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Community Perceptions Report

01 September – 30 November 2023

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Working for
Engagement,
Acceptance
and Mediation

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1. Introduction and Purpose

ALEF – act for human rights is implementing the WE'AM project (Working for Engagement, Acceptance and Mediation), funded by the EU and lead by OXFAM, which aims to contribute to a people-centered recovery of Lebanon, in line with 3RF and particularly its Pillar 3 focusing on supporting a socially cohesive environment. Considering the multi-layered crisis and divisions that characterize the country, the project aims at focusing on three key dimensions: drivers of tensions at the community level; conflict prevention processes and awareness raising; mainstreaming of community level social cohesion into programming, with particular focus on the EU. By involving a variety of stakeholders – civil society, community groups, religious, political, media and private sector actors, donor community and the wider audience - with a participatory approach, the project will help building consensus and produce recommendations to mainstream social cohesion into EU community-based development programs.

As part of the project, the Working Group for People Affected by the Syrian Crisis (WG PASC), a network of 32 local CSOs facilitated by ALEF,¹ has been collecting real-time community perceptions on social tensions and the reform process using Oxfam's Community Perception Tracker (CPT) approach to enable capturing, analyzing, and understanding the perceptions of communities in the 6 areas prioritized by the consortium (Beirut, Tripoli, Akkar, Baalbek, Saida and Barja). PASC's usage of the CPT has focused on monitoring social tensions and sentiments of people around the reform process and its application, through the network's regular day-to-day engagement and programming. This has been allowing for the tracking of the perceptions of not only crisis-affected communities, but also local service providers, local authorities, wider civil society and UN agencies' staff, and other community groups, on an ongoing basis.

To further understand drivers and triggers of social tensions at the national level and the impact of the reform process and its connection to social cohesion, the qualitative data collected by PASC using the CPT is being analyzed by ALEF on a quarterly basis against incidents, news reports, and other secondary sources to produce quarterly perception reports around social tensions and the reform process. ALEF has also been conducting monthly meetings with PASC members

¹ The Working Group for Persons Affected by the Syrian Crisis in Lebanon (WG PASC) is a voluntary, inter-organizational, non-binding, and informal network. The Working Group is open to all local CSOs working with persons affected by the Syrian crisis. It works to enhance the capacity and space for CSOs in Lebanon to influence their government and international actors to adopt policies that more effectively meet the needs of vulnerable refugees and host communities and implement them effectively.

using the CPT, in order to discuss any observations, recurrent trends witnessed, and potential improvements to the process. Additionally, the findings and recommendations of this report have been validated with PASC and project partners, in order to ensure that the report are in accordance with observations from the field.

Monthly Meetings with PASC Members



This community perceptions report is the first of the series and covers the period between 01 September and 30 November 2023.

2. Community Perception Tracker (CPT)

The CPT is a community-based approach that uses a mobile tool to enable staff to capture, analyze, and understand the perceptions of communities during shocks. It helps organizations better understand the perceptions and beliefs of crisis-affected communities. The purpose of the CPT is to grant conflict-affected populations the opportunity to shape programs and policies that could potentially impact their lives. This approach runs alongside existing programs through active listening and documenting what individuals and groups share with staff. Under the WE'AM project, the approach is used to specifically understand and track perceptions around drivers of social tensions and reform processes to ensure that the project addresses the triggers, needs, and issues previously identified.

3. Context Analysis

The period spanning September to November 2023 in Lebanon was marked by notable events that influence social stability and conflict management, particularly in light of the regional developments following the events of October 7, 2023.

Lebanon has been suffering from a multitude of crises since the fall of 2019. Most notably, the economic and financial crash in the country has impacted all individuals residing on Lebanese territory with no exception. The cost of good and basic services has increased by at least 700% in the first two years of the crisis alone,² whereas most households have either had their income stagnated or have been earning very little. This has led to high food insecurity and poverty levels in the country, a skyrocketing rate of unemployment, a grave disruption in access to basic services (such as access to electricity, water, healthcare, and education), and a total collapse of essential programs for public investment and social security.

