



2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

LEBANON
NOVEMBER 2022



2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

For Lebanon

November 2022

Developed by:

United States Agency for International Development

Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance

Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance

Acknowledgment: This publication was made possible through support provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-LA-17-00003.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A publication of this type would not be possible without the contributions of many individuals and organizations. We are especially grateful to our implementing partners, who played the critical role of facilitating the expert panel meetings and writing the country reports. We would also like to thank the many CSO representatives and experts, USAID partners, and international donors who participated in the expert panels in each country. Their knowledge, perceptions, ideas, observations, and contributions are the foundation upon which this Index is based.

LOCAL PARTNER

MAHARAT FOUNDATION

Loyal Bahnam
Mia Crochot
Roula Mikhael

PROJECT MANAGERS

FHI 360

Michael Kott
Eka Imerlishvili
Alex Nejadian

INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW (ICNL)

Catherine Shea
Jennifer Stuart
Marilyn Wyatt

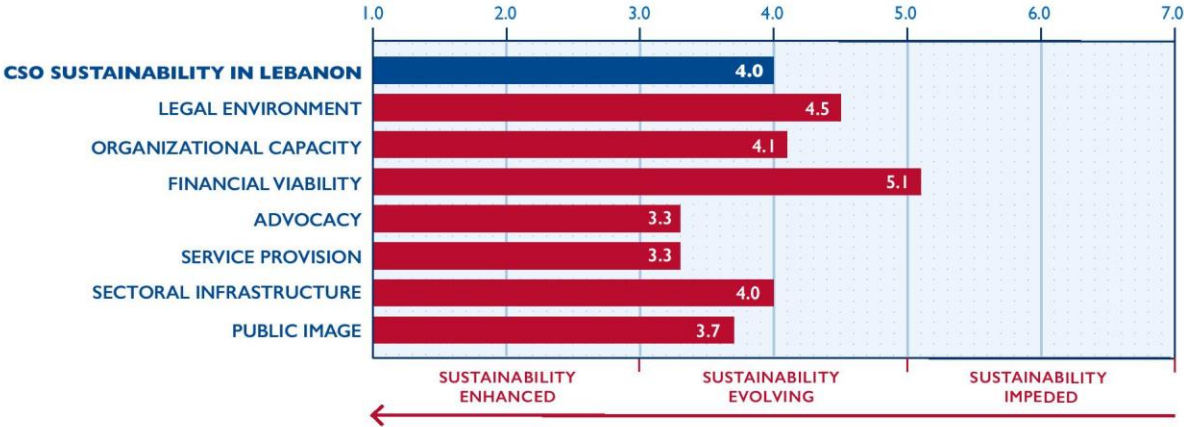
EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Obed Diener, Kristen McGeeney, Stephen Brager, Milad Abraham, and Amy Hawthorne

LEBANON

Capital: Beirut
Population: 5,296,814
GDP per capita (PPP): \$11,600
Human Development Index: High (0.706)
Freedom in the World: Partly Free (42/100)

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.0



Lebanon grappled with multiple challenges in 2021, including the continuation of an unprecedented economic and financial crisis, the disastrous impact of the massive August 2020 explosion at the Port of Beirut, political deadlock, and shrinking public space. These crises were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in mid-January 2021, in response to a dramatic spike in cases, Lebanon imposed a 24-hour curfew, one of the strictest lockdowns in the world. The restrictions began to generally ease on February 8 and the 24-hour curfew was lifted on February 22, allowing some businesses providing essential services to resume operations; on March 22, restrictions were completely lifted.

As policymakers continued to fail to provide an adequate response to the economic crisis, Lebanon’s real gross domestic product (GDP) declined by an estimated 10.5 percent in 2021, following a 21.4 percent contraction in 2020. This economic decline was the worst among 193 countries analyzed by the World Bank over the same period of time. According to the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), in 2021, 78 percent of the Lebanese population (excluding refugees), or three million people, were estimated to be living below the poverty line, and extreme poverty reached 36 percent.

Lebanon also continues to host a large refugee population. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees and 15,000 refugees of other nationalities in Lebanon in 2021. Almost nine in ten displaced Syrian households were living in extreme poverty, according to The Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.

Lebanon faced ongoing security challenges in 2021. In February, the body of Lukman Slim, a prominent Shia writer and civil society activist, was discovered in southern Lebanon. Though the investigation is unresolved, an envoy from the European Union (EU) considered the case an assassination and Lukman’s family blamed Hezbollah, reporting that he had received death threats from the group in late 2019 due to his vocal criticism.

