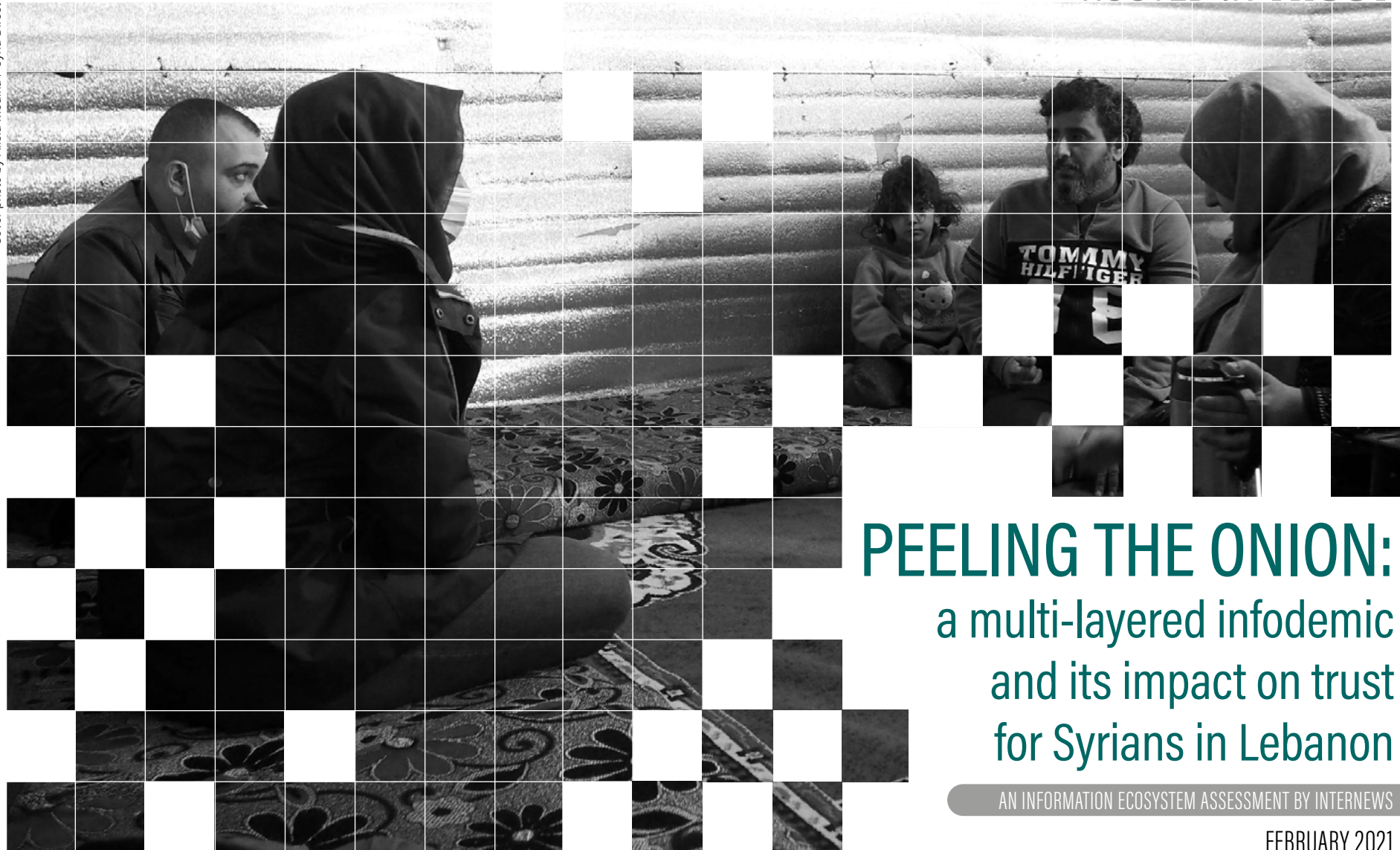


ROOTED IN TRUST

Cover photo by Alicia Medina / Syria Direct



PEELING THE ONION: a multi-layered infodemic and its impact on trust for Syrians in Lebanon

AN INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT BY INTERNEWS

FEBRUARY 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



nternews focuses primarily on the information ecosystem for Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon to acknowledge and unpack the unique experiences for Syrians at a time when information is heavily impacted by Lebanon's various compounding crises. The ecosystem for Syrians is assessed here as an ecosystem within Lebanon's larger information environment which largely caters to Lebanese communities.

PUSHED OUT: MEDIA'S SUPPLY OF INFORMATION

Lebanon's traditional media landscape was set up in the wake of the country's decades long civil war and continues to reflect Lebanon's political status quo today. Politically contentious issues are reported with a bias by larger media outlets which bring in a large viewership and primarily operate on TV and radio. Many of these outlets seldom cover issues specific to politically marginalized communities such as Syrian

refugees. Considered here as Lebanon's 'traditional' sector, many of these outlets, while household names, are also largely understood to be financially and socially linked to Lebanon's political elite. As the pandemic wore on in 2020, COVID-19 too became an object of political polarization within the traditional media realm: Several TV news channels—the most relied upon source of news for refugees and Lebanese alike—regularly aired shows criticizing and questioning the COVID-19 vaccine and other aspects of the pandemic response.

Lebanon's digital space hosts more moderate coverage of relevant issues. Several grassroots media organizations have gained prominence in recent years, particularly in the wake of Lebanon's 2019 October Revolution. Many of these outlets commonly report on issues for marginalized communities when compared to the coverage from more traditional, or politically linked ●●●

●●● media. A few refugee-led media organisations are present in Lebanon, but face funding challenges and host a lower following than mainstream media or larger digital media outlets. Internet connectivity is likewise becoming more costly for low-income communities amidst the country's current economic crisis and thus news from social media and online is becoming increasingly inaccessible to economically marginalized communities in Lebanon.

INFORMATION GATEKEEPERS

Humanitarian agencies and the Lebanese government serve as crucial information providers for Syrian refugees. While humanitarians fill important information gaps for Syrians, the information they provide typically corresponds to their own programming and service provision, and seldom covers other topics relevant to refugees. Humanitarians communicate with refugees through a variety of platforms such as in-person awareness raising sessions, SMS and WhatsApp communications trees, and across

Lebanon's traditional media landscape was set up in the wake of the country's decades long civil war and continues to reflect Lebanon's political status quo today.

social media. While this information is disseminated consistently, it is typically top-down in nature and is limited in its use as a place to open a conversation or for more bilateral back and forth between humanitarians and communities.

The government's provision of legal, procedural, and administrative information for refugees tends to be insufficient, at times for political reasons. Syrians interviewed by Internews mentioned that information from government offices was convoluted and difficult to understand which pushed people to rely more on their personal networks, and people with firsthand experience with the issue at hand.

Across these two information providers, information gaps were evident in regard to legal and administrative procedures, travel regulations between Syria and Lebanon, access to humanitarian services, and resettlement.

COMMUNICATING COVID-19

Several governmental and humanitarian bodies have made efforts to inform the public in Lebanon about COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic. Across these initiatives however, information has lacked proper localization. While studies show that most Lebanese and refugee communities alike have heard the recommendations to distance and stay home to reduce the spread of COVID-19, communications strategies have not acknowledged the economic implications of doing so for a massive portion of Lebanon's population. This top-down communication style has been regarded as disconnected and at times downright hypocritical: Lebanese and Syrians alike acknowledged the irony of the Minister of Public Health and ●●●

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

●●● many famous media broadcasters urging people to stay home while being seen in public socializing with Lebanon's political and social elite.

At the same time, communications from humanitarians to refugee communities seldom acknowledged the limitations of social distancing and hygiene practices in camp settings. The communications style has thus undermined Lebanon's COVID-19 response altogether: Rather than engaging with people around their concern—and at times, their disregard—for COVID-19, the response stayed disconnected from the very communities it aimed to protect.

Despite these shortcomings, basic information about COVID-19 does appear to have reached most people in Lebanon. All the Syrians who spoke with Internews could recall at least two accurate techniques for protecting against the virus. At the same time, research and survey data showed that people residing in closer proximity to NGO programs had access to more information than those residing

outside of these 'humanitarian hotspots.' While it is clear that humanitarians have successfully disseminated basic information to the communities they work with, more can be done to engage with marginalized communities outside of these heavily targeted zones. Likewise, information access about COVID-19 was

lower in more remote and smaller camp settlements where Syrian refugees reside than more heavily trafficked and heavily populated camps.

Information management around COVID-19 shines a light on the broader dynamics at play in Lebanon's ecosystem: ●●●

A Syrian woman walks outside a stretch of tents set up for Syrian refugees who have fled to neighboring Lebanon, Friday, June 15, 2012.



●●● The government disseminates information sporadically and while humanitarians make a concerted effort to get this information to Lebanon's most marginalized communities, all of these information providers engage with communities in a top-down manner that fuels distrust and resentment in light of Lebanon's current crisis.

HOMEgrown SOLUTIONS

Syrians have pragmatically responded to information gaps they face by creating Facebook and WhatsApp groups devoted to information sharing, some of which host thousands of followers and were often referenced during field work as a key source of information. People mentioned relying on these pages to confirm information received from other government and humanitarian sources, and to get more context on different developments.

Syrians and Lebanese communities rely heavily on information they receive over social media, primarily from WhatsApp and Facebook. In many ways, Lebanese

social media reflects the tight-knit, familial nature of communities in Lebanon: WhatsApp groups are common among families and friends, and such groups are used as much for sharing relevant COVID-19 information as for socializing. While these informal pathways fill important information gaps, they also facilitate the quick spread of rumors. WhatsApp channels and Facebook groups were a primary conduit for COVID-19 rumors collected by Internews' Rooted in Trust project in late 2020 and early 2021. Rumors were consistent across seemingly disconnected social groups like Syrians and Lebanese. In many cases, respondents confirmed noticing COVID-19 information from the World Health Organization (WHO) or Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), but key rumors about COVID-19 tended to reach people sooner than information from official sources.

Likewise, Syrians appear to cast a wide net to receive the information they need, incorporating a variety of sources—trusted and non—into their decision-making repertoire. As such, official

information from bodies like the WHO or MOPH are often taken in combination with other informal sources such as family, friends, and information received over social media.

RELiance VERSUS TRUST

While many of the Syrians interviewed by Internews mentioned seeing information about COVID-19 from the WHO and MOPH, reliance on certain information sources did not always indicate trust in that source. Trust appears to be varied across the Syrian community, but proximity plays a role in either degrading or reinforcing trust: Many survey respondents and interviewees mentioned having a higher disregard for sources that did not have a physical presence in their community while Syrian NGOs, family and friends, and medical professionals working directly with Syrian communities were mentioned as trusted sources for COVID-19 information more often than official sources like the WHO or MOPH.

Access to accurate information likewise did not always cause positive changes ●●●

●●● in behavior. The most common protection measures cited by Syrian interviewees for protecting against COVID-19 were mask wearing and social distancing. However, many Syrians residing in camps mentioned wearing masks and distancing when in public among Lebanese communities but did not practice similar methods when at home among their community. Likewise, some survey respondents confirmed knowledge of these prevention methods but mentioned feeling more confident in boosting their immunity with vitamin supplements and herbal teas to prevent against COVID-19. Whereas they abided by mask and distancing measures in public, these measures did not give them the same sense of security as immunity-boosting techniques.

HUMANITARIAN ENGAGEMENT

Humanitarians invest in trust-building, but within limits. Whereas Syrian NGOs can more naturally engage with the Syrian communities they serve, larger humanitarians train cohorts of community

volunteers and engage with local community leaders in the areas where they work to create mutually supportive networks. While these representatives serve as an important link between beneficiaries and humanitarians, they are not relied on as heavily as the other information sources mentioned in the previous section.

