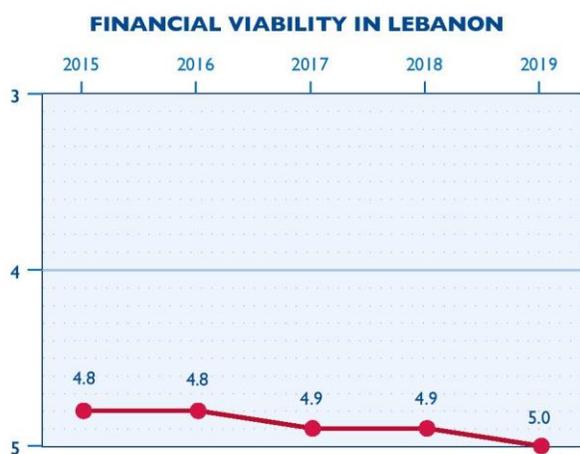
In general, CSOs' main source of funding is project based, which only allows organizations to hire staff for limited periods. CSOs find that donors' limits on allowable budgets for human resources, usually about 30 percent of overall costs, is a major impediment to their operations. For example, Menara, a drug rehabilitation center supported by volunteers, closed its office in 2019 because its donor would only cover the salary of one staff person. Most grants to small or local CSOs are seed funding, which hinders these organizations' ability to hire staff despite their need for human resources to meet complex reporting and documentation requirements. CSOs have begun to ask donors to allocate more to administrative costs, such as at least 3 percent for contingencies or overhead in budget lines that do not show the names of staff, and to report on the achievement of deliverables rather than individual budget lines.

Volunteering is becoming popular but is still not self-sustaining. According to the Charities Aid Foundation's 2019 World Giving Index, which reports on giving trends over the past decade, an average of 10 percent of respondents in Lebanon have taken part in volunteer activities over the past ten years. Volunteers prefer to engage in humanitarian and social work rather than work on administrative tasks.

CSOs have limited access to technology because of their lack of resources. Lebanon's internet infrastructure is still poor, and the internet speeds tend to be very slow. This undermines CSOs that want to use digital technologies effectively, including for uploading videos. CSOs continued to be concerned in 2019 about digital security, including fears that the government is surveilling their online activity and their vulnerability to hackers.



FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.0



The volume of foreign aid flowing to Lebanon continues to increase. According to the UN Lebanon Aid Tracking reports, total disbursed funds from government donors to national entities, UN agencies, NGOs, and other actors increased from \$259.7 million in the first three months of 2018 to \$334.5 million in the same period in 2019. The bulk of this support is still focused on mitigating the impact of the Syrian crisis. Despite this increase in the availability of foreign funding and the CSO sector's heavy reliance on such funding, CSOs' financial viability deteriorated in 2019 as the number of organizations competing for these funds has increased. In addition, Lebanon's deteriorating economy in 2019 caused the value of CSOs' foreign currency accounts to plummet, and for a period, organizations were unable to access funds from their foreign currency accounts.

Local CSOs complain that there is a lack of transparency on the part of international donors. CSOs suspect that donors select project implementers in advance and that public calls for proposals are only a formality. They also complain that donor-driven interventions do not always appreciate the efforts of local CSOs, thereby undermining their work. For example, a Lebanese organization implemented an activity with the municipality of Baysour with funding from the UN Development Programme (UNDP). When the program ended, a consulting firm evaluated the work but did not even meet with the local CSO, signaling that its work was considered unimportant. International donors sometimes fund organizations founded by politicians or their family members, which have powerful political connections and do not charge for overhead. International donors often work with municipalities that fully control the selection of partners, which can be limited to its supporters. During the protests, CSOs were more sensitive about accepting foreign funds because of increasing accusations that they were implementing embassies' agendas. Small CSOs tend to partner with larger CSOs to apply for projects.

Partnerships between international and local CSOs continue to be problematic. Local CSOs often feel that their international partners do not treat them as equals. In addition, some local CSOs complain of micro-management by their international partners. Local CSOs also report that international CSOs are more focused on conducting activities rather than achieving real impact. In some cases, however, international organizations provide their local partners with capacity-building support and treat them as equal partners in the design and implementation of activities.