In October, violent clashes erupted in the Tayouneh neighborhood of Beirut in the midst of political demonstrations. Calling for the removal of the judge leading the Beirut port explosion investigation, hundreds of Hezbollah supporters were marching toward the Palace of Justice when shots were fired from nearby rooftops. The ensuing confrontation left seven people dead and at least thirty-two others injured.

No one has been held responsible for the deadly explosion in Beirut’s port on August 4, 2020, which killed at least 219 people and destroyed half of the city. In July, the National Human Rights Commission formally recognized that the official state response showed failure and neglect to protect the rights of citizens without discrimination, including their rights to life, housing, health, food, and education. In December, two members of parliament filed complaints against the leading judge, prompting the fourth suspension of the investigation in 2021; the case was ongoing at the end of the year. This continuing political inertia has aggravated the blast’s largely unresolved impact on vital infrastructure in Beirut, including the port, hospitals, and businesses, compounded by the country’s

economic collapse and electricity shortages. Much remains to be done in the reconstruction of Beirut’s damaged infrastructure.

Parliamentary elections were scheduled for May 2022 but political stagnation and the lack of an approved national budget hampered administrative and logistical preparations. This, combined with the ongoing lack of trust in public administration in the country, prompted CSOs working on electoral reforms to form a coalition in August 2021 demanding timely, fair, and inclusive elections. In response to this advocacy and international pressure, parliament adopted a reform of the applicable electoral law to amend legal deadlines in order to conduct the elections on time.

In spite of the significant challenges facing Lebanon in 2021, CSOs showed remarkable resilience, offsetting what otherwise might have been disastrous circumstances. The overall sustainability of the CSO sector in Lebanon deteriorated slightly in 2021, with slight deteriorations in four dimensions while the remaining three remained unchanged overall. Shrinking civic space spurred deterioration in the legal environment, while smear campaigns worsened CSOs’ public image. CSO advocacy initiatives also deteriorated in 2021 due to general stagnation in policymaking and CSOs’ prioritization of meeting basic needs rather than advocacy work. Declining collaboration caused a slight deterioration in the infrastructure supporting the CSO sector. Though the need continues to outpace available resources, financial viability of CSOs remained unchanged overall in 2021 as they better adapted to the changing banking system. Organizational capacity and service provision also remained unchanged, with CSOs continuing to fill the role of the Lebanese state in providing basic services to the public.

Most CSOs in Lebanon are registered as associations. According to the Ministry of Interior, at least 8,500 associations were registered as of the end of 2021, including at least 200 branches of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). However, reliable data is limited and sometimes conflicting, and experts estimate that the actual number of CSOs is higher. The CSO sector in Lebanon continued to respond quickly to community demands in 2021 and has taken on increasing responsibility in providing and ensuring the public’s basic needs. Informal social and political movements and collective civic actions protesting the government also continued to be an important part of the civil society landscape in 2021.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 4.5



The legal environment governing CSOs slightly deteriorated in 2021 due to the ongoing shrinking of civic space, as well as logistical difficulties and obstacles in the public sector and the banking system.

The registration procedures for CSOs remained unchanged in 2021. According to the 1909 Law on Nonprofit Organizations, CSOs are able to register by notifying the government of their establishment. While most CSOs notify the Ministry of the Interior, others notify the Ministry of Social Affairs or the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The respective ministry must then deliver a registration receipt to CSOs in order for them to enjoy legal capacity and operate in Lebanon. The receipt is also necessary to open a bank account and obtain international funding. Registered CSOs must also

annually submit the previous year’s budget and a financial forecast for the following year to the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Finance.

Though CSOs do not face significant legal barriers to registration, in practice, obtaining a registration receipt continues to be difficult at times for those working on sensitive matters such as human rights. For example, the Lebanese Monitor for Human Rights has yet to receive its receipt of notification, which has likely faced delays because the organization’s founders are political activists who typically clash with the current government. Organizations working on Syrian issues and those managed and staffed by Syrian refugees are particularly vulnerable to interference in both their registration and operation.

In 2021, registration procedures were also delayed by increasing logistical problems affecting the public administration: many public servants quit because of the devaluation of the Lebanese currency, in turn seeking better paid employment outside of the public sector, and administrative offices experienced higher degrees of absenteeism. Work in public administration offices was also hampered by power outages and a lack of basic supplies like paper and ink. The resulting delays mean that the registration process can take more than a year.