Trust for Syrian communities has been built and degraded over the years by the various bodies that engage with them: while Syrians seem to trust humanitarian bodies more so than the Lebanese government, the former is still regarded by many with hesitation. Complaints

While humanitarians try to build relationships and reinforce trust with the communities they work with, they simultaneously undermine trust with opaque processes

about humanitarian referrals and access to services has been common among Syrian refugees in Lebanon for years and were likewise present during field work. While humanitarians try to build relationships and reinforce trust with the communities they work with, they simultaneously undermine trust with opaque processes: NGOs seldom explain eligibility criteria for receiving aid and when aid is administered to one family and not another, the reasons go unexplained. Likewise, Syrians must rely on NGO workers to refer them to the most relevant service provider as holistic service mapping information is so far only available to humanitarians themselves. The private nature of service information and referral follow-up do not account for the public nature of information sharing among refugee communities.

Likewise, the pandemic has showed that the way humanitarians engage in one area of their programming can have effects in other interventions: Syrian NGOs and local charities were commonly referenced as a source of information, even for ●●●



An informal tent settlement in the Bekaa Valley, 2013.

●●● topics outside of their programming areas. The opposite can be true for poor engagement: disconnected communication about COVID-19 could undermine peoples' beliefs that humanitarians truly have their best interest in mind.

THE PATH FORWARD

For many communities in Lebanon, trust is at an all-time low. While much of the distrust is directly focused on the Lebanese government, it also extends to the international community, Lebanon's public health sector, and the COVID-19 vaccine itself. While it is easy to resign to feel that trust is nowhere to be found in Lebanon, this research aims to identify the

spaces where trust is present, and where it can be reinforced from the ground up. Our analysis indicates that this is primarily feasible through engagement at the community level with the most marginalized communities in Lebanon, and through the platforms and mechanisms they themselves have created.

Below is a sample of the most essential recommendations for humanitarians, media, the community, and donors based on our findings and analysis. Detailed key findings and recommendations can be found in [Section VII. Key findings and recommendations – towards a healthier information ecosystem](#)

FOR HUMANITARIANS:

■ **Consolidate trust:** Where possible, increase transparency about referral processes and timelines, aid selection criteria, and the purpose of information collection from the community. When information is collected for donors or partners, also create materials to benefit the people who provided the information. This engagement can also be facilitated through Syrian-led information sharing platforms on Facebook and WhatsApp which are trusted by the community.

■ **Communicate “with” rather than “to”:** Invest in listening activities which directly inform communication materials and programming from the bottom up. The rapidly changing landscape in Lebanon means that listening sessions should occur regularly and in a variety of formats to see where new information and service gaps are appearing. Likewise, timely follow-up from humanitarians to participants on how listening sessions impacted programming can encourage future engagement. ●●●



■ **Better understand:** Engage with the communities you work with to understand their perceptions of COVID-19 and the underlying factors fueling them. Create communications materials which acknowledge those underlying factors rather than ignore them. Likewise, be transparent about what we so far do not know about the pandemic and vaccine. People will continue to receive misinformation and rumors on these topics whether or not they are acknowledged by official sources.

FOR MEDIA:

■ **Remain accountable:** Recognize the magnitude of misinformation in Lebanon and the need for stronger fact-checking activities and due-diligence in selecting 'expert perspectives.' Acknowledge the potentially harmful role of some social media influencers and healthcare professionals in spreading misinformation and disinformation. Cite medical sources directly involved with the COVID-19 Vaccine Committee and the broader COVID-19 response in COVID-19 reporting.

■ **Reach new audiences:** find ways to reach traditionally politicized audiences and marginalized communities who may not come across your reporting. This can start with identifying and engaging with key members of different target communities to discuss challenges and information gaps experienced by their community.

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FOR CIVIL SOCIETY:

■ **Raise awareness:** About the risks and prevalence of rumors in the communities where you work. Likewise, invest in media literacy for your staff and networks to equip people with the tools needed to identify rumors when they appear. Several Lebanese NGOs are well-positioned to

support in building the capacity of NGO teams and beneficiaries in these topics.

FOR DONORS:

■ **Invest in trust:** Incentivize bilateral engagement between humanitarians and the media and community networks they work with. Likewise, identify with partners areas where information about referral mechanisms, aid selection criteria, and information gathering can be made more transparent in a safe and sensitive way for beneficiaries.

■ **Encourage capacity building (for community-led media and information channels in particular) and two-way communication between humanitarians and media:** Humanitarians and public health agencies can better support media and the public by linking journalists with experts from their institution which help journalists better understand concepts rather than simply translate organizational policy. This is particularly pertinent for the current vaccine rollout in Lebanon. ●

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

■ **ARM**

Anti-Racism Movement

■ **ATI Law**

Access to Information Law

■ **AUB**

American University of Beirut

■ **COVID-19**

Coronavirus Disease of 2019

■ **CSO**

Civil Society Organization

■ **DRM**

Disaster Management Unit

■ **EPI-WIN**

Information Network for Epidemics

■ **FGD**

Focus Group Discussion

■ **GDP**

Gross Domestic Product

■ **ICRC**

International Committee of the Red Cross

■ **IFRC**

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

■ **ICU**

Intensive Care Unit

■ **IEA**

Information Ecosystem Assessment

■ **IEC**

Information, Education and Communication

■ **IHR**

International Health Regulations

■ **IMC**

International Medical Corps

■ **IMF**

International Monetary Fund

■ **JEE**

Joint External Evaluation

■ **KII**

Key Informant Interview

■ **LAU**

Lebanese American University

■ **LRC**

Lebanese Red Cross

■ **LU**

Lebanese University

■ **MSF**

Médecins Sans Frontières

■ **NDU**

Notre Dame University - Louaize

■ **NGO**

Non-profit Organization

■ **NRC**

Norwegian Refugee Council

■ **PHC**

Primary Healthcare Center

■ **PPE**

Personal Protective Equipment

■ **RCCE**

Risk Communication and Community Engagement

■ **ROV**

Refugee Outreach Volunteer

■ **SKeyes**

Samir Kassir Eyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom

■ **SOP**

Standard Operating Procedure

■ **UN**

United Nations

■ **UNDP**

United Nations Development Programme

■ **UNHCR**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

■ **UNIC**

United Nations Information Centre

■ **UNICEF**

United Nations Children's Fund

■ **UNRWA**

United Nations Relief and Works Agency

■ **USEK**

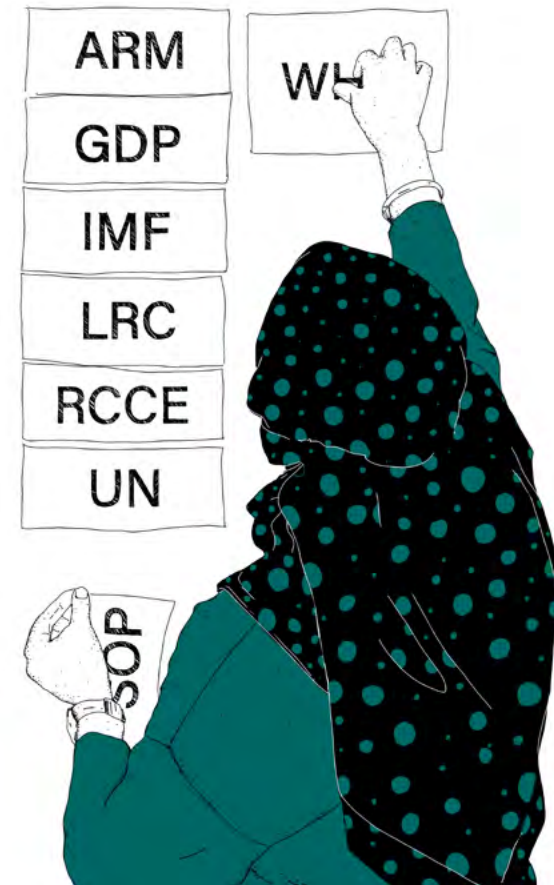
Holy Spirit University of Kaslik

■ **USJ**

Université Saint-Joseph

WHO

World Health Organization

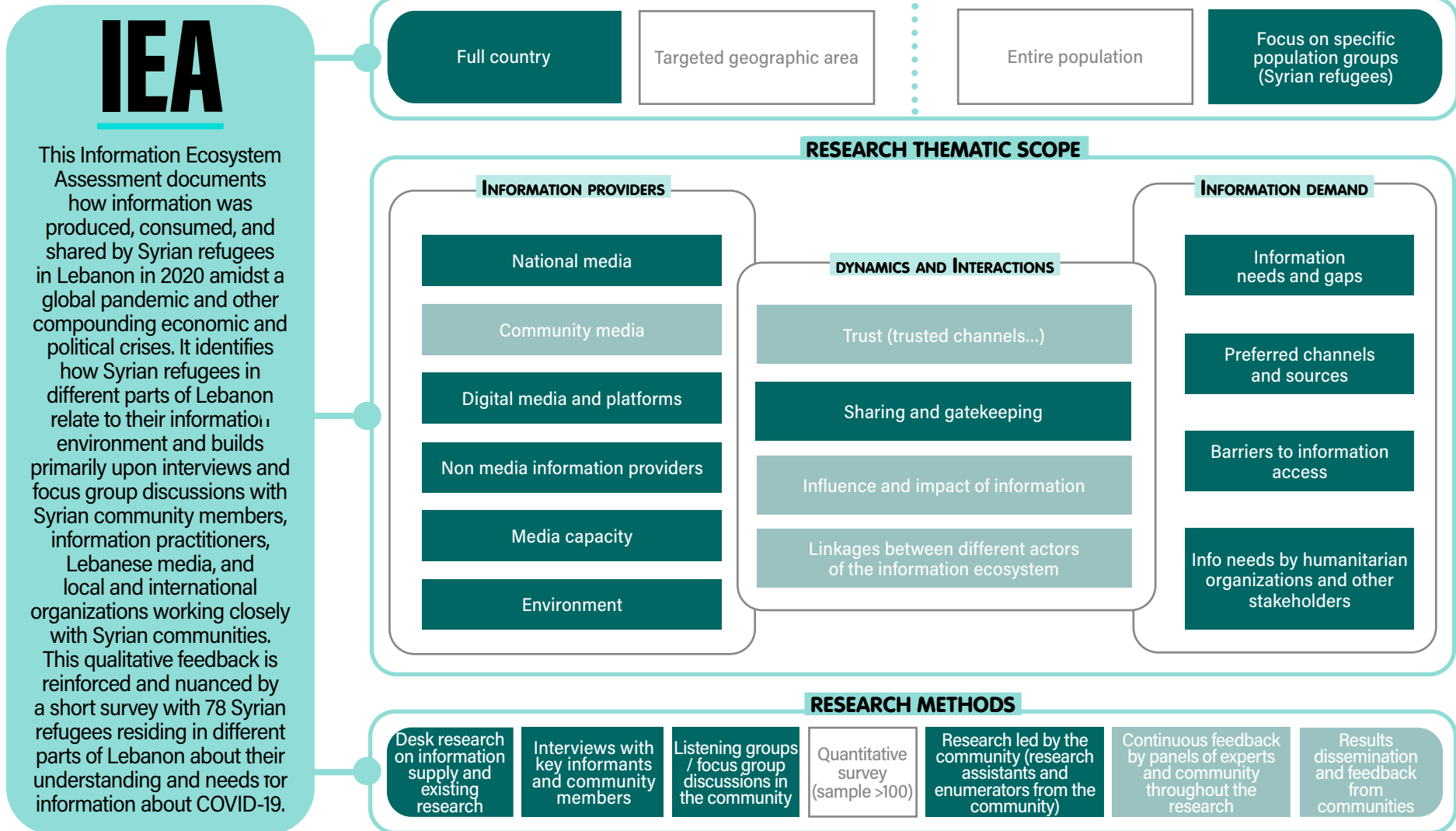


I. RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

1.1. RESEARCH SCOPE AND MAIN BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE IEA

LEGEND

- Covered
- Partially
- Not covered



1.2. PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

The people we seek to reach often live in diverse, noisy, risky, and confusing news and information environments that present them with challenges - as well as choices - as to what information they access, what they trust and what they share and act upon. Internews undertakes Information Ecosystem Assessments (IEA) to better understand unique and localized information needs, gaps, sources and patterns of access and use. Information Ecosystem Assessments offer us an analytical framework to capture all dimensions of the relationship between information consumers and information supply. Gaining precise high-quality insights into these interactions allows us to design truly unique projects that meet people where they are to deliver information through the channels, platforms, formats or people that they prefer and trust. Our IEA research is based on four key principles:

- 1- Putting the community at the core of the research** – Internews seeks to be at the core of the communities it serves. For our IEAs, we endeavor to have the community itself do a large part of the research: we hire researchers and enumerators from the community and we rely on community members to disseminate results and gather feedback. When context truly limits our ability to do so (as during the COVID-19 pandemic) we strive to design multiple ways to gather feedback from community members and representatives as a second best alternative.
- 2- Following a human-centered research design**– We seek to develop a

holistic understanding of people's information practices. We understand demand and supply in a broad sense, not narrowly focused on media outlets or traditional media actors. Our scope of analysis is defined by how people actually access and consume information and not by pre-defined categories. We strive to understand both which practices are broadly shared and what are the specific needs and behaviors of groups, especially the most vulnerable ones.