CSOs have been slow to seek other sources of funding and receive few local funds. Only CSOs working on charitable causes such as children with cancer successfully raise public donations. Because of weak oversight, private companies do not have robust financial and auditing systems and prefer not to declare their profits, inhibiting the development of a culture of corporate philanthropy. Only banks and big corporations, as well as some medium-sized companies, tend to have corporate social responsibility programs, but these tend to benefit their relatives or personal interests. Many politicians and powerful businesspeople have established nonprofit organizations through their wives or other people from their inner circles. They provide support from their businesses to these organizations and deduct the amount of the donations from their businesses' profits.

Some CSOs try to generate revenue, for example by offering consultancies or media production services of videos, infographics, and other products. However, these efforts generate little income, particularly in light of the deteriorating economic situation in 2019, which impeded potential clients from seeking paid services.

Civil companies must appoint auditors, while in nonprofit organizations, the financial officers can present annual financial documents to the authorities. Larger CSOs rely on international donors to guide them through their financial management systems. Most CSOs are not aware of other resources to help with their financial management, such as online instructions in Arabic for preparing financial reports.

ADVOCACY: 3.2

CSOs' advocacy efforts improved moderately in 2019. In the last three months of the year, for the first time in Lebanon's history, people from all different religious backgrounds across the country took to the streets to demand their rights. As part of the protests, civil society groups organized public discussions and debates with experts, especially in economic fields. According to a UNDP mapping of the demands of fifty-seven CSOs, political movements, and professional organizations at the peak of the protests (October 17-28), the most important areas of concern included economic inclusion, government accountability, social justice, economic growth, access to basic services, and the rule of law.

CSOs also engaged in advocacy efforts earlier in 2019.

Despite the absence of institutionalized joint decision-making processes, parliamentary committees and ministries engaged in participatory processes with CSOs or invited CSOs to attend their sessions. CSOs were asked to provide expertise in the drafting of laws, although the requests were sometimes merely a formality. The Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reforms launched a plan to implement the access to information law through a participatory process that included open consultations with stakeholders, including CSOs. International pressure from embassies and groups such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and UNDP helped push reforms that included government engagement with CSOs. However, state actors did not always facilitate access to information by CSOs in 2019. For example, the follow-up and accountability committee for the Litani River, which monitors the implementation of related policies and laws, was unable to access relevant information. In addition, the committee could not access the Litani River to conduct its own monitoring except by force, as it is a closed area.

CSOs successfully advocated for the protection of fundamental freedoms in 2019. The Mashrouh Leila band, whose leader is openly gay and which advocates for equality and non-discrimination, was scheduled to play at the Byblos festival in August. The Catholic Media Center pressured the festival organizers to cancel the performance and a concerted smear campaign was organized that accused band members of satanism, blasphemy, and anti-Christian sentiment. The performance was ultimately canceled, allegedly to maintain security and prevent bloodshed. Eleven CSOs jointly filed a request with the prosecutor asking for an immediate investigation into the individuals who had initiated the campaign against the band. However, no investigation had taken place at the time of writing this report.

CSOs also engaged in other joint advocacy campaigns during the year. Environmental CSOs in the Bisri Dam coalition opposed the dam's construction as many studies concluded that it would cause significant damage to the environment and is not efficient. The coalition raised public awareness of the fact that the government approved the dam's construction without conducting an environmental assessment. The coalition's work was visible in environment-related demands during the autumn protests. The alternative journalism union, which serves as a counterweight to the editors' and journalists' unions, which mainly represent the interests of media owners and politicians, was the leading voice calling for the protection of journalists during the protests and the socio-economic protection of media institutions, which were struggling to pay journalists. The election of the new head of the Beirut Bar Association in November 2019 was considered a win for advocacy organizations, as he comes from a civil society background. In the spring of 2019, environmental CSOs also conducted a media campaign and organized sessions with local communities to raise awareness on the danger of forest fires. This helped protect targeted areas, although there were still several huge fires in other regions across the country.