While the legal framework that governs associations does not restrict CSO operations, CSOs' margin of freedom also depends heavily on the administration's practices in implementing that framework. Human Rights Watch and others have expressed grave concern about the shrinking of civic space and regression of freedom of expression on the ground, and in 2021, Lebanon dropped twenty-three places in Reporters Without Borders' freedom of expression index, to 107 out of 180 countries. The increasing restrictions had a negative impact on CSOs and activists, many of whom were summoned to the Cybercrime Bureau for investigations after criticizing the ruling elite over the course of the year.

Some CSOs operating in peripheral regions were victims of harassment by political actors affiliated with traditional parties like Hezbollah, and many CSOs were unable to operate in certain areas because some political parties sought to monopolize aid distribution in order to consolidate their dominance. This was especially true ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections. In order for CSOs to operate freely in such regions, they have to build strong connections with members of the party in power. Through bureaucratic complications and delays, municipalities can make the work of CSOs at the local level difficult if the organization is not in line with their political affiliation or if the municipality's own financial interests are not involved.

Public actors also increasingly questioned CSOs' work as CSOs competed with governmental bodies for international funds. For instance, in a tweet on October 16, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement blamed CSOs, embassies, and foreign funding for Lebanon's economic collapse, and accused them and their allies of manipulating the electoral law in their own interests.

As in 2020, freedom of assembly was again breached in 2021 when security forces confronted several protests. At a January demonstration in Tripoli against the extension of COVID-19 restrictions, numerous protesters were injured and at least one killed, while at least thirty-five participants were arrested and charged with terrorism in military courts. In August, police clashed with demonstrators demanding accountability for the Beirut port explosion. Throughout the year, supporters of various political parties assaulted demonstrators or attacked their encampments.

CSOs and organizations registered as civic companies in Lebanon are exempt from taxes because they do not make a profit. Although these organizations are required to declare their employees and enroll them for social security benefits, many CSOs do not comply with these regulations due to negligence, lack of resources, or the lack of a culture of paying taxes. The collapse of public administrations in 2021, including the National Social Security Fund, and a lack of trust in state institutions due to corruption and mismanagement of taxpayer money further disincentivized compliance.

CSOs face no legal limitations on fundraising or receiving foreign funds. However, due to strict banking requirements imposed in October 2019, CSOs continued to face difficulties when opening bank accounts. In some cases, CSOs must rely on personal connections to facilitate the opening of an account. This has a dire impact on CSOs dependent on foreign support, which requires transferring funds through a bank account. Restrictions also include procedures that limit account holders' access to their foreign currency accounts, impose additional fees on transfers and withdrawals, and only permit withdrawals of amounts in foreign currency at a depreciated rate and in Lebanese pounds. The complicated financial procedures prompted a few organizations to move to Dubai and Cyprus and to seek to open bank accounts abroad, though this is not easy.

In the last three years, since the widespread October 2019 protests, lawyers have shown notably more interest in supporting activists and CSOs. A large number of volunteer lawyers have started to defend CSOs pro bono.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.1

The organizational capacity of CSOs remained unchanged in 2021. Despite increased challenges—including the growing and urgent needs of constituencies, the unpredictable economic and political situation in the country, and significantly impeded infrastructure—CSOs demonstrated resilience in 2021 through targeted responses, allowing them to offset challenges and maintain steady overall capacity.

The ongoing social, political, and economic crises spurred both CSOs and donors to prioritize humanitarian assistance and relief, and CSOs continued to focus less on building their constituencies and more on addressing urgent community needs and following the flow of funding. CSOs continued to struggle to coordinate with one another to ensure that all communities were supported, inevitably leaving some beneficiaries behind. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, especially early in the year, some CSOs also struggled to reach their primary constituents; this challenge was particularly reported by CSOs working with people with disabilities. CSOs required permits to go to their offices, suppliers, or beneficiaries during the lockdown, and the Ministry of Interior requested personal information on aid recipients in order to approve those permits. The Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA), for instance, was forced to suspend its food distribution because it lacked the necessary permit. The process of applying for a permit could be so burdensome that some CSOs did not even initiate it. Regardless, in areas like health and relief, CSOs continued to respond to urgent needs that otherwise should have been met by the state.