- 3- Marrying qualitative and quantitative data** – We seek to combine different types of data to best understand both the supply and demand of information and how the two interact to produce a ●●●

“In the constant quest of human beings to connect with information, the ways in which they consume, produce, contribute to, interact with and behave around their information supply are what makes information ecosystems dynamic, diverse and sometimes quirky and unpredictable.”

I. RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

●●● dynamic ecosystem. We go beyond traditional mapping and audience surveys. Our IEAs rely heavily on a qualitative approach: understanding information practices requires getting up close and personal to people to figure out the best ways to reach them with good information.

4- Integrating research and action -

We do not see Information Ecosystem Assessments as an “end product”. They are most often the first stage of our project design, providing invaluable context and a way to build a trusting relationship with the community we hope to work with. They are always connected to recommended actions, whether our own, those undertaken by the communities or by our partners and other key stakeholders in the ecosystem. ●

1.3 DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE

INFORMANTS	COLLECTION TOOL	SAMPLE	SPECIFICS
ONG Internationales	Key Informant Interviews (KIs)	9	Syrian community members in camp and urban settings of Lebanon
	Focus Groups	15	Mixed and private focus group discussions with Syrian and Palestinian refugees in camp in Bekaa Valley and Ain Helwe camp in Saida.
	Survey	78	Snowball sampling of Syrian refugees in and around Aley, Akkar, Tripoli, Beirut, and camps in the Bekaa Valley.
Informal Representatives & Leaders	KIs	10	Representatives from Syrian-led Civil Society Organizations
	KIs	1	<i>Shawish</i> (locally-appointed leaders of Syrian camps)
	KIs	2	Representative from Lebanese Civil Society Organizations
	KIs	3	Local information representatives for Syrians
Government Authorities	Focus Groups	4	Ministry of Interior representatives to Lebanon’s refugee community (Akkar, South Lebanon and Nabatieh, Bekaa and Baalbek-Hermel, north Lebanon represented)
	KIs	1	Director General of the Ministry of Information
Media	KIs	12	Freelancers, full-time journalists, and media consultants
	KIs	2	Media and free speech-focused Lebanese NGOs
International Agencies and Humanitarian Actors	KIs	3	UNICEF Communications for Development UNHCR Communications with Communities
	KIs	2	Previous INGO staff and volunteers
Internews Rooted in Trust staff	KIs	2	Data Analyst Information Manager
Experts (academics, think tanks...)	N/A	0	

Source : Internews

II. COUNTRY PROFILE

2.1 COUNTRY PROFILE INDICATORS

		LEBANON
Press related index	Civil liberties (including freedom of expression)	30/60
	Press freedom index 2019 (out of 180 countries)	101
	Press freedom index 2019 (out of 180 countries)	↓ 102

* Source civil rights: freedom house global freedom status

** Source index ranking: Reporters without borders

Freedom on the net	Obstacles to access (0=Worst; 25=Best)	12
	Limits on content (0=Worst; 35=Best)	22
	Violation of user rights (0=Worst; 30=Best)	18
	Freedom on the net score 2019	52
	Freedom on the net score 2020	52

* Source: Freedom house freedom on the net

ICTs	Internet penetration rate	78.2%
	Mobile phone penetration	64.5%

* Source: United Nations Human Development Reports

Key demographic, social and political factors	Total population (millions)	6.9
	Population in multidimensional poverty (% headcount)	No data available
	Human development Index (rank)	0.730 (93)
	Rural population (%)	11.4%
	Illiteracy rate**	8.8%
	Refugees by country of origin (thousands)	6
Elections		2022

* Source: United Nations Human Development Reports

** Literacy is understood as the ability to read and write a short simple statement of everyday life

COVID-19	Confirmed cases	55869
	Décès	479

* Source: World Health Organisation <https://covid19.who.int/>

LEGEND	
● Not free	● Partially free

COVID-19 arrived in Lebanon at a tumultuous time in Lebanon's history: The country is suffering from the worst economic crisis in decades and two governments have resigned since October 2019, delaying critical bailout negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and much-needed economic reforms. Since October 2019 the currency has steadily collapsed, countless

businesses have shut, prices for basic goods have skyrocketed, and today the threat of hunger looms for even previously middle-income communities.

This economic crisis is inextricably linked to a parallel political crisis also unfolding since October 2019, and many blame systemic corruption from the Lebanese ruling establishment for the economic

collapse itself. In October 2019, Lebanese took to the streets denouncing this corruption through an unprecedented wave of country-wide protests against the ruling elite and the current status quo.

2020 only saw a deepening of these crises with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the August 4 port explosion in Beirut which killed 190 people. The ruling ●●●

II. COUNTRY PROFILE

●●● elite's subsequent response to both events have only further proven the lack of appetite for reform or progress by the longstanding ruling class in Lebanon, and thus these compounding crises have only further driven vulnerable communities and likewise formerly middle-income communities deeper into economic difficulties.

The Syria crisis, now in its ninth year, has had a profound humanitarian, socio-economic, and political impact on Lebanon. Lebanon has the world's highest number of refugees per capita with an estimated 1.5 million Syrians who have fled the conflict (just under 1 million of whom are registered) living in a country of 4 million inhabitants. This is in addition to an estimated 1 million vulnerable Lebanese and almost 300,000 Palestinian refugees. This mass influx of Syrian refugees has thus placed strain on the country's economic and service infrastructure while also opening the country up to millions of dollars of humanitarian aid per year as part of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). The Lebanese government's involvement within the LCRP plan has indi-

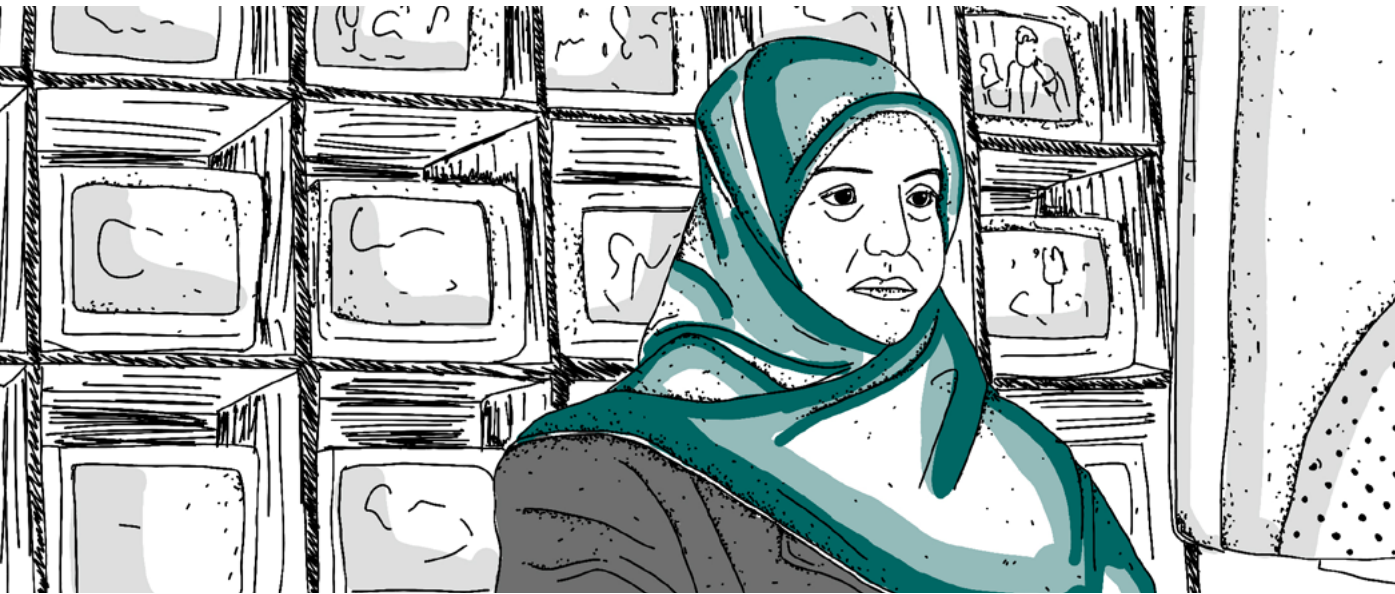
cated support for refugee populations in Lebanon, but also comes alongside discriminatory policies and rhetoric against Syrian refugees from various members of the political elite over the years.

The pandemic has likewise shined a light on the larger dynamics at play between Syrian refugees, the government, and humanitarians in Lebanon. Thousands of refugee communities in Lebanon live in poorly serviced and often overcrowded spaces, making them at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19¹. Refugee communities are likewise more at risk of stigma in testing for or contracting COVID-19. Municipalities across Lebanon have imposed harsher measures on refugees than those placed on Lebanese citizens, including longer curfews, restriction of movement and no-exception lockdowns, making accessing health and other services difficult. While testing and treatment for COVID-19 is free for cases approved by the MOPH, the government leaves it to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) and the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees) to cover healthcare costs for Palestinian and Syrian refugees who also provide them with hygiene items and protective equipment.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the Lebanese government has been criticized for a knee-jerk response to the pandemic. In lieu of a consistent medium or long-term strategy for combatting the virus, instead focusing more on mitigation and reacting to spikes in cases. In the initial stages of the pandemic, the Lebanese Government responded quickly to the onset of COVID-19, closing the airport and enforcing country-wide lockdowns. However, in late 2020, after mounting pressure from restaurant and business syndicates hurt by the economic implications of the shutdowns, the Lebanese government reopened the country for the Christmas and New Year holidays, sparking a dramatic increase in cases in the early weeks of 2021. Several Lebanese hospitals have reached capacity for COVID-19 and non-covid treatment, and the combination of the economic and COVID-19 crisis has led to the near collapse of the country's medical infrastructure at the time of publication. ●

III. INFORMATION SUPPLY – INFORMATION PROVIDERS LANDSCAPE REVIEW



3.1 MEDIA PROVIDERS

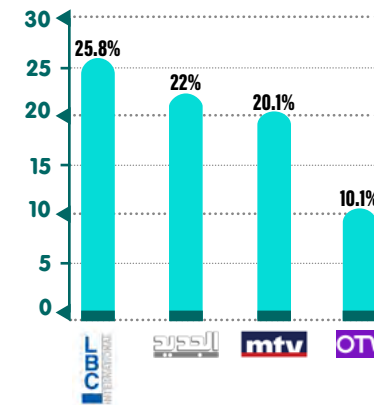
Lebanon has historically hosted a multifaceted media sector with a variety of newspapers, radios, and TV stations providing news and information even in times of conflict². Many companies in the traditional media sector were forced to downsize due to growing financial challenges in the wake of Lebanon’s ongoing economic crisis. Despite these challenges, television still reigns supreme

as the most preferred medium for news and media in Lebanon while radio and newspapers have dropped in popularity over the years.