The continued vacuum in the Presidency of the Republic, which has been preventing effective parliamentary action, and the consequent presence of a caretaker cabinet have all had an adverse impact on decision-making in the country. For instance, the IMF Staff Level Agreement on a comprehensive economic reform package has been on hold since its formulation by the Government of Lebanon (GoL) in April 2022. The paralyzed parliament has also been putting on hold many discussions or approvals of grants and programs for the support of the most vulnerable. In the face of numerous crises in Lebanon, including this political deadlock, socioeconomic deterioration, and their effects on funding, services, and access; municipalities and local authorities have also been encountered significant challenges at the local level.

However, beyond the governance realm, social stability in Lebanon is influenced by confessional and political tensions as well. With the presence of at least 18 religious groups, many of which were fighting against each other during the Lebanese civil war, the lack of proper reconciliation in the country has ensured that the diverse religious communities continue to fear one another. This often triggers tensions and conflicts on the basis of confessions across different areas in Lebanon. Additionally, due to the country's power-sharing system rooted in consociationalism, politics and religion are intertwined in the country, linking every group's bid for power

² American University of Beirut (2022, April 07). Lebanon's Economic Crisis: Current Conditions and the Way Forward. Retrieved from <https://www.aub.edu.lb/osb/research/Documents/AUB%20webinar%20-%20Dr%20Marwan%20Barakat.pdf>

and influence to their religious identity. This has rendered it rather easy to create divides among the population based on political competition and the fear of repeated conflicts.

Socially, the GoL's mismanagement of the presence of a large number of refugees from Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and other countries, especially amid Lebanon's deteriorating plights, has strained the country's already-depleted resources and contributed to economic challenges. As Lebanese vulnerable groups continue to grapple with unemployment and poverty, worrying tensions have been growing between the host community and refugee groups across the country.

In September 2023, armed clashes reignited in Ain el Helweh, the biggest Palestinian camp in the country - located in the South.³ The altercation had unfolded between Fatah – a Palestinian political party – and armed groups inside the camp, known as the Muslim Youth,⁴ in late July 2023. Despite endeavors to implement a ceasefire, hostilities resumed in September. The Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) cautioned concerned parties about the potential repercussions and its commitment to undertake suitable measures should their military centers and personnel be exposed to danger.⁵ However, they were not able to enter the camp. These clashes sparked significant concern over the potential of similar escalations in other Palestinian refugee camps, along with a fervent nationwide debate regarding the LAF's inability to access the camp and stabilize the situation. However, in general, widespread armed presence of non-state actors across the Lebanese territory is a major source of fragility. This can be seen not just in the presence of armed non-state actors in the country, but also in day-to-day incidents in which innocent civilians lose their lives to stray bullets due to celebratory or mourning gunfire.

To add to the economic and societal strains, people, in early September, were suffering from the impact of climate change on their livelihood. Areas such as Akkar experienced heat waves that affected crops and individuals were forcibly displaced due to floods, which further exacerbated their economic difficulties.⁶

Additionally, cultural norms continued to play a pivotal role in shaping events during this period, especially in September. Following Pope Francis' statement on same-sex couples in September, Lebanese television channel MTV aired a clip that stated that "homosexuality is not a crime."⁷ This reignited a fervent debate about the acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community and triggered grave instances of hate speech, as conservative and progressive ideologies clashed.

Just recovering from the clashes in Ain El Helwe in October, Lebanon faced a new challenge as the war on Gaza, which began early in the month, swiftly extended to Southern Lebanon.

3 L'Orient Today (2023, September 14). New ceasefire in Ain al-Hilweh. Retrieved from <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1349402/death-toll-rises-to-at-least-18-in-ain-al-hilweh-clashes.html>; LBCI (2023, September 14). Renewed clashes: 15 killed and 150 injured in Ain al-Hilweh conflict. Retrieved from <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/lebanon-news/722979/renewed-clashes-15-killed-and-150-injured-in-ain-a/en>.

4 Al Jazeera (2023, September 8). Clashes between Palestinian factions resume in Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh camp. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/8/clashes-between-palestinian-factions-resume-in-lebanons-ein-el-hilweh-camp>

5 Relief Web (2023, September 12). UNRWA Situation Report #7 on the situation in Ein el Hilweh, Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/unrwa-situation-report-7-situation-ein-el-hilweh-lebanon>

6 World Vision (2023, August 11) Climate Crisis: a new threat on the rise. Retrieved from: <https://www.wvi.org/stories/global-hunger-crisis/climate-crisis-new-threat-rise>.