Peaceful protests were held in February to call for the recognition of civil marriages, in addition to religious marriages, in Lebanon. The movement also called for the legal age for marriage to be raised, demanded equal inheritance rights, and opposed domestic violence and all types of discriminations. Feminist groups and women's rights CSOs, including Kafa, Lebanese Democratic Women's Gathering (RDFL), and Abaad, played a key role in these protests and worked on draft laws addressing these issues. In response to the protests, the minister of



interior stated that she is not against a law for civil marriage. However, this statement was met with harsh criticism from Dar al-Fatwa, the official body for the Sunni branch of Islam in Lebanon, opposing civil marriage.

Despite these successes, networking and coalition-building for greater social impact is generally still weak. For example, CSOs working on governance issues in the oil and gas sector were unable to form a coalition, thereby impeding Lebanon from joining the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). Some established coalitions lack democratic leadership. For example, three individuals dominate a coalition of 185 organizations supporting women’s political engagement. Another challenge for coalition-based advocacy is that clear mechanisms for discussion and decision making are lacking, making small CSOs feel marginalized as a result. For example, at a conference for women’s organizations, the leading organizations decided to draft an action plan and ruled that organizations that did not want to commit to it would have to withdraw. This dynamic particularly affected CSOs in rural areas, as there are many different approaches to women’s issues depending on local cultures.

The reach and impact of CSO advocacy campaigns do not always reach the grassroots level. For example, even though a law was passed years ago that criminalizes honor crimes in response to CSO advocacy, the practice continues as certain segments of society still believe that actions to protect the honor of families are justified. In addition, many advocacy and awareness campaigns now rely on social media, but access to social media can be limited, particularly among women in rural areas.

Structural issues also dissuade advocacy in Lebanon. In particular, the freedom of expression is increasingly threatened, especially through social media. In 2019, there were several cases in which activists were targeted after criticizing public figures or the performance of institutions and bodies or expressing sarcastic opinions against them or in issues related to religion. The authorities used provisions of the penal code related to insulting public institutions, disturbance of public peace, stirring religious strife, endangering the integrity of Lebanon and its external relations, insulting public officials, and other texts related to blasphemy to stifle such criticism. Activists have been called for investigations by different security bodies including the cybercrime bureau, Lebanese Army intelligence, and General Security, and some have even been prosecuted in military courts.

In light of such incidents, significant efforts were made to protect the freedom of expression online and offline in 2019. A coalition of local and international organizations including Maharat, Skeyes, Smex, Legal Agenda, Amnesty, HRW, Alef, and Map advocated for the parliamentary committee of justice and administration, which was discussing the media law, to adopt concrete reforms to ensure wider protection. In general, however, despite ongoing restrictions on civic spaces, CSOs did not focus on changing existing laws in this area in 2019, because they see the problem as lying mainly in implementation rather than the legal framework.

SERVICE PROVISION: 3.4



CSOs in Lebanon continued to provide diverse goods and services in 2019. Although remaining at about the same level as in the previous year, CSO service provision is expected to become more difficult in the future as the effects of the financial crisis become more pronounced.

Service provision usually depends on donors’ agendas. For example, CSOs sometimes compete for projects in refugee camps simply to earn income even when the expectations are unrealistic. CSOs can also be frustrated by donors’ expectations that larger numbers of CSOs become involved as project implementers without corresponding increases in funding. In 2019, for example, one donor was pleased that with \$600,000 it was able to reach thirty to forty CSOs, rather than the eight to ten organizations previously targeted. In such a situation,

CSOs feel the quality of services suffers even as the numbers confirm the success of the program. Services funded by donors are not always aligned with community needs. For example, CSOs fear that some donors’ programs are directed towards naturalizing refugees and integrating them into Lebanese society, whereas many municipalities are not inclusive or receptive to such efforts and feel that their own needs should come first.

CSOs usually publish resources, notices of training opportunities, and publications on their websites, where they are publicly accessible. For the most part, CSOs—with the exception of religious CSOs and those that are politically affiliated—provide their services without discrimination.

Some CSOs earn income by marketing services and products. For example, several organizations rent out their training facilities. A few CSOs offer paid training sessions and consultancy services, but they had few paying customers in 2019 because of the financial crisis. The legal framework does not encourage social entrepreneurship, and most CSOs do not have the resources and experience to engage in market analysis.