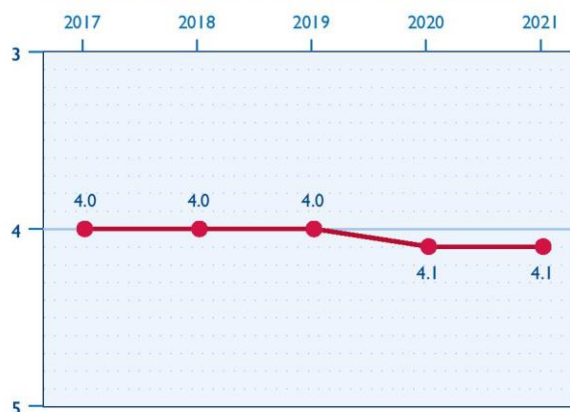
Most CSOs have flexible mission statements that allow them to respond to immediate needs or shift their focuses based on donor priorities. For example, while the majority of CSOs continued to focus on humanitarian relief and the urgent needs of their constituents, many also began projects tied to the 2022 parliamentary elections in order to benefit from the funds dedicated to that work.

CSOs often lack long-term visions or strategic plans, or simply do not follow their stated missions and goals. Projects are often driven by immediate needs and are more concerned with relief and humanitarian aid than with development. Small, local organizations struggle to write proposals that can attract foreign funding. The unpredictability of the economic situation in the country also makes it very difficult to plan for projects in the long term, and some CSOs continue to follow donor priorities. Still, some CSOs that had shifted to humanitarian and relief activities after the Beirut blast have since refocused on their long-term objectives. For example, in impoverished areas like Akkar or in areas of Beirut affected by the blast, most CSOs in 2020 focused on humanitarian aid. In 2021, however, some began to return to their previous focuses on vocational training and developing skills for entrepreneurship.

There are many disparities between CSOs' organizational capacities, particularly regarding internal management. Larger CSOs are more likely to have clearly defined structures and boards actively engaged in internal governance, with tasks and responsibilities allocated based on competencies. Others, however, often lack the resources or capacity to proactively develop these internal management structures. In the Akkar region, for example, there are about 800 or 900 active CSOs, 70 to 80 percent of which work in a temporary capacity—entirely ceasing operations between projects—and are primarily focused on emergency relief. The compounded crises of 2020 prevented CSOs from focusing on internal management, but in 2021, some larger CSOs were able to better cope with the challenging environment and gave greater attention to their strategies and internal procedures. This included, for instance, improving their procurement policies or engaging with their boards to increase their transparency in the shift to a cash economy.

The severe economic crisis affecting Lebanon has resulted in a brain drain, depriving the country of qualified human resources and making it difficult for the non-profit sector to retain skilled staff. Some CSOs that lacked internal expertise hired assistance from the dwindling pool of local consultants. Staff retention is particularly difficult for organizations that are unable to pay competitive salaries. Those CSOs that are able to pay salaries in USD offer

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY IN LEBANON



attractive work opportunities; on the whole, however, CSOs struggle to retain skilled staff who can seek more competitive salaries elsewhere. Some CSOs also worry that, given the economic environment, some individuals seeking work in the sector are primarily looking for the most competitive salary and are less committed to the mission. Many CSOs offer capacity building for their personnel, but this is sometimes dependent on donors' financial capacity and the availability of relevant training opportunities. Though CSOs continued to engage volunteers where possible, the economic crisis has pushed most individuals to seek paid work. According to the Charities Aid Foundation World Giving Index 2022, which covers 2021 developments, Lebanon recorded a clear drop in the Index in 2021 (which covers both giving and volunteerism), and only 9 percent of people in Lebanon reported volunteering in the previous month, one of the lowest rates of volunteering in the world.

COVID-19 continued to force CSOs to increase their use of technology, although the situation did not change significantly in 2021. While many have access to the necessary information communication technology (ICT), some CSOs remained limited by financial constraints or lacked digital literacy skills and internal ICT expertise.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.1



The financial viability of CSOs remained unchanged overall in 2021. Most CSOs no longer had money locked up in banks, and CSOs became more familiar with the new banking procedures. Financial transfers from abroad were delivered in USD rather than in the failing and volatile Lebanese pound. However, these improvements were offset by ongoing economic challenges, and uncertainty remained high regarding potential future restrictions on depositors' foreign currency accounts.

Small, volunteer-based CSOs and grassroots organizations typically have less access to diversified funding resources than larger CSOs. The CSO sector continued to rely heavily on international funding, especially because local funding and state support remain limited. Foreign funding is typically tied to specific

projects with limited timespans rather than providing core support, further endangering CSOs' long-term sustainability.