7 L'Orient Today (2023, September 5). Pro-LGBTQ+ MTV ad sparks controversy in Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1348448/pro-lgbtq-mtv-ad-sparks-controversy-in-lebanon.html>.

Citizens, already grappling with economic struggles and inflation, expressed imminent fear about Lebanon's ability to handle the outbreak of a full-scale war. The situation escalated when demonstrations in support of Gaza turned violent, with attacks on American franchises in Lebanon, including McDonald's and Starbucks. Violent protests also targeted the US Embassy in Awkar and the American University of Beirut (AUB). The unrest persisted in November, fueled in part by the division in public opinion between strong support for the Palestinian cause and the desire to distance Lebanon from the fighting and suffering of another's battle, considering the country's existing instability.

4. Sources of the Perceptions

The CPT covers six key regions in Lebanon – Tripoli, Akkar, Beirut, South, Mount Lebanon, and Baalbek-El Hermel – each of which has specific areas of focus. In Tripoli, the project’s attention centers on Baddawi, Jabal Mohsen/Tebbeneh, and El Mina. Akkar’s focus includes Fneidek, Tekrit, Mashta Hassan/Mashta Hammoud. The project’s focus in Beirut lies in Ain el Remmeneh/Chiyah, and Hay el Gharbeh/Ghbeiry. Saida is the central focus in the South, Barja in Mount Lebanon, and Baalbek City and Deir El Ahmar in Baalbek-el Hermel.

In the third quarter of the project’s inaugural year, spanning September through November 2023, a cumulative total of 308 Community Perceptions were collected. The primary sources of information that influenced or shaped the perceptions collected were word of mouth, based on what the community around is saying, (45%) and personal feelings, based on one’s own beliefs (41%).

The majority of perceptions collected came from women (73%). Notably, 20% of participants identified facing difficulties in areas such as hearing, seeing, mobility, remembering/ concentrating, communication, and self-care, while the majority reported no disabilities. Geographically, 76% of the of the recorded perceptions were from the north, 14% from the south, 4% from Baalbeck-el Hermel, 3% from Mount Lebanon, 2% from Akkar, and 1% from Beirut.

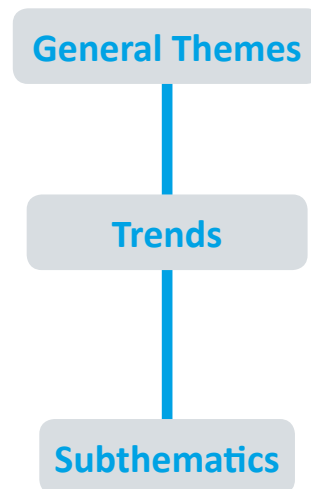
5. Trends Identified

The perceptions collected were categorized into three different distinct tiers, defining the analytical process.

The broad classification, denoted as “general themes”, encompasses the general titles under which the community perceptions were grouped. It is a description of the general idea behind the perception.

The second tier, “trends”, offers a more nuanced exploration into the underlying drivers of conflict within the community, it breaks down the general themes into specific constituents. For instance, “fear-safety” describes the safety concerns behind tensions and insecurity in the community.

The third tier is a subcategory nested within the trends, referred to as “sub-thematic”. These sub-themes elucidate the intricate components that contribute to each trend, which allows for a finer analysis of the community perceptions. This tripartite division organizes the perceptions and facilitates the understanding and exploration of the multifaceted nature of the drivers of instability and insecurity in communities.



One of the main findings during this quarter is that the context and discourse within local communities substantially influenced the views, opinions, and perceptions of individuals on drivers of tensions. This can be reflected in the fact that the portion of perceptions emanating from word of mouth is quite significant.