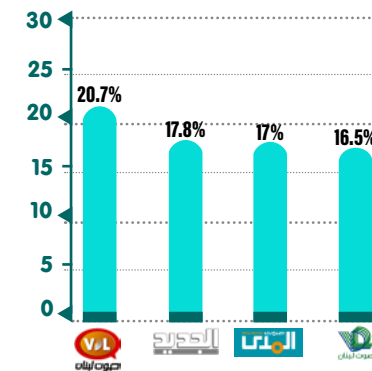
Much of TV news coverage in Lebanon focuses on ratings and appealing to wide audiences as opposed to in-depth or investigative journalism. “If a politician is talking about it, everyone carries it,” a Lebanese journalist interviewed by Internews mentioned, “it’s not about ●●●

Figure 1. High audience concentration

The top 4 companies in the TV sector gather 78.1% of the audience



The top 4 companies in the radio sector gather 72% of the audience



III. INFORMATION SUPPLY – INFORMATION PROVIDERS LANDSCAPE REVIEW

●●● quality control anymore.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has created space for misinformation and disinformation to trickle down from TV broadcasts to Lebanese and refugee communities alike. In late 2020, Internews and Maharat Foundation, a Lebanese NGO working on media development and free speech in Lebanon, conducted listening groups with refugee and vulnerable Lebanese communities to discuss access to information about COVID-19. Famous TV broadcast shows hosted by TV personalities like Tony Khalife and Marcel Ghanem were referenced as a source of information for Lebanese and refugee communities. Both of these TV broadcasters hosted doctors and commentators who shared misinformation about COVID-19, which were then spread across Lebanese social media sites and individually through WhatsApp.

Between October 2020 and January 2021

Here, we characterize the large media outlets catering to massive audiences on TV and radio, most of whom are also politically and socially linked to Lebanon's ruling class as Lebanon's 'traditional' media sector.

Internews and Maharat Foundation logged 320 rumors circulating on Lebanese social media which were shared directly by media outlets, including the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI), Lebanon24, AlJadeed news, and other major Lebanese outlets.

In theory, the multiplicity of Lebanon's media sector provides viewers an opportunity to choose reliable news which is most relevant to their needs, as well as creates space for healthy competition between different media outlets. However, in many cases, these information broadcasters are connected financially and socially to Lebanon's political elite, impacting the bent of coverage. “The media landscape was set up following the civil war to reflect the political system,” mentioned a representative from Maharat Foundation. **These remnants of the civil war status quo create an environment for political in-fighting and smear campaigns which also open the**

sector up to being a conduit for malicious disinformation, a tactic regularly used by Lebanon's political elite.

Each of the nine Lebanese TV stations which broadcast to 97% of the population in Lebanon are at least partially politically affiliated. Furthermore, nine out of the ten Lebanese print outlets and seven of the eight radio stations are directly politically affiliated³. The founder of a Lebanese digital rights NGO described the politicization of mainstream media in Lebanon as “common knowledge”, as did several Lebanese and Syrian refugees interviewed during field work.

The same pattern of politicization emerges in print and radio. All four of the most prominent radio shows in Lebanon—Voix du Liban 100.3, Voix du Liban 93.3, Sawt al-Muda, and Radio Liban Libra—are either directly politically affiliated or owned by a politically involved family.

The politicized agendas of media agencies have an impact on coverage of politically contentious topics, such as Lebanon's role in hosting ●●●

III. INFORMATION SUPPLY – INFORMATION PROVIDERS LANDSCAPE REVIEW

●●● **millions of Syrian refugees since 2011.** For many mainstream media outlets, coverage of issues for refugees and minority communities is deprioritized: according to a 2015 study by the Maharat Foundation, the front page of newspapers analyzed in the study excluded any reference to stories related to Syrians or Palestinians and 88% of such reporting was limited to the inside pages of newspapers⁴. In other cases, refugee topics are covered from a political or economic lens. During the period analyzed by Maharat, OTV was the leading station to report on the political fallout of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon and publicly advocated for a solution to the refugee crisis through mediation with the Syrian government⁵. OTV is financially and politically affiliated with the Free Patriotic Movement party (FPM) and the FPM's leader, President Michele Aoun, is known to have political linkages to the Assad family in Syria⁶⁻⁷. Likewise, the economic repercussions of Syrian refugees' presence in Lebanon represented 13% of total coverage from major TV stations about

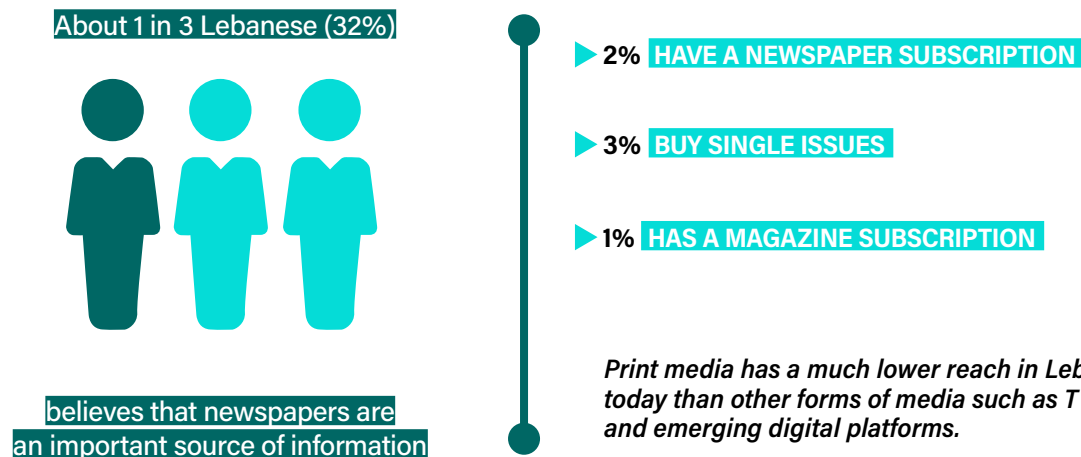
“The barriers are political more than cultural. Information on residencies or work permits, these things aren’t broadcast on television at all. There’s a media blackout. From a humanitarian perspective, everyone should be included [in coverage], but this isn’t the case.”

A SYRIAN NGO WORKER DESCRIBED THE IMPACTS OF THIS PHENOMENON

refugee-related issues from December 2015 to February 2016. For many Syrians, this simply means they

cannot rely on TV and mainstream media coverage for information specific to their experiences in Lebanon. ●

Figure 2. Perception and reach of print media



3.2 DIGITAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

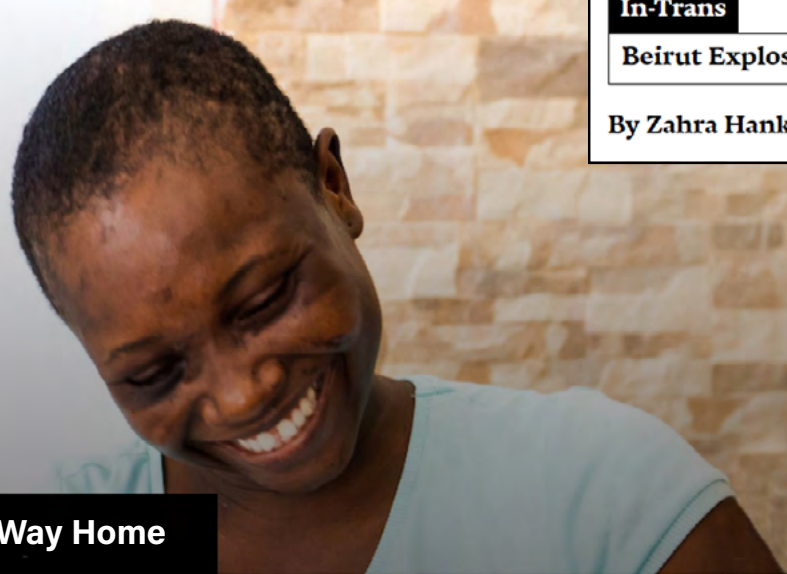
Given the politicization of the traditional media sector in Lebanon, the digital space has provided an opportunity for more balanced and representative reporting in recent years. Lebanon has a uniquely high internet saturation rate in comparison to other countries in the Arab world. According to DataReportal, in January 2020 there were 5.35 million internet users in Lebanon and internet penetration stood at 78%. Likewise, Lebanese social media hosted 4 million users in 2020. Among the refugee community Facebook and WhatsApp groups are used to circulate information and some groups host thousands of followers. “Syrians are sending information in huge numbers across WhatsApp,” a Syrian in Beirut mentioned to Internews. “Everyone—student groups, social groups, family groups—as soon as they see information on COVID-19 they send it through WhatsApp.”

Relevant digital media outlets include Megaphone, an independent online media platform popularized by the uprising, which relies on social media and has a particularly young followership. Other outlets include Akhbar Al-Saha, which focuses on refugee issues and relies heavily on citizen journalism; Daraj Media, an independent online media platform; the Public Source, an independent media organization; and Beirut Today, an independent, community-based platform. All of these outlets report in Arabic and English, are generally financially independent, and rely on international grants.

Given the politicization of the traditional media sector in Lebanon, the digital space has provided an opportunity for more balanced and representative reporting

Blogs, especially those focused on citizen and opinion journalism, have grown in popularity over the last several years. Per the website Feedspot, which focuses on blogger outreach and influencer marketing, the top Lebanese blogs in October 2020 included The961, Blog Baladi, Gino’s Blog, and others which report on politics, economy, and culture in Lebanon. This digital space has provided an opportunity for more nuanced social commentary and coverage of issues facing marginalized communities in Lebanon. Rather than pushing for reform in the traditional media sector, young activists, journalists, and researchers, have carved out space in the digital sphere in recent years. This new focus on traditionally uncovered issues was proven in the wake of the August 4, 2020 Beirut port explosion: Grassroots digital media and freelancers played a key role in highlighting the adverse impacts of the explosion on Syrian refugee and migrant workers living in the vicinity of the blast. Traditional media outlets have a strong presence on Lebanese social media, ●●●

"I wasn't planning on moving back to Ghana before the explosion happened. The explosion changed everything."
 Beirut, Lebanon. August 31, 2020.
 (Lynn Chaya/The Public Source)



In-Trans
Beirut Explosion
 By Zahra Hankir

Surviving Karantina: The Long Way Home

●●● and many survey and interview respondents mentioned receiving TV news through clips shared across WhatsApp and directly on outlets' Facebook pages. The digital space thus in some ways, is at risk of politicization similar to radio and TV. The digital space in Lebanon is likewise only nominally free. Bureaucratic, legal, and political hurdles stand in the way of journalists to fully practice in-depth, investigative journalism. Slander and defamation charges have been used for years

to apply pressure to journalists investigating political figures or reporting negatively on influential Lebanese figures. Human Rights Watch documented at least 29 people investigated for defamation and insult charges since the October 2019 revolution⁸. Likewise, laws enacted to facilitate the flow of information between the government and the public have been only marginally enforced in recent years⁹. As such, some media advocates consider media freedoms to be in retreat in Lebanon. ●

3.3 MEDIA AND JOURNALIST ASSOCIATIONS AND REGULATORS

For decades, regulation bodies have fallen victim to the same politicization present within Lebanon's traditional media sector. The Lebanese Press Syndicate (LPES, or Niqabat al Lubnaniyya in Arabic) was formed in 1962 and later the Club de la Presse (Nadi es Sahafa) was formed by journalism students in Beirut. According to Media Landscapes, for decades journalists viewed the two institutions as ineffective and existing solely to give the impression that Lebanon respected international press standards¹⁰. In many cases, these bodies were considered to be plagued the same cronyism and sectarianism as the media outlets they were tasked with regulating. ●●●

III. INFORMATION SUPPLY – INFORMATION PROVIDERS LANDSCAPE REVIEW

●●● The early 2000s brought a renewed interest in regulation and advocacy for independent journalism. Much of this has been ushered into Lebanon's media landscape through research and advocacy groups engaging primarily with budding digital news channels and freelance journalists. NGOs focused on freedom of speech and journalistic integrity in this manner include organizations like the SKeys Center within the Samir Kassir Foundation, the Social Media Exchange, and the Maharat Foundation.