In 2021, however, private donations continued to increase in response to the ongoing economic crisis and expatriates emerged as a major source of financial support for families and CSOs. For example, Medonations, an NGO that provides medicine and covers the cost of hospitalization and education for people in need, received significant cash transfers from expatriates in 2021. Funding from the diaspora has been integral in providing medicine, hygiene supplies, and cash as shortages intensify in Lebanon.

Support from local individuals, businesses, and philanthropic organizations, however, became nearly non-existent as the economic situation impacted all local sources. The Ministry of Social Affairs no longer has funds to support CSO work, particularly impacting CSOs that provide special services to people with disabilities. Any funding provided by the public sector is in the Lebanese currency, which has dramatically decreased in value. There is no dedicated public fund for NGOs. Discussions began around a circular that would create a category of public benefit organizations and allow them to receive support from the Ministry of Public Affairs, but the criteria seemed vague and non-transparent.

Though international funding increased substantially in 2020 in response to the various crises confronting Lebanon, the global economic impact of COVID-19 notably weakened international support in 2021. The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP)—a multi-stakeholder response co-led by the government and the UN, which channels funds to CSOs—received approximately \$1.19 billion in 2021 from a wide range of donors, compared to \$1.44 billion in 2020, meeting just 43 percent of the anticipated need. CSOs working on relief and humanitarian assistance remained more likely to secure funding than those working on democratization, social cohesion, and peacebuilding, and donor priorities did not necessarily always coincide with community needs. Nevertheless, foreign funding patterns began to shift in 2021, allowing for greater focus on development, gender equality, and democratization

and the upcoming elections rather than only relief and humanitarian aid. A number of new non-professional CSOs that emerged after the Beirut blast (including unofficially registered groups and registered CSOs lacking formal structure) also attracted some funding away from more established organizations in 2021, simultaneously sparking concerns about the lack of transparency or monitoring of their use of foreign funds.

Crowdfunding remained a popular method of raising funds, particularly from the diaspora community, in 2021. For instance, the NGO IMPACT allocates funds received from the Lebanese diaspora or through fundraisers (mostly locally raised) to Lebanese CSOs; in 2021, it allocated \$376,630 to Baytna Baytak for four rehabilitation projects, with funds received from the Beirut Disaster Relief Fund. Live Love Beirut also supported urgent needs and environmental and social initiatives in Lebanon in 2021 through its fundraising platform Live Love Fundraising; individual donors select which cause to support through the platform, such as the Lebanon Medical Supplies Fund and the My Education, My Future Fund. However, fundraising alone provides insufficient support, and some CSOs that rely largely on private donations struggle to sustain themselves.

Only a few CSOs try to generate their own revenues, and revenues generated from the sale of products and services continued to decline in 2021 as it became increasingly difficult for local communities to afford them. The cooperatives that used to sell products had difficulties sustaining sales due to the decrease in local purchasing power, but some have begun to export their products.

Some CSOs are now accustomed to the new banking procedures and have adjusted their financial practices accordingly, but others continued to face hardships and were unable to operate due to bank restrictions and their inability to open new bank accounts or issue withdrawal letters. CSOs working with vulnerable communities such as Syrian refugees were particularly likely to face obstacles in opening new bank accounts. The shift to a cash economy also reduced the transparency of CSO financial management, and numerous allegations of corruption among CSOs have surfaced from those already critical of CSO missions. Donors and CSOs have largely agreed upon best practices and attempted to increase transparency as much as possible, and there have been no formal investigations of corruption.

ADVOCACY: 3.3

CSO advocacy slightly deteriorated in 2021 as CSOs prioritized the provision of emergency assistance and humanitarian services, stepping in where the state failed. In this context, many CSOs considered advocacy to influence public policy and legislative processes of secondary importance.

CSO cooperation with local and the central government remained relatively unchanged in 2021. Government actors at every level increasingly rely on research and data analysis produced by civil society. For instance, the Ministry of Interior requested data from the Lebanese Union for People with Disabilities (LUPD), which LUPD had compiled in lobbying for accessible polling stations in the upcoming elections. However, political and legislative stagnation continued to make policy advocacy and lobbying relatively ineffective, spurring most CSOs to focus their limited resources on other, more impactful areas of work.