General Themes

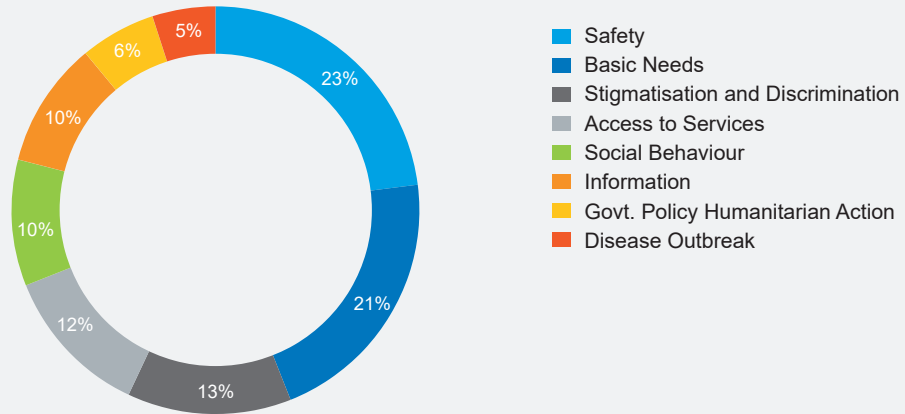


Figure 1

Trends

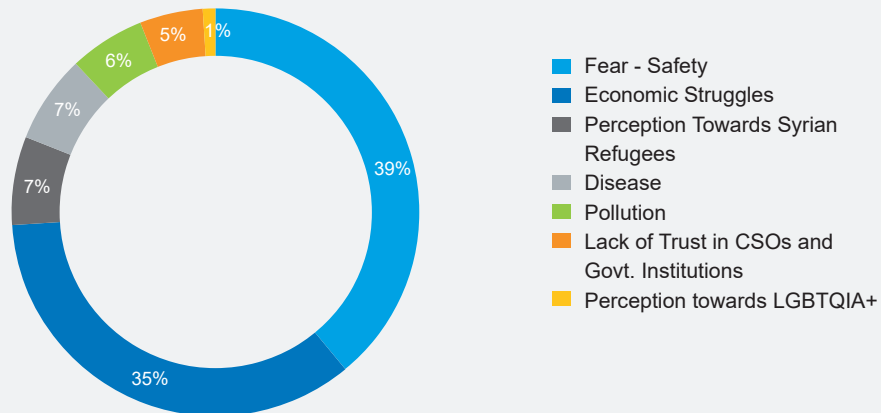


Figure 2

Subthematic of Fear and Safety Concerns

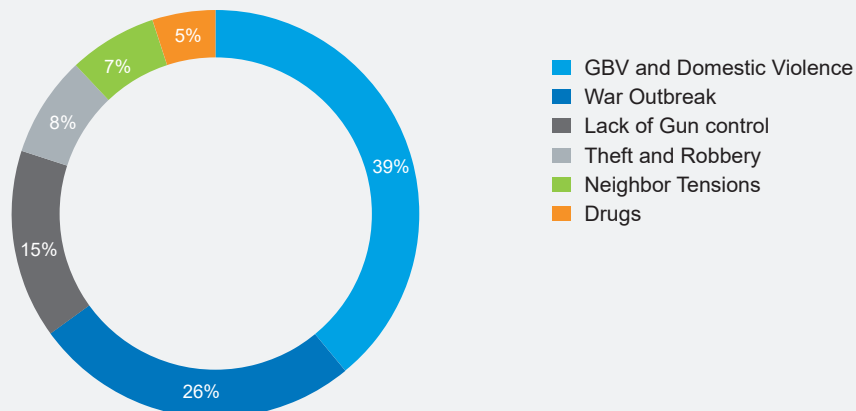
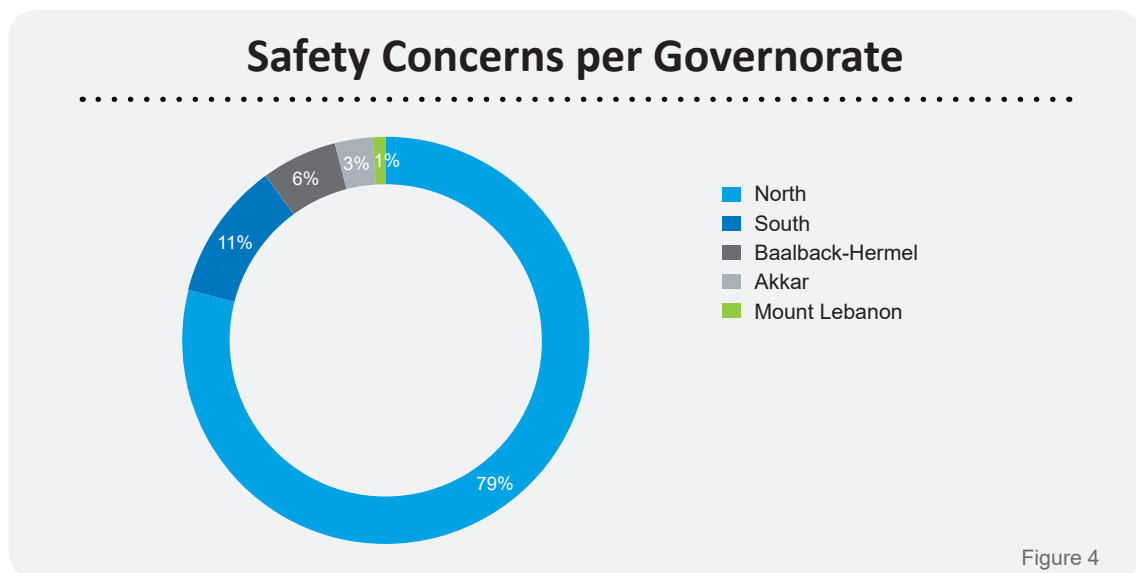