In addition to pushing for reform through a budding civil society, there are several traditional media regulatory bodies present in Lebanon today including the

Because refugee perspectives are seldom covered in mainstream media, other information providers have stepped in to fill gaps.

Lebanese Press Syndicate Editors, the National Media Council, the Ministry of Information, and the Free Press Syndicate. However, some feel these bodies have fallen ill to politicization similar to their 20th century predecessors. These bodies are regarded by journalists and regulatory NGOs with hesitation. "The press law limits which journalists can join the syndicate," mentioned one journalist who spoke with Internews. "The syndicate is outdated and not relevant to the digital age."

In January of 2020, the Syndicate for Freelance Journalists in Lebanon announced that it would ensure the vaccination of journalists registered with the Syndicate. The decision sparked outcry on Twitter among journalists, and fueled sentiments that the Syndicate was self-serving to its constituents rather than to journalistic principles. A journalist interviewed by Internews mentioned that she wouldn't take the vaccine despite having a press card with the Syndicate. "There are more important people who need to be vaccinated. I'll go and take it in Dubai or somewhere else rather than take it away from someone here." ●



Excel الالعاب
@OmarTamo19

نقابة المحررين طلبت من الصحافيين الراغبين بتلقي اللقاح تزويدها بمعلومات عنهم في مهلة اقصاها 28 الحالي.

This is unbelievable and unacceptable, I really cannot believe they're doing it

وطنية - صدر عن نقابة محرري الصحافة اللبنانية البيان الآتي:

"بناء على الاجتماع الذي عقد اليوم بين وزيرة الاعلام الدكتورة منال عبد الصمد نجد ونقيب الصحافة والمحررين عوني الكعكي وجوزف القصيفي ورئيس المجلس الوطني للاعلام عبد الهادي محفوظ، في شأن حملة التطعيم الخاصة بالاعلاميين والصحافيين، ضد وباء كورونا،

تطلب نقابة المحررين الى الصحافيين الذين يرغبون بتلقي اللقاحات ضد فايروس كورونا، تزويدها بالمعلومات الآتية:

الأسم:

الصفة: محرر - مراسل - مصور

العمر:

5:31 PM - Jan 25, 2021 - Twitter for iPhone

13 Retweets 35 Quote Tweets 90 Likes

Tweet from a Lebanese journalist about the Syndicate of Freelance Journalist's decision to offer the vaccine early to registered journalists. The decision sparked frustration among many journalists in Lebanon, who felt other vulnerable groups should be prioritized firsthand.

3.4 INFORMAL INFORMATION PROVIDERS

Because refugee perspectives are seldom covered in mainstream media, other information providers have stepped in to fill gaps. According to field work, Syrians rely on a series of information providers to learn about services and assistance, legal procedures, documentation, and news. Sources include traditional media outlets, humanitarian and development bodies, the Lebanese government, as well as social networks between Syrians in Lebanon and elsewhere in the world. Depending on the issue at hand, Syrians tap into any one—or more—of these networks for relevant information.

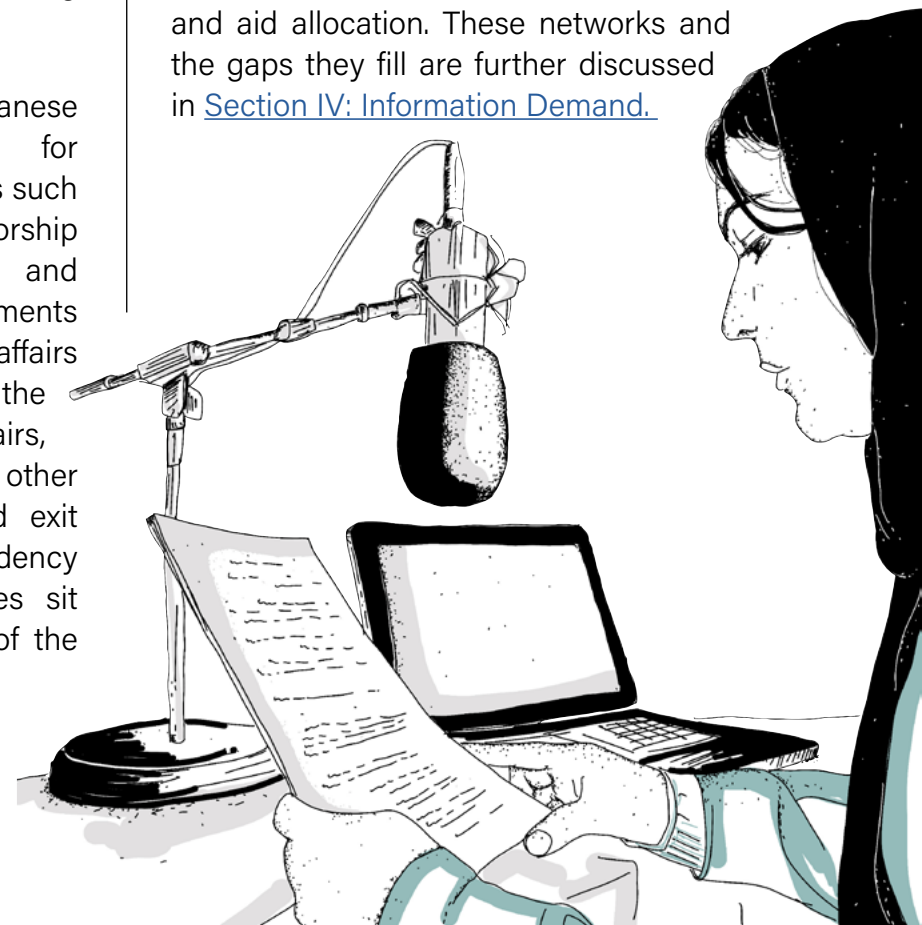
Humanitarians serve as a strong information provider for Syrians in Lebanon. Humanitarians provide regular awareness sessions on health and hygiene and topics which most directly relate to their programming scope. The primary source of information for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is the UN High

Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), although a multitude of international and local organizations also play a role in sharing information. These organizations distribute information through digital communications, via WhatsApp communications trees, tailored Facebook groups, as well as awareness sessions and teams of Syrian volunteers residing in camps throughout Lebanon.

Different bodies within the Lebanese government are responsible for procedural information for refugees such as renewing residencies or sponsorship papers, documenting births and deaths, and entry and exit requirements into Lebanon. Syrian refugee affairs are generally managed under the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs, although security procedures and other tasks such as border entry and exit policies, procurement of legal residency in Lebanon, and other processes sit within the General Security unit of the Internal Security Ministry.

Local community leaders, such as

Shawish, and volunteers and employees for humanitarian organizations serve as an important conduit of information between NGOs and the government to local communities, particularly in camp settings. Facebook also hosts several Syrian-run pages for refugees to inquire and discuss topics such as governmental procedures, resettlement opportunities, and aid allocation. These networks and the gaps they fill are further discussed in [Section IV: Information Demand](#).



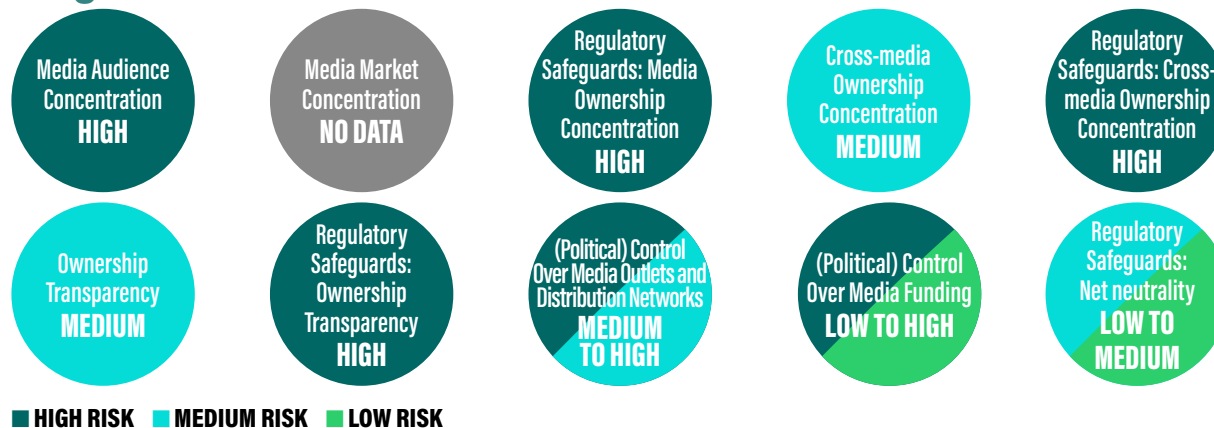
3.5 LOCAL RELEVANCE OF INFORMATION:

Local topics of interest and status of community media.

Mainstream media outlets, typically TV, radio, and print media, are limited by the political agendas of their backers, and typically provide information which is most directly relevant to Lebanese communities. However, there are also a small number of media organizations run directly by refugee communities themselves, such as Campji and the Syrian Press Center. The latter is comprised of a cohort of Syrian volunteers who conduct reporting projects as funding allows. Campji has a pronounced presence on Facebook and has stood out among other media initiatives since the COVID-19 pandemic through its coverage of personal experiences of Palestinian refugees who have contracted the virus, patients in isolation centers, and the economic impacts of the pandemic on refugee camps.

While some examples are present, the scope of grassroots media directly catering

Figure 3. Indicators of Risk to Media Pluralism



to refugees is small. All of the Syrians interviewed during field work mentioned relying primarily on traditional media sources, NGO sources, and informal informational sources online over these more localized sources. ●

3.6 MEDIA CAPACITY AND INFORMATION QUALITY

Several of Lebanon's top universities have hosted journalism programs since the 1990s, including private universities like the American University of Beirut (AUB), Notre Dame University, and Saint Joseph University, as well as the public Lebanese University¹¹. Such pro-

grams offer practical, on the job journalism skills such as newsroom management and elections coverage, but in many ways feed into the broadcast journalism style of media coverage in the country, according to one journalist interviewed by Internews.