The government still does not consider public opinion when developing policy, and the absence of policy responses to the multiple unfolding crises inevitably limited CSOs' opportunities to cooperate with policymakers or influence public policy. CSO representatives were, however, engaged in several initiatives with the central government in 2021. CSOs and unions were included in the Independence of the Judiciary Coalition, formed in 2021 under the leadership of the NGO Legal Agenda to advocate for an independent judiciary. In mid-December, the Administration and Justice Committee adopted an amended version of a bill on the independence and transparency of the judiciary drafted by Legal Agenda. However, Legal Agenda considered the amended version insufficient to



ensure judicial independence and denounced the secretive approach of the Administration and Justice Committee, whose debates were not open to the public.

Three CSOs—Maharat Foundation, the Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA), and Kulluna Irada—are represented in the Independent Oversight Board, which oversees the implementation and financing of Lebanon's Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) and holds the government, development partners, and implementing organizations accountable for overall progress. All three joined the Board in late 2020 and remained active throughout 2021. In August 2021, Maharat Foundation, LTA, LUPD, and the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) launched a consortium to lobby for timely elections that would be fair, democratic, and inclusive, and advocated accordingly through ongoing meetings with relevant ministries like the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Though advocacy directed at government representatives constitutes the only formal leverage to change public policies, its impact remained limited in 2021 due to the lack of political will to enact change. Policy advocacy initiatives during the year were selective and CSOs prioritized attention to some laws over others. Some CSOs also only advocate for changes in laws that directly affect them, so because many CSOs no longer had funds held in their previous bank accounts, for instance, they no longer pursued advocacy efforts around the capital control law.

While CSOs actively used social media in 2021 to raise awareness on issues like women's rights and domestic workers' rights, such platforms were more likely to reach the educated urban population, and advocacy campaigns often failed to actively engage with marginalized and more rural communities. CSO campaigns related to accountability mechanisms and the right to information, for example, struggled to reach grassroots communities beyond Beirut.

Lobbying efforts also somewhat declined in 2021. Some CSOs are reluctant to collaborate or interact with the government through lobbying because they consider decision makers at this level to be corrupt; instead, they prefer a more confrontational approach through activism. Similarly, some CSOs hold that real social change can only be achieved through a bottom-up approach, and hence argue that advocacy initiatives should target local communities, not just decision makers.

The disorganization of advocacy initiatives also hampered CSO lobbying. For instance, in lobbying for women's rights, different CSOs led the conversation on different issues, ranging from violence against women to political participation and child custody. The disconnected fronts of the movement therefore resulted in an overall lack of harmonization. Limited visibility further hampered such campaigns as organizations often lacked the capacity to provide regular updates of their actions to demonstrate follow-up. Recognizing this challenge, some in the feminist movement have begun to focus instead on creating solidarity platforms and networks to promote change.

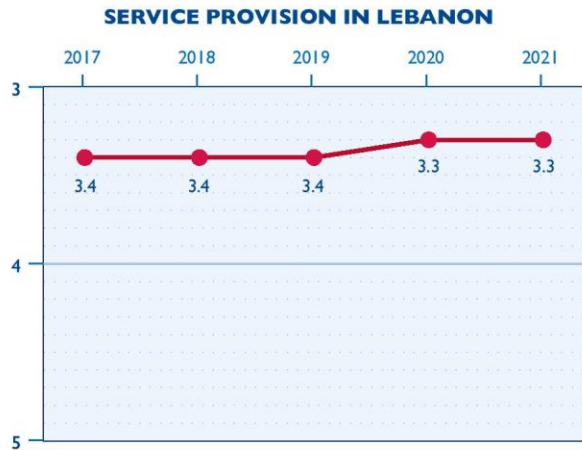
CSOs did not actively advocate for a more favorable legal framework for the sector in 2021. However, after an article in the newspaper *Al-Akhbar* demonized CSOs and suggested modifications to the law of associations to restrict them, CSOs began discussing the need to counter any future attempts to introduce legal restrictions.

SERVICE PROVISION: 3.3

CSO service provision remained unchanged in 2021 as CSOs continued primarily to meet the basic needs of the population. Given the lack of resources and extent of the need, however, services were still not adequate to meet demand, and those working on low-priority issues like social cohesion and peacebuilding especially lacked the needed resources to continue operations.

CSOs offer a wide range of services, including housing, education, and health. Often, CSOs do not conduct needs assessments prior to implementing activities (which are frequently based on donor priorities), and during the lockdown period especially, some initiatives were carried out quickly without allowing for adequate coordination, mapping, and assessments.