Figure 3

The perceptions from the CPT revealed a substantial increase in safety concerns starting October (from 25% in September to 42% in October). This surge primarily emanated from the heightened fear of a war outbreak following the events of October 7. The perceptions indicate that there is a widespread disbelief among the people regarding Lebanon’s ability to manage a full-scale war, especially considering the existing economic, social, and security hardships. Moreover, four respondents articulated concerns about their inability to endure a war similar to that of 2006, vividly indicating the resurfacing of their trauma.

“We are reliving the traumatic war experience due to the cruelty happening in Gaza.” (woman, Baddawi, adult).

“There is no security, I am afraid a war will erupt, and I am barely able to cover my bills as it is.” (man, el Mina, adult).



However, it is crucial to recognize that safety concerns were already high, as explained above, predominantly fueled by women’s apprehensions related to Gender-Based Violence (GBV), rape and domestic abuse, especially in the North. In fact, GBV concerns constituted 39% of the overall safety perceptions for this quarter (figure 3). This trend can be attributed to increased reporting of a perceived lack of security in the areas, especially at nighttime. Perceptions revealed a prevalent association between domestic abuse and early marriage, with many individuals expressing a deficiency in knowledge and maturity to navigate such situations. Aside from GBV, the lack of security perception is also correlated with the absence of arm control, and the prevalence of theft and robberies. Notably, most of these insecurities originate from the North, specifically Tripoli, constituting a significant 36% of the documented concerns in the area. These perceptions have heightened safety concerns throughout this quarter. This trend was primarily articulated subjectively, with almost half of safety concerns perceptions deriving from “personal feelings”. In fact, in late August, the case of Lynn Taleb in Minieh, Tripoli, reverberated throughout the nation, eliciting profound societal concerns. Lynn Taleb, a 6-year-old, died due to injuries sustained during a sexual assault perpetrated by her uncle, who faced death penalty for the crime. The child’s mother, and maternal grandparents were also subjected to similar criminal

charges for “intentional homicide” since they denied Lynn essential medical treatment.⁸ This was an additional contributor to the diminishing trust in governmental institutions and their ability to enforce law and order. Similar to safety concerns, diminishing trust in governmental institutions was predominantly rooted in personal feelings.

“The lack of small arms control is enabling anyone to carry weapons, so that whenever a confrontation arises you see them take out their guns and start shooting at one another.” (man, Jabal Mohsen/Tebbeneh, adult).