Due to time constraints, Internews chose to focus field work and analysis on the demand side of information and thus was unable to attribute full attention to the education landscape for media in Lebanon. For more research on this topic, see the report: [Challenges of Media Ethics Education in Lebanon in the Midst of Political and Economic Pressure](#) (December 2019). ●

Source: Samir Kassir Eyes Media Ownership Monitor <https://www.mom-rsi.org/en/countries/lebanon/>

3.7 COVID-19 INFORMATION COORDINATION MECHANISMS

From the outset there has been no standardized approach to covering the pandemic in Lebanon. In the first months of the pandemic, several communications channels were created between the Disaster Risk Management (DRM) department of the Lebanese Red Cross, the Ministry of Information, and the MOPH itself. Likewise, the Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) component of the COVID-19 response comprises UN bodies and INGOs responsible for creating communications materials for the general public. From the beginning, these parallel pathways for information set the foundation for confusion regarding the primary source on COVID-19 in Lebanon.

Several key outlets within the media sector in Lebanon fueled misinformation around the virus as the pandemic wore on in 2020. In late 2020, mainstream media

outlets regularly hosted doctors of different specialties to their programs who shared false information about COVID-19, its spread in Lebanon, and a possible vaccine. Such an environment proved challenging for journalists and freelancers

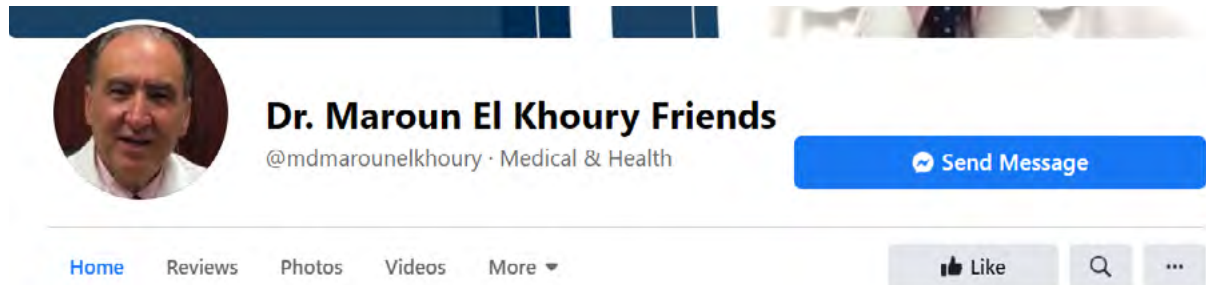
"This is global, biological warfare! What I fear most is a new virus counteattack more vicious than Corona, and people will be the victims!"

posted by Lebanese doctor on his Facebook page, 6.793 followers.

Source: November 16 humanitarian rumor bulletin, Rooted in Trust Internews project².

looking to report on the pandemic. Likewise, the pandemic shed light on skills and sourcing gaps for journalists in Lebanon. In a journalist roundtable event hosted by Maharat Foundation in October 2020, a group of journalists cited challenges they faced in 2020 with fact-checking, connecting with official sources, and skills gaps in health journalism as major challenges to reporting on the pandemic.

Reaching authorities and scheduling interviews was also a difficulty: According to several journalists, politicians used the pandemic as an excuse to avoid speaking to the media. This makes already distrusting journalists even more skeptical of official statements ●●●



Source: Facebook fanpage of a Lebanese doctor who regularly comments on COVID-19 and the vaccine for mainstream media outlets in Lebanon.



●●● from the Lebanese Government. Many also stated that there are discrepancies in the number of infected and the number of deaths reported by the government. One journalist mentioned that in his own investigative reporting, he found that some families were hiding details of relatives that had died from COVID-19.

In late 2020, mainstream media outlets regularly hosted doctors of different specialties to their programs who shared false information about COVID-19

This decentralized and ad hoc approach for COVID-19 communications has created confusion for journalists trying to report on COVID-19. In early 2021, it was also evident that this environment has caused many Lebanese journalists themselves to be distrustful of the COVID-19 vaccine. Without adequate training and support to journalists on the fundamentals ●●●

III. INFORMATION SUPPLY – INFORMATION PROVIDERS LANDSCAPE REVIEW

●●● of the vaccine, as well as how to report on it, this decentralized approach will continue to have adverse impacts on media coverage of COVID-19 in Lebanon.

Refugees in Lebanon primarily receive in-

formation about COVID-19 through word of mouth, personal WhatsApp and Facebook groups, and groups set up by local and international organizations. According to a Syrian working with a prominent Syrian NGO in the Bekaa Valley, his organization

localizes information from UNHCR and the WHO for beneficiaries. Reporting on the impacts of COVID-19 among refugee communities was largely limited to coordination and coverage by responding NGOs and the grassroots media initiative Campji. ●



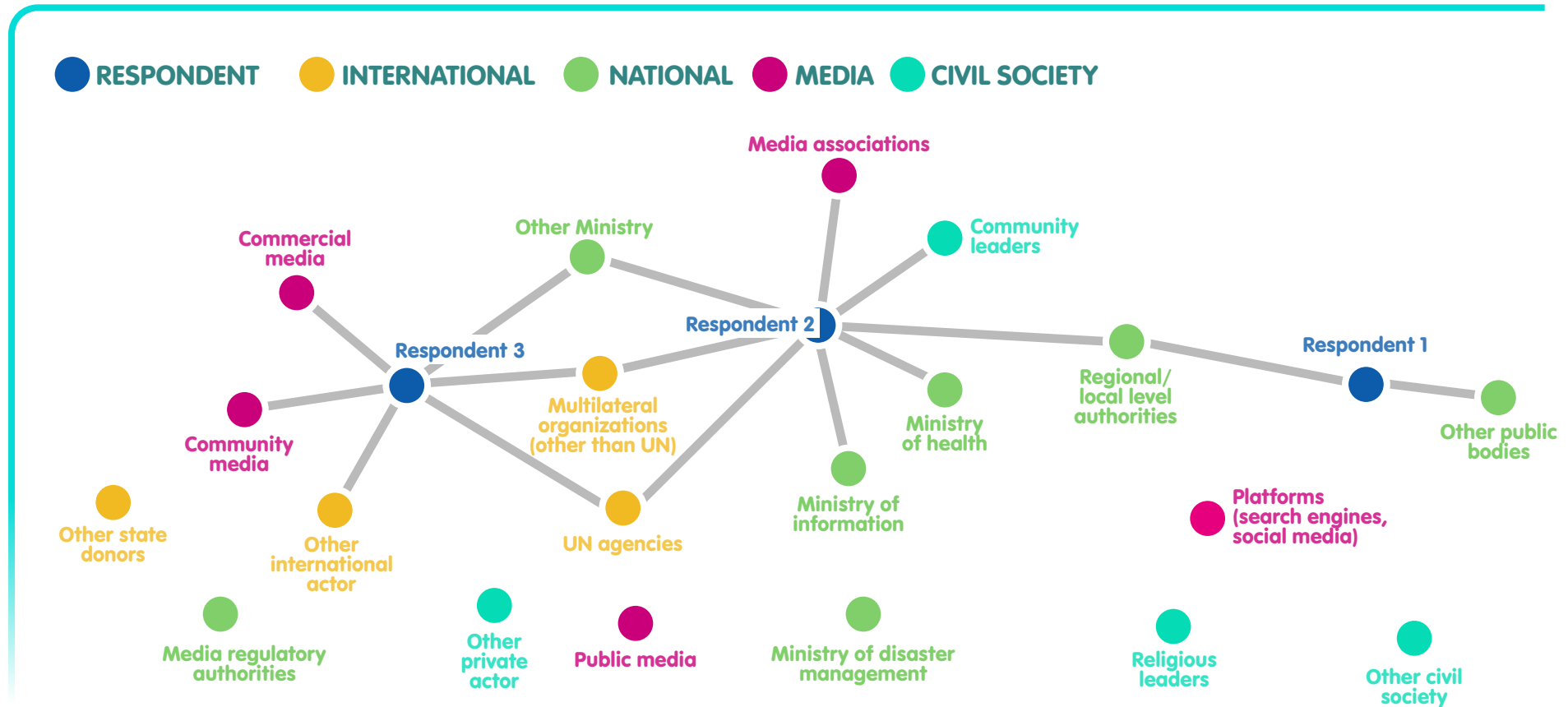
Campji was one of the few sources reporting from inside isolation centers in 2020, alongside regular coverage of lockdowns and COVID-19-related developments as they unfolded in several Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.



Medical staff at a hospital in Beirut's eastern suburbs holding 'Mother's Day' and other messages during a break in the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) section of the health facility.

Figure 4. Visual COVID-19 Stakeholder Map of media outlets

(nodes with scored interaction over 3 in a scale from 1 to 5)



IV. INFORMATION DEMAND

Internews focuses primarily on the information needs and demands of Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon, to acknowledge the specialized needs and gaps in information faced by this community. Anecdotal evidence was also gathered regarding the information needs of Palestinians, migrant workers, and marginalized Lebanese communities through field work and desk research.

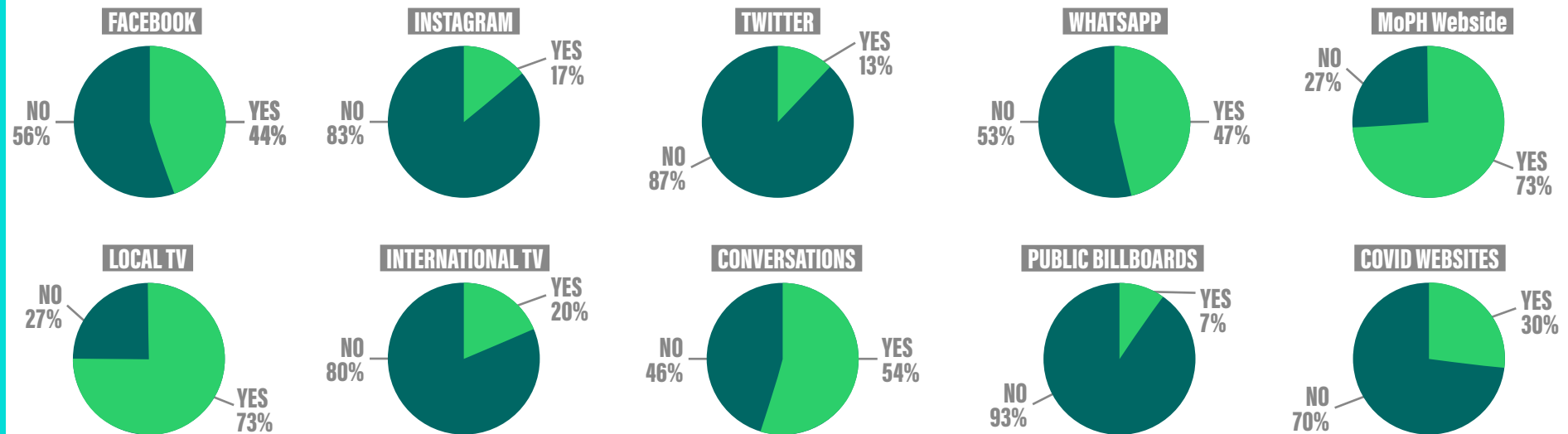
4.1 INFORMATION NEEDS AND GAPS

A large portion of communities in Lebanon still receive information through traditional media sources on TV and radio, while some younger communities have shifted to digital content in recent years. Many traditional media sources have followed suit by reinforcing their presence on social media. Social

media and WhatsApp, heavily used by Syrians and Lebanese alike, likewise host a mix of information from official sources like the MOPH, WHO, and media outlets, as well as informal information providers such as political parties, popular figures, and community members.

Surveys conducted by the UNDP Accelerator Lab in late 2020 with Lebanese communities parallels surveys and key informant ●●●

figure 5. What channels do people their COVID-19 information from?



Survey on COVID-19 in Lebanon: Perceptions and Behavioral Trends, 2020, PowerBI Dashboard

IV. INFORMATION DEMAND

UNHCR household data July 2020 accessed via Tableau Reader and summarized on Canva¹³.