The LCRP—made possible by donor contributions and implemented by humanitarian, government, and development partners—aims to address immediate and medium-term needs in the country, and thus reflects an assessment of the operational environment in Lebanon and its impact on service delivery and protection risks. LCRP partners use the assessment to adapt their interventions and seek adequate funding to address the identified needs. According to the LCRP, in 2021, funds covered 43 percent of the \$2.75 billion needs-based appeal,



increasing slightly to 56 percent with the carry-over of \$345 million from 2020. This again left significant gaps in vulnerable populations' access to basic social services. CSOs also faced logistical constraints due to insufficient infrastructure, hampering aid distribution.

According to the LCRP, in 2021, most funding was directed to food security and agriculture, education, and basic assistance such as cash and in-kind support. For instance, Beit el Baraka distributed food boxes during the lockdown. Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) continued its Reconstruction of Beirut program to support medical services and assist in the repair of damaged homes, historic buildings, and public spaces.

The majority of services are provided without discrimination. However, CSOs tend to focus less on accessibility and inclusion, and sometimes struggle to adapt services for people with disabilities, the elderly, migrants, and those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. In addition, some services are only available to refugees while others are only available to specific constituencies in a particular region. This distinction generates tensions between refugees and the host community amidst growing needs. According to a survey by Lebanon Support covering January through March 2021, interventions during the lockdown also tended to concentrate on Beirut and Mount Lebanon, neglecting peripheral regions like Akkar, Baalbeck, and Nabatieh.

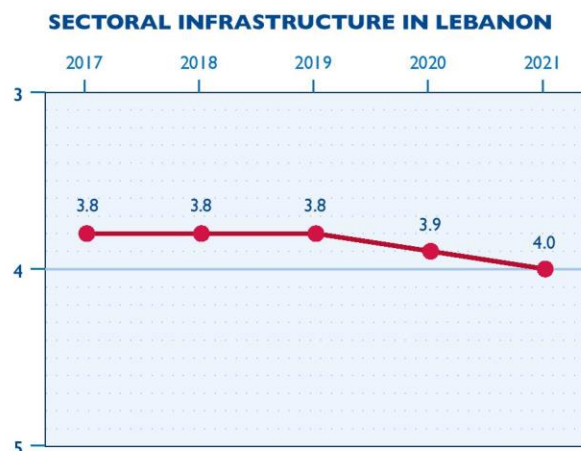
CSOs were still largely unable to generate revenue through their service provision, and cooperatives that used to rely on product sales struggled in 2021 as inflation drastically reduced the purchasing power of the public.

Continuing the trend observed in 2020, as the socioeconomic crisis worsened, the government increasingly relied on CSOs to provide the services it was unable to provide itself, even as government representatives did not publicly acknowledged the vital contributions of CSOs.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.0

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector slightly deteriorated in 2021, primarily due to declines in networking and alliances between CSOs.

A few programs continued to provide capacity-building support to CSOs in 2021. The Center for Social Sciences Research and Action, for instance, provided multidisciplinary research and education through the Civil Society Incubator. Some foreign donors also provided capacity-building training. The American embassy, in partnership with Tatweer Baladna, launched a monitoring and evaluation initiative that included one-on-one coaching sessions for CSOs. Expertise France launched the Shabake program to strengthen the capacities of Lebanese CSOs in preventing and responding to crises. The program also aimed to strengthen partner CSOs' incorporation into the aid ecosystem by fostering a network among them, connecting them with donors, and consolidating existing donor coordination structures. In June 2021, USAID launched a program to support CSOs in Lebanon through technical capacity building and grants, totaling \$15 million over the next five years.



Local grantmaking organizations remained limited in 2021. IMPACT, an NGO registered in the United Kingdom by members of the Lebanese diaspora, supported local CSOs with funds received from the diaspora and through local fundraisers, as discussed above.

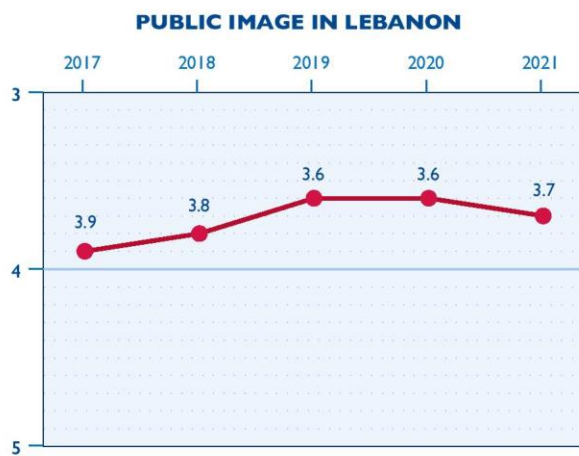
CSO networking and coalition-building efforts declined overall in 2021 as CSOs adopted a more competitive attitude, vying for limited resources. Frictions within the sector also increased somewhat due to lack of consensus about possible alternative political leaders. At the same time, advocacy groups like Kulluna Irada, though not intending to position themselves politically, were accused of acting as political parties because they worked on political reforms.