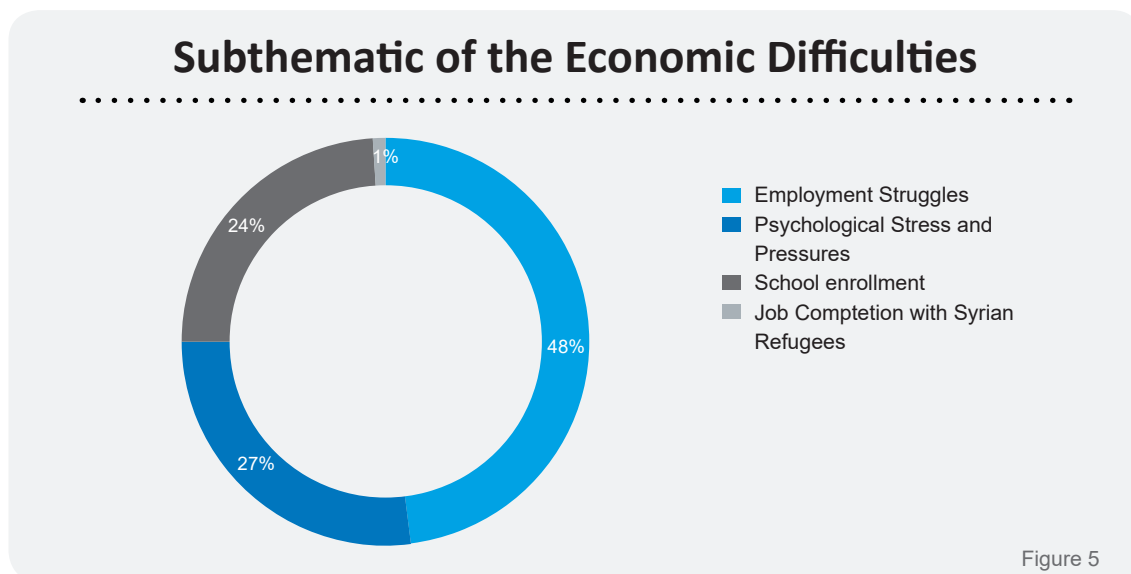


Figure 5

The observed safety fears highlight a substantial correlation with the ongoing economic challenges confronting the communities who responded to the CPT. This is evident through the perceptions, indicating that 48% of the collected perceptions pertaining to economic difficulties relate to the respondents’ struggles in meeting rental and bill payments, sustaining themselves on low incomes, or facing unemployment. The latter, in some cases, is attributed to perceived instances of nepotism and competition on lower-skilled jobs between Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees. These struggles are leading to psychological stress and pressure and respondents are fostering a pessimistic outlook to the future while questioning their capabilities to endure such conditions. The CPT shows that this is heightened when individuals are facing a critical medical condition or disease that they cannot afford to treat. Moreover, parents, in particular, express concerns regarding their children’s enrollment in schools, as they find themselves unable to afford the increased tuition fees. According to the collected perceptions, the unreliability of public schools, coupled with their recurrent closures mainly due to teacher’s strikes, further complicates the situation. Consequently, parents, though desiring to place their children in private schools, are often constrained by financial limitations. This compels them to either resort to public schools or abstain from enrolling them altogether, with a number of respondents expressing fear of

⁸ L’Orient Today (2023, August 31) Lynn Taleb: 4 members of maternal family face death penalty. Retrieved from: <https://today.lorientjour.com/article/1348032/lynn-taleb-case-4-members-of-maternal-family-face-death-penalty.html#:~:text=The%20story%20of%20Lynn%20Taleb,sexual%20assault%20to%20her%20death.> ; Arab News (2023, August 31) Lebanese man accused of raping 6-year-old niece faces death penalty. Retrieved from: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2365241/middle-east> .

sending their children to school due to heightened safety risks attributed to the lack of security in their region. Notably, most perceptions related to economic struggles were based on word of mouth, and the discourse fostered within the community, underscoring the influential role of local context on individuals.

“Living expenses and financial difficulties are posing mental burdens and pressures on us and draining us due to overthinking. It is creating problems in the house.” (woman, Tripoli, adult).

“I did not let my daughter to still attend the Lebanese University. I heard that a lot of sexual assaults are happening in public universities.” (woman, Jabal Mohsen, adult).

“My kids are enrolled in school, but I will not be able to pay their tuition anymore.” (woman, Jabal Mohsen/Tebbeh, adult).

In turn, this increases the worry of prevalent drug use and its correlation with safety concerns. This unease extends to the security of young individuals and the broader community, as drugs are perceived to be linked to incidents of theft, robberies, and irresponsible gun usage which might lead to intercommunal tensions.

“Weed is publicly normalized, and we are afraid of sending our children to the network to play videogames.” (woman, el Mina, adult).