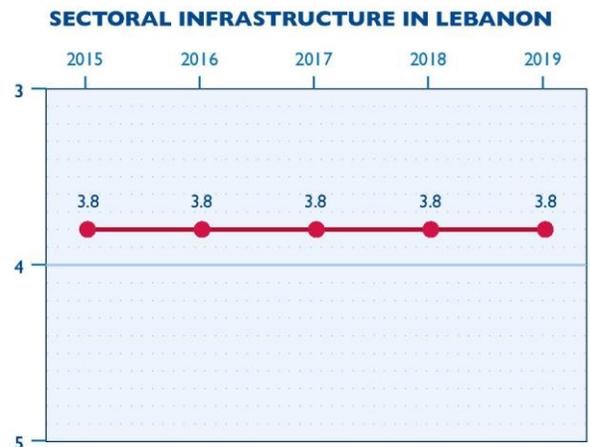
The discussion of the 2019 budget in May 2019 included a debate on funding for the Ministry of Social Affairs to support CSOs working on social needs such as those of people with disabilities. The minister of social affairs objected to the proposed decrease in his ministry’s budget by LBP 3 billion (approximately \$2 million), which would have threatened CSOs’ ability to continue supporting marginalized groups and individuals. Ultimately, when the budget was adopted in July 2019, it included an increase in funding for the Ministry of Social Affairs of LBP 35 billion (approximately \$23 million) for CSOs working on social needs. CSOs were invited to sign contracts with the ministry in December 2019.

The government also recognizes the expertise of CSOs in service provision and relies on CSOs, especially in areas where public institutions lack needed skills, such as reviewing curriculum in the education field, legal assistance during the drafting of laws, or technical assistance to municipalities to collect data or improve good governance. Since the protests, however, a lack of trust has developed between the government and civil society.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 3.8

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector did not change in 2019. CSOs continue to have access to a range of facilities and intermediary support organizations (ISOs) that support their development. The SMART Center supports the development of new CSOs, including their missions, visions, internal policies, and registration as civil companies with the Ministry of Justice. In 2019, the SMART Center offered workshops addressing ten different aspects of organizational capacity. Beyond Reform and Development (BRD) continued to offer services to CSOs in areas such as policy research, public management consulting, and capacity development. Lebanon Support mentored fledgling CSOs on issues ranging from organizational management to web development and continued to operate an online platform called Daleel Madani, which allows organizations to post resources, find out about calls for proposals, and advertise job openings. In addition, in 2019, Lebanon Support organized Daleel Madani Goes on Tour, a series of meetings with CSOs to assess their needs and capacities and improve networking in the sector. Catholic Relief Services works with its partners to develop their organizational capacity to a level that allows them to successfully compete for and manage grant awards and develop financial and administrative systems to promote internal good governance, transparency, accountability and planning.

Several capacity-building programs, including some MEPI programs, ended in 2019, while others were launched. For example, in March, Expertise France, l’Agence Française de Développement (AFD), and the Danish International Development Agency (Danida) launched a call to select Lebanese CSOs to be partners in the SHABAKE project, which aims to strengthen capacities to both prevent and manage crises and effectively respond to vulnerable communities’ needs. The program will also reinforce the networking capacities of local CSOs and facilitate their access to international funding. As part of a program launched by Bioforce and its local partner North Leda in partnership with Oxfam in 2018, twenty-five CSOs in Tripoli were trained in April on the Taking-the-Lead Methodology and received technical assistance in context analysis, organizational self-assessment, and action planning.



While these and other donor-supported programs help CSOs build their capacity, some capacity-building programs remain unknown to local CSOs, especially small and emerging organizations. Communication can be a major impediment, as most support is offered in English. However, a few international organizations, such as Hivos and Oxfam, help small CSOs write proposals in Arabic and then translate them. Several projects offer capacity building through local offices of the Ministry of Social Affairs, although there are concerns that the selection of participants is biased. Some local CSOs, especially small emerging ones, require further support and capacity building in order to prepare financial reports that meet complicated donor requirements. However, such training is not always available or does not fulfill their needs. Instead, these CSOs would prefer specific and tailored training combined with technical on-the-job assistance to be able to prepare their financial reports accurately.