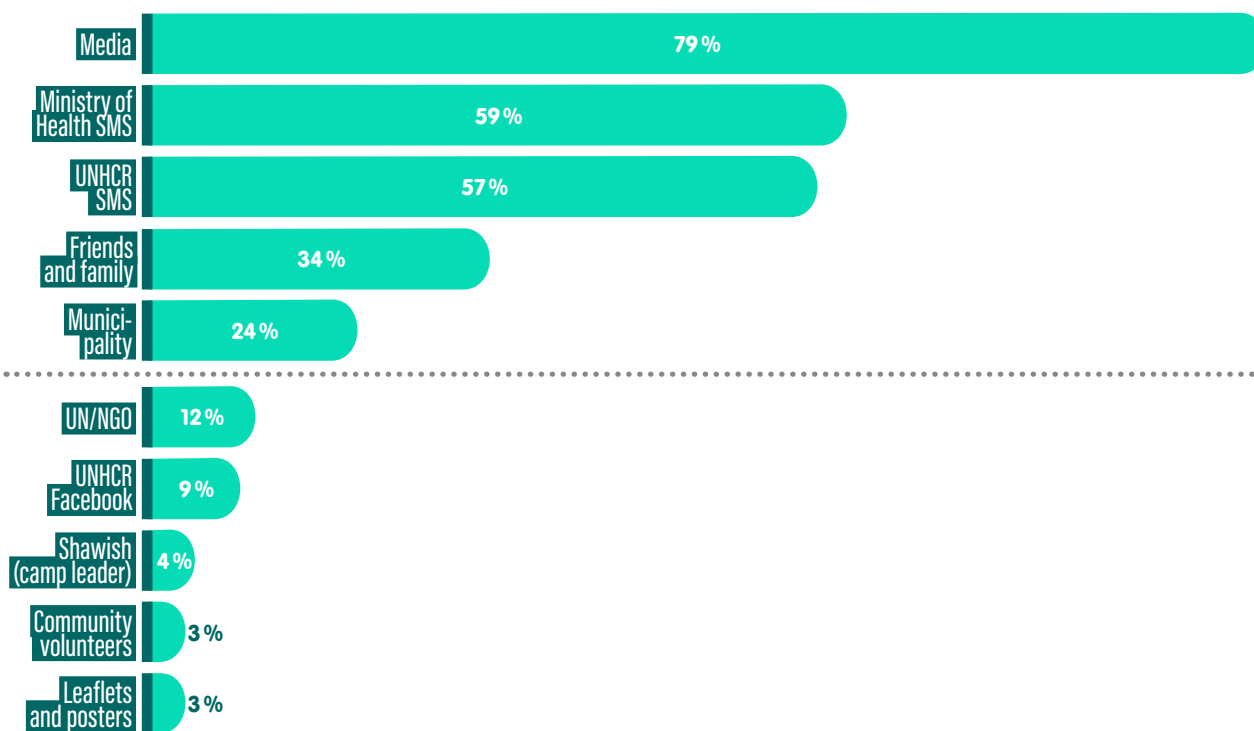
●●● interviews conducted by Internews in early 2021. Both Syrian and Lebanese communities appear to rely on several channels for information on COVID-19, with word of mouth, local TV, and the MOPH playing a particularly important role.

Similarly, Syrians rely on a variety of sources for information on other tangential topics such as humanitarian services, border procedures, and local news. While many Syrians interviewed by Internews mentioned local charities and NGOs as primary information providers in their communities, larger data collected by UNHCR in the summer of 2020 indicates less of a reliance on these sources in comparison to others. However, the latter could reflect the fact that humanitarian information tends to be concentrated in camp settings and a large number of Syrians live outside of these areas in Lebanon.

UNHCR household surveys also indicated a higher reliance on SMS messaging over other information sharing through WhatsApp or online. SMS messages are free for the recipient and not dependent on regular renewal of internet and data packages, and

Figure 6. Preferred information channel

Percentage of respondents (Syrian refugees) using the most popular 5 sources to access COVID-19 information and selected sources among sources with the lowest usage.



thus appear to be a more effective mechanism for getting information to refugees compared to social media. SMS messages from the MOPH were a primary source for 59% of respondents whereas the MOPH

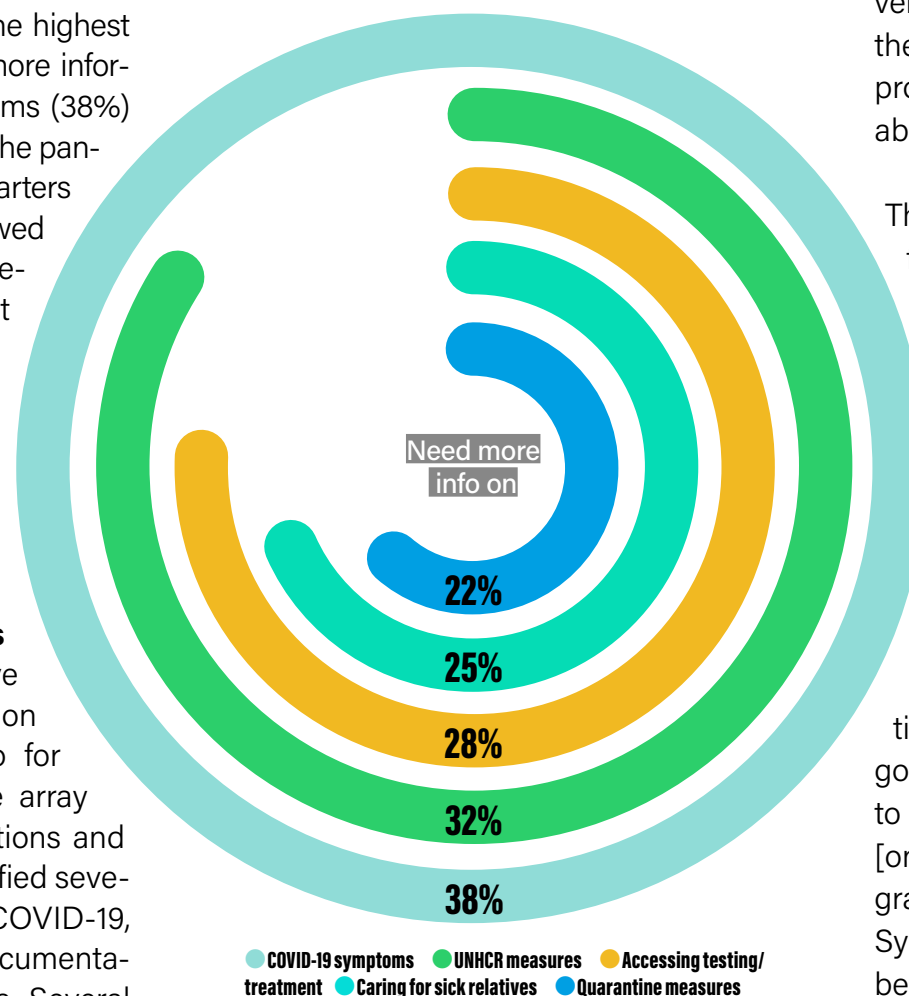
website was only a primary source for 1% of people. Likewise, WhatsApp messages from UNHCR were referenced by 5% of respondents whereas SMS messages were a primary source for 57% of people. ●●●

●●● Refugees surveyed by UNHCR mentioned generally high access to information related to COVID-19, with the highest percentage of people needing more information about COVID-19 symptoms (38%) and UNHCR services related to the pandemic (32%). Roughly three quarters of Syrian respondents interviewed by Internews in January and February 2021 were able to recall at least two pieces of factual information about COVID-19 and all mentioned at least two proven measures for protecting against COVID-19 during surveys.

The previous Section 3.4: informal information suppliers as well as the charts above highlight the various information providers that Syrians turn to for information. While this diverse array of sources provides people options and alternatives, Syrians have identified several information gaps related to COVID-19, legal and administrative documentation, and humanitarian services. Several

Figure 7.
COVID-19 information needs

Top 5 responses on more information needed related to COVID-19,



of the Syrians interviewed by Internews mentioned that while NGOs readily cover information related to the services they provide, they seldom share legal or procedural information, or information about resettlement to a third country.

These information gaps were evident in field work and commentary posted on Syrian-led Facebook groups like *Dubarah* and *'Ana Souriyeh fi Lubnan'* (I'm a Syrian in Lebanon), which serve as crucial yet more informal information providers for Syrians in Lebanon. These pages most commonly display queries about border procedures, resettlement, and aid availability¹⁴. In many cases, Syrians look to these pages for the information which NGOs, the media, and the government either cannot or do not care to provide. "Plenty of informational pages [on Facebook] inform people how to migrate to Europe or Canada," mentioned a Syrian NGO worker. "Resettlement has become a buzz word for Syrians."

Figure 8. Information gaps

Key words most mentioned by Syrians surveyed over WhatsApp when asked where they faced information gaps in terms of news and services



- Legal documents - 14%
- Food items - 1%
- No interest - 6%
- Education - 2%
- News and fact checking - 9%
- Resettlement - 7%
- UN Agency or NGO - 18%
- Health & COVID-19 - 17%

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●●● Even information regularly provided by NGOs could be made more widely accessible to Syrians. UNHCR and NGOs send information through SMS, informational brochures, their website and social media, and awareness sessions. However, local or regional maps of the various service providers present in a particular area are available to NGO staff but not beneficiaries themselves, leaving refugees at the whim of the service provider for much-needed information. A social worker from a prominent Syrian NGO in the Bekaa valley mentioned that information reaching the target community also depends on how proactive a community leader is in sharing that information with their networks.

In areas with a less tangible NGO presence, information on aid and assistance is more difficult to come by. A Syrian woman living in Aley in the foothills of Mount Lebanon mentioned to Internews in January 2021 that because Syrians and likewise humanitarians are concentrated

in other parts of the country, Syrians in her network are seldom approached with information from NGOs:

"There are a lot of Syrians living here, but no centralized place to get services or to get our questions answered. Health services for Syrians are severely lacking in Aley. If I needed hospital care they would send me either to Beirut or the Bekaa valley. Same for UNHCR services...I'd need to go to Beirut, Zahle, or the Bekaa."

A Syrian activist serving on Internews' Panel of Experts mentioned how gaps in service allocation and information sharing are not new. *"Nine years later, and [refugees] still don't know where to go for health care."* The Syrian NGO worker mentioned that the solution starts first with more in-depth and accessible service mapping. *"A refugee should be able to use a service map to choose the services they need, rather than us as NGO workers deciding where they go."* ●



4.2 ACCESS: CHANNELS AND SOURCES

In addition to the primary information sources mentioned in the previous section, more informal information providers play a key role in transmitting official information to the communities they serve. Serving as administrator between information ‘gatekeepers’ and camp-based Syrian communities are Shawish and community-based volunteers recruited and trained by NGOs. Shawish serve as the focal point between NGOs administering services in the camp, the local municipality, and residents¹⁵. A Shawish residing in Bar Elias in the Bekaa valley mentioned that he disseminates information he receives from a WhatsApp group of local government representatives in Bar Elias. He also mentioned his role in buffering his community from potentially false information:

“We can’t trust sources like Facebook posts and WhatsApp messages sent by average

people. We don’t know how to verify the misinformation so we don’t share things we aren’t sure of.”

This more tailored information-sharing primarily revolves around humanitarian and procedural information disseminated directly to representatives of Syrian communities. Outside of this, information from the government is disseminated through media coverage or the social media pages of the relevant government office.