The decreased economic stability of the Lebanese community is generating stigmatization towards the Syrian community allegedly receiving more aid from INGOs. Around 25% of the perceptions related to Syrians are associated with bias in aid distribution. Many Lebanese respondents assert that Syrians receive assistance even when it is unnecessary, emphasizing that there are Lebanese families in greater need of aid, but are not receiving any assistance. As a result, some individuals reported that Syrian led business have been boycotted and their revenues have been impacted. It is crucial to highlight, that perceptions related to Syrian refugees are mostly grounded in local interactions, and word of mouth (figure 5), which underscores the impact of community bias towards Syrian refugees.

“Syrians are living in better conditions than we are because they receive aid. We are the ones living with them, and not the other way around.” (woman, el Mina, adult).

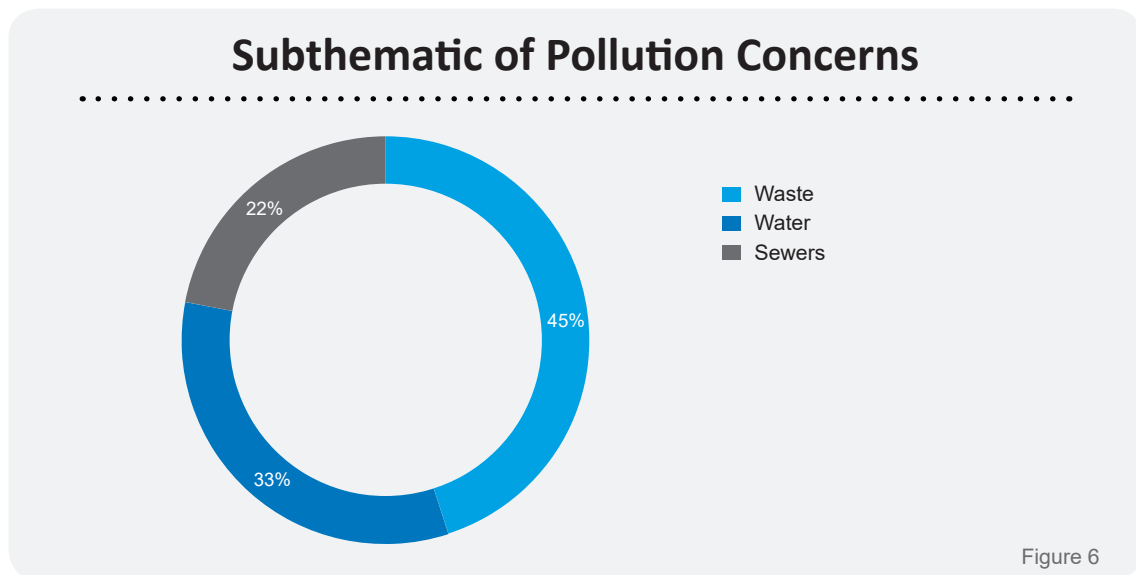
“Aid is being received by some people and the Lebanese became more in need of assistance than Syrians are.” (woman, Ain el Remmeh, adult).

In the October 7 aftermath, a notable trend in perceptions emerged, revealing a skepticism towards Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) advocating for human rights principles. The respondents believe that the war in Gaza is inhumane and encompasses severe human rights violations. Many view that these organizations merely articulate their commitment to safeguard human rights on paper without actively protecting individuals' rights. This sentiment, combined with concerns of aid distribution bias, significantly eroded the trust between the community and CSOs and institutions.

“We are living in a hypocrite world where organizations who advocate for the protection of human rights are the first violators of those rights.” (woman, Saida, adult).

Lastly, some perceptions reflected apprehensions about pollution, with individuals expressing their discomfort and psychological distress regarding this matter. Particularly, respondents in the North faced substantial challenges in waste management, contributing to a diminished trust in governmental institutions’ ability to allocate adequate resources for the well-being of citizens.

“The trash smells awful, and the municipality is not disposing of it. Mosquito bites on children are getting infected, and we do not have the financial abilities to admit them to hospitals, and even dispensaries are expensive.” (woman, el Mina, adult).



6. Conclusions

The CPT findings on social tensions reflect the perceptions and sentiments of the communities in the WEAM project's priority areas. These help understand the drivers and triggers of social tensions in these communities.