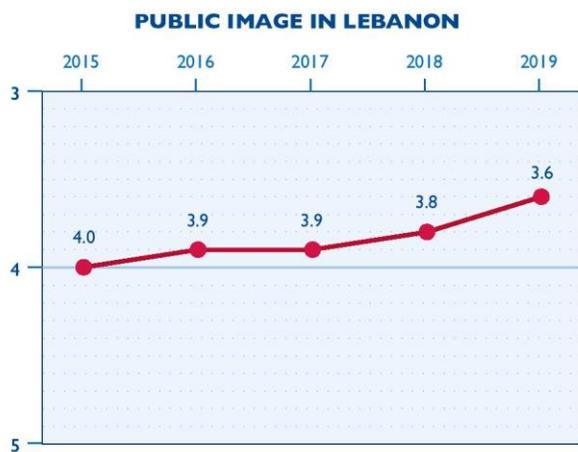
There are still no local organizations that provide grants from either locally raised funds or by re-granting international donor funds to local CSOs to address locally identified needs and projects.

CSOs increasingly form coalitions with specific goals. Examples of such coalitions include the Litani River committee, the Bisri Dam coalition, and coalitions addressing waste management and the freedom of expression.

CSOs regularly share information with each other. While there are local experts and consultants in various fields, there is no platform to find this expertise. Furthermore, it is difficult to assess the competency of alleged experts in specific areas. Therefore, CSOs rely on each other to identify experts, which increases demand for the services of a small number of experts and allows them to increase their fees.

CSO partnerships with the government exist, especially at the legislative level, where CSOs engage with parliamentary committees discussing law proposals. However, such partnerships are still not institutionalized and the extent to which CSOs are allowed to participate in discussions depends on the openness of the head of individual committees. CSOs report that sometimes their engagement is just a formality. The Lebanon Internet Governance Forum, a multistakeholder platform focused on internet governance issues, was supposed to take place in November 2019, but was canceled because of the protests. However, the Lebanese Multistakeholder Advisory Group (LMAG) organized public consultation meetings on internet governance throughout the year to engage with more ministry, civil society, academia, and private sector representatives. The media, especially alternative media platforms, began to approach CSOs about partnerships in 2019.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 3.6



The public image of the civil society sector improved moderately in 2019, especially during the protests during the last two months of the year, when the public was more aware of their activities and media relied on their expertise.

Whereas in previous years, CSOs struggled to access the media, in 2019 media reached out to CSOs for their expertise. For example, many media outlets contacted the founder of a new CSO, Seeds for Legal Initiatives, for comments on legal matters. Almost all television stations provided live coverage of the protests and civil society actors across Lebanon had an easier time accessing media, even on political issues, during the protests. For example, the political talk show Vision 2030 on LBCI provided space for emerging groups and young experts,

including women, to engage in evidence-based discussions on current issues, while previously, political talk shows served primarily as platforms for politicians to make political statements. The exception was small local CSOs, which the media tended not to cover unless they received payment or had personal relationships with an organization.

The public increasingly empathized with the work of CSOs in 2019. The public regarded CSOs as experts in publicly debated topics and appreciated it when they offered concrete data related to their fields of expertise. Organizational reputations continued to influence public perceptions of CSOs. For example, some communities,

especially in Hezbollah-controlled areas, are suspicious of CSOs that accept foreign funding but will cooperate with organizations that they trust.

Both the government and businesses view CSOs as experts in their fields. The government increasingly engages with CSO experts as they have greater access to international actors and embassies. However, as CSOs have become more engaged in political life, including as candidates in the 2018 elections and vocal critics of economic, social, environmental, and other policies in 2019, politicians and political party members increasingly view them as rivals rather than partners.

CSOs improved their work with journalists in 2019. For example, on International Women’s Day in March, Noun Tadamon, a small CSO, designed an event in schools to honor women cleaners. Al Jadeed TV, a major television station, came to the schools to film the event for its news bulletins. CSOs have become experts in social media and used it extensively in 2019, particularly during the protests. CSOs use Facebook to reach broader constituencies and WhatsApp to reach out to their narrower constituencies. Some CSOs use Twitter to reach decision makers and journalists. However, Twitter is not widely used by the public.

Many organizations publish reports of their activities online, but few compile annual reports, since they lack the financial resources to pay staff to do this work. Some CSOs have internal policies that might include codes of conduct, but this depends on the size and structure of individual organizations.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.

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