Because CSOs often do not share information with each other or collaborate, they miss opportunities to further common goals and sometimes programs are unnecessarily duplicated. What coalitions do exist tend to be short-term and limited to the lifespan of funded projects. Still, some CSOs have formed organic coalitions, which then became the main drivers for change in fields like judicial independence, freedom of expression, and electoral reforms. For instance, one coalition lobbied for the continuation of the investigation of the Beirut port explosion and provided legal arguments to support the investigation, while another coalition called for the transparent investigation of the death of Lukman Slim, demanding an end to impunity for crimes related to freedom of expression.

While donors offered a number of training and capacity-building opportunities, those opportunities were frequently overlooked by CSOs, which were instead primarily interested in funding for project implementation. The majority of available training sessions focused on proposal writing and were provided for grassroots organizations and CSOs in peripheral regions. Others, like the EU-funded Safir project, aim to strengthen CSO advocacy capacities.

Intersectoral partnerships increased in 2021, particularly between CSOs and alternative media platforms, which helped to build an independent, alternative narrative and regularly highlighted CSO data and resources. CSO partnerships with the private sector remained somewhat limited, though some collaboration is ongoing in projects like the USAID-funded Community Support Program (CSP). CSP uses a participatory design approach, including local governments, CSOs, and the private sector, to improve the delivery of essential services.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 3.7



The public image of CSOs slightly deteriorated in 2021. CSOs were sometimes presented in the media as being affiliated with Western embassies, and some traditional political parties and media accused CSOs of corruption, especially in regard to the management of aid following the Beirut blast. The new tendency of some civil society actors to position themselves as political alternatives rather than development actors also had a negative impact on the public image of the sector.

Some media outlets continued to reference CSO expertise and covered CSO work and conferences. Alternative media, such as Megaphone News and Naked Politics, were active allies of CSOs. However, the anti-Western editorial line of other, more traditional media generated greater hostility toward CSOs. For instance,

the newspaper *Al-Akhabar* launched a smear campaign against foreign-funded CSOs, presenting them as agents of the West and demonizing their role in society. Media also accused some newly established CSOs of fraud and corruption after they received funds for the Beirut blast and accused others of being politically connected. This accusation was compounded by the fact that some CSOs had become somewhat involved in the political arena, further hampering the perception of CSOs overall. Those outlets willing to cover CSO work also lacked the bandwidth to send reporters, given the economic crisis and fuel shortages.

Though negative media coverage threatened to impact the public's perception of CSOs, it was largely offset by CSOs' pivotal role in providing necessary services and relief in 2021. These contributions in various areas were acknowledged by the public, and because CSOs continued to provide services and take on the responsibilities of the state, Lebanon was increasingly perceived by the public as a "Republic of NGOs." However, transparency of CSO spending remained a growing concern for the public.

Government perception of CSOs continued to decline in 2021 at both central and local levels, and the state increasingly saw them as competitors for international support. As a result, government representatives leveled numerous allegations at CSOs, accusing them of acting as foreign agents. The business sector also continued to negatively perceive CSOs, a trend that began in 2020 as the private sector began to see them as competitors for limited resources.

CSOs recognize the value of working with journalists and media professionals. Well-established CSOs that document human rights and transparency issues, in addition to providing evidence-based resources, are frequently cited by journalists and influential figures on social media. These CSOs effectively use social media to increase their outreach and visibility.

Leading CSOs in Lebanon have not adopted a common code of conduct. However, after the campaign launched by *Al-Akhbar*, some CSOs began discussions both internally and alongside other CSOs about the need to counter the smear campaign by increasing transparency and publishing annual reports that would include all donors' names. Some CSOs, such as Himaya and Arcenciel, publish annual reports.

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.*

U.S. Agency for International Development

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20523

Tel: (202) 712-0000

Fax: (202) 216-3524

www.usaid.gov