Indeed, the perceptions collected during this quarter align with the prevailing local context and mirror the nationwide instability. The economic deterioration in the country, coupled with the onset of violence and the absence of gun control, has caused apprehension among local communities regarding their safety and security within their communities. This comes especially following the armed conflict in Gaza, and its instant spillover to Southern Lebanon, as local communities express skepticism regarding their capacity to navigate a full-scale war amid existing economic challenges and prevalent insecurity. Overall, there is a diminishing trust in governmental institutions' capacity to enforce the law and ensure overall public safety. Without reforms that improve governance, and, in turn, help restore people's trust in governmental institutions, drivers of tensions related to public safety concerns will only continue to increase, thus widening social tensions in the country.

Additionally, as reflected in the findings, there is a heightened sense of apprehension among individuals, particularly concerning their children. This concern is compounded by the inability, in some instances, to enroll youngsters in schools due to the prohibitive cost of tuition and the unreliability of public institutions. As a result, this leaves the youth vulnerable to societal risks, including drug abuse, which may lead to misdemeanors, which often go unpunished amid the lack of progress on judicial reform and rule of law in the country, only further exacerbating social tensions. The respondents expressed a sense of despair, perceiving a lack of optimism for the future. The challenges they face include precarious financial circumstances, as they grapple with the demand for rent and bills while striving to meet their basic needs. As such, there is a prevailing belief that Lebanon does not offer a promising future, especially for young individuals. Indeed, without a comprehensive reform package that improves the sustainability of livelihoods for the population, expands social justice, guarantees participation in decision making, delivers access to basic services of quality, and allows a sustainable economic recovery; the country cannot and will not address the concerns of local communities, especially the most vulnerable and crisis-affected among them.

These dire circumstances and the perception of aid bias towards Syrian refugees have contributed to heightened tensions within the community. This is exacerbated by the observation that local

communities, facing significant challenges, do not receive any assistance, triggering a notable skepticism towards the credibility of CSOs concerning the equitable distribution of humanitarian aid and their ability to advocate for human rights.

In conclusion, the prevailing socio-economic challenges, and concerns about the effectiveness of law enforcement and aid distribution mechanisms, highlight the interconnectedness of factors influencing community perceptions. The perceptions and sentiments of communities in the WE'AM project's priority areas reflect the drivers and triggers of social tensions in these communities. However, when analyzed against the context in the country, the impact of the lack of reform progress in the country on social tensions becomes evident.

7. Community-level Recommendations

To civil society:

- Work towards rebuilding trust with communities by articulating the criteria for aid reception, enhancing transparency in aid distribution to foster the understanding of individuals, and actively addressing concerns raised by the community.
- Collaborate with local communities to design and implement awareness campaigns on safety, security, and conflict resolution, with emphasis on the youth.

To local authorities:

- Establish partnerships with law enforcement agencies, such as the ISF, and existing programs in the country to implement strategies that bring the police closer to the community and can support the current capacities of local authorities. These initiatives are designed to cultivate positive relationships between residents and local police, ultimately contributing to a safer living environment.
- Promote community-led protection programs to strengthen local security, encouraging active community involvement in promoting safety and reporting any concerns for the well-being of the neighborhood.
- Actively engage with local communities and civil society through regular town hall meetings, community forums, and other participatory platforms to understand their concerns and aspirations.

Although the GoL serves as the primary duty-bearer to respond to local and national challenges, the prevailing circumstances in the country preclude the consortium from proposing community recommendations to the GoL at this time. These quarterly briefs will be coupled with other project outputs to develop more concrete recommendations at the policy-level to the GoL.

To EU and other programmes:

- Prioritize funding for programs that address safety concerns and insecurities within communities, especially those related to potential conflict outbreaks, and encourage projects that aim to strengthen the overall public safety and security.
- Mainstream the promotion of safety and security across all programs to ensure contribution to social cohesion in the country.
- Support initiatives that promote economic stability and resilience, considering the challenges faced by vulnerable populations in meeting basic needs and sustaining livelihoods.
- Invest in educational programs that address the specific challenges faced by young individuals, including affordable and accessible schooling, mental health support, and opportunities for skill development.



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