Digital information sharing has been a primary method for information sharing related to the COVID-19 response. In January 2021, the Lebanese government announced the launch of an application where residents can register for a COVID-19 vaccine. Residents who do not have smartphones must register through a vaccine call center, which at the date of publication cost the caller standard call rates, which can be expensive for many people Lebanon¹⁶.

Mobile and internet access in Lebanon is widespread and accessible in comparison

to other countries in the region, though it is weak in terms of bandwidth and coverage. Internet access is likely to weaken further in the months and years to come due to Lebanon’s financial crisis, as previously affordable internet packages become more expensive while internet quality and bandwidth further decreases. Likewise, inclement weather cuts internet and electricity, making digital communication more difficult in the winter months in mountainous regions where many Syrian refugees reside. “Internet is not cheap,” the *Shawish* in Bar Elias mentioned to Internews, “but most of our camp is connected through this WhatsApp group to up to date information.”

Syrians are pragmatic in finding the information they need directly through Facebook groups and contacts in their immediate network, relatives back home, and in the diaspora. Facebook groups like *Dubarah Lebanon* was created by Syrians to serve as a connecting point for their community. Syrian activists and social workers often provide relevant information on these platforms and, perhaps most ●●●

IV. INFORMATION DEMAND

●●● importantly, people share personal experiences of navigating often opaque bureaucratic and legal processes. A Syrian social worker in Beirut mentioned his approach:

"I don't look at procedures through General Security to understand a policy. I look for groups on Facebook and online. Most of the people on these pages which provide information are educated activists, so you feel the information is relevant."

DUbarah.com
شبكة دعم السوريين حول العالم
www.dubarah.com



Digital information sharing has been a primary method for information sharing related to the COVID-19 response.

While Syrians themselves find answers to their questions and pragmatic ways to connect others with the information they need, such an environment leaves space for disinformation and misinformation to fill gaps. Disinformation has been a tactic used by Lebanese political parties on social media over the years, and several politically-affiliated bots were identified by Internews' Rooted in Trust project. Such malicious tools, if targeted towards Syrians, could pose risks for those seeking information online about potentially sensitive issues such as residency and employment. Non-malicious forms of misinformation were also identified commonly through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and rumor data collection from pages for Syrians in Lebanon on Facebook. ●

مرحباً
#اليوم_عنا_استطلاع_رأي
الهدف من استطلاع الرأي نقل المخاوف والهواجس التي تواجهكم بطريقة شفافة.....
#السؤال بالنسبة للعام الدراسي شو اهم مشكلة واجهتكم من بين الخيارات التالية.....
النقطة الثانية بتمنى منكم شرح المشكلة بشفافية بالتعليقات.... الهدف نضوي عالمشاكل....

<input type="checkbox"/>	التعليم عن بعد**	208 Votes
<input type="checkbox"/>	صعوبات اخرى كاللغة.*** والانترنت... اداء المعلمين... الدروس غير كافية	143 Votes
<input type="checkbox"/>	الدوام المسائي غير أمن*** بالنسبة للتنقل بسبب الوضع الامنى	119 Votes
<input type="checkbox"/>	عندي اربع ولاد والبيت كلو هاتف واحد ونت مافي شو بدنا نلحق لنحلق وكملت معنا غيرنا السكن والمنطقة كلا الحمد لله كلو خير	12 Votes
<input type="checkbox"/>	ماعندى ولاد ولا متزوج 😊	8 Votes

2 More...

👍👎 78

221 Comments

A Facebook post from February 2021 about education challenges on a Facebook page for Syrians in Lebanon. The most common response was distance learning.



Medina, A. (2020, July 8). *The pigeons take a rest after their daily flight in the Beirut skies.*

4.3 MAIN DETERMINANTS AND BARRIERS TO ACCESSING INFORMATION

More than ever before, digital connectivity facilitates or hampers one's ability to connect directly with relevant services, particularly from humani-

tarians. Many NGOs shifted their communications online in 2020 due to the pandemic. Both a Syrian NGO worker and UNHCR manager mentioned that the COVID-19 lockdowns made them unable to conduct in-person awareness sessions and trainings, even for seemingly essential humanitarian services. However, digital communication does not account for increased internet costs or the increasingly intermittent connectivity, especial-

ly in remote parts of Lebanon. A Spanish journalist who covers refugee issues in Lebanon mentioned her experience trying to connect a Syrian woman at risk of eviction with relevant NGO services:

"The NGOs couldn't contact her because she didn't have data, or when they would call her connection was bad. They would keep reverting back to me to coordinate directly with her. In the end she was evicted." ●●●



An informal tent settlement in the Bekaa Valley, 2013.

●●● In addition to over-reliance on digital communications, humanitarians appear to focus efforts primarily on larger, more accessible camps and refugee communities. In November 2020, residents living in a small, informal tent settlement in El Marj in the Bekaa valley mentioned to Internews that they had not received any information or material support related to COVID-19 to date. Internews confirmed with a local resident and a municipality representative that NGOs were present in larger camp settlements in the area. Syrian respondents interviewed by Human Rights Watch in December 2020 in Aarsal, one of the most remote areas of Lebanon, also had not received personal protective equipment (PPE) or information on COVID-19, save for some small distributions and awareness sessions at the start of the pandemic¹⁷.

Living in humanitarian 'hotspots' also indirectly connects people with more in- ●●●

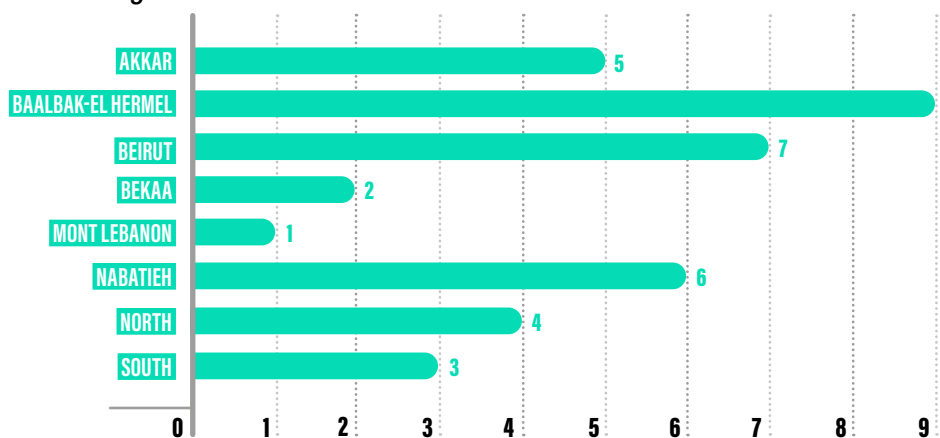
IV. INFORMATION DEMAND

formation: Syrian and Palestinian refugees living in Ain Helweh refugee camp mentioned to Internews that they receive information from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) albeit through their children's schools. Likewise, the country-wide household survey conducted by UNHCR showed that a higher percentage of respondents in Mount Lebanon—an area where Syrians primarily live in villages and urban settings amongst Lebanese—felt they had less access to information about services compared to governorates more commonly covered by humanitarian programming in Lebanon¹⁸.

This unequal distribution of humanitarian information also points to the need for regional or nationwide, publicly accessible service maps. Such services could help Syrians living on the periphery of 'humanitarian hotspots' make more informed decisions about their service options. Likewise, if Syrians are more informed about the service opportunities around them, they will in turn be able to strengthen the information-sharing networks they have created across social media and WhatsApp in recent years. ●

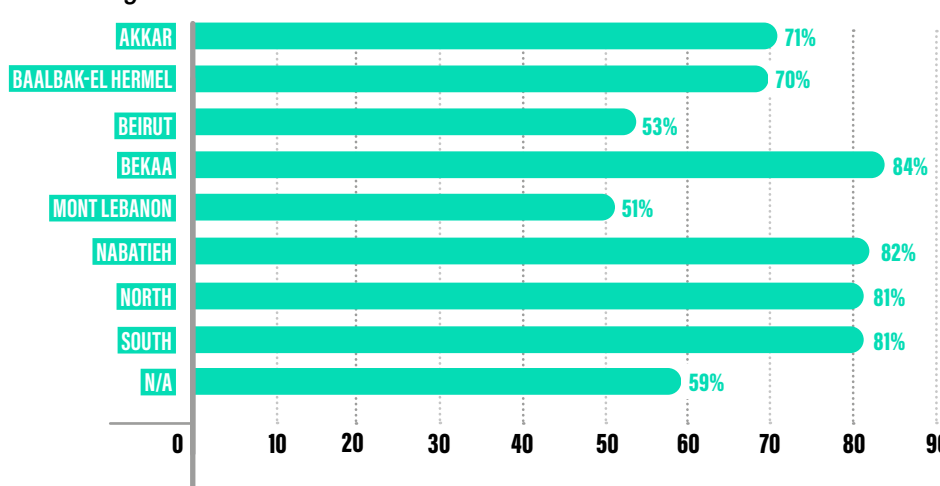
Figure 9. Awareness about humanitarian and government services

Knowledge about humanitarian services



UNHCR household survey data published in July 2020 about information on humanitarian services. Information access (ranked 0 to 10 by respondents) appears highest in areas heavily trafficked by humanitarians such as the Bekaa valley and North Lebanon, in comparison to Mount Lebanon and South Lebanon.

Knowledge of the MOPH COVID-19 hotline



Likewise, knowledge of the MOPH hotline number for COVID-19 symptoms (measured here in percent of respondents familiar with the hotline number) was highest in many of these same areas and lowest in Mount Lebanon.

4.4 FOCUS ON VULNERABLE GROUPS

2020 brought new levels of vulnerability for Lebanese citizens, refugees, and migrants alike. According to a preliminary Vulnerability Assessment conducted by UNHCR and the World Food Program, half of the Syrians in Lebanon are now food insecure. As Lebanon's economic situation continues to degrade, marginalized communities will continue to bear the brunt of Lebanon's compounding crises.

Illiterate Syrian communities face disproportionate challenges in accessing Lebanon's information ecosystem and must rely more on traditional forms of information like TV, word of mouth, and awareness sessions which are primarily offered in camps. The Shawish in Bar Elias mentioned that illiterate communities in the camp where he resides rely on in-person check-ins from a local medical clinic for information. Whereas camp settings can alleviate some barriers to information, illiterate residents in the aforementioned areas



Communities with compounding vulnerabilities (...) deserve focused needs assessments to ensure they do not become further disconnected

outside of the 'humanitarian hotspots' risk being isolated from digitally published information.

As vulnerabilities grow in 2021, communities with compounding vulnerabilities, such as illiterate refugees, deserve focused needs assessments to ensure they do not become further disconnected from Lebanon's information ecosystem. ●

V. INFORMATION DYNAMICS

5.1 TRUST

Many Syrians and Lebanese have a complicated relationship with trust. **Both communities have experienced conflicts rooted in misinformation and constructed narratives as much as in armed aggression and ideology.** ‘The walls have ears’ is a common expression for Syrians who grew up under the oftentimes pervasive surveillance of the Syrian state. For Syrians now residing in Lebanon, their experience with trust has been undermined by the degrading situation in the country and legal, procedural, and security policies which contradict one another frequently.

For Lebanese, this relationship means always viewing information through a lens of scrutiny. Lebanon continued to be the playground for foreign interests from Syria, Israel, and beyond in the years following the country’s decades-long civil war. A Lebanese journalist living in northern Lebanon described how this dynamic fuels rumors as well as a constant state of flux:

‘During the [2019] revolution, people would send rumors: “Walid Jumblatt is packing his bags because war is coming, floors of hospitals are being cleared out for weapons...” People like to make it seem like speculation is the reality. “Tomorrow, war is coming,” they will say.’

In the early months of the COVID-19 response in Lebanon, the pandemic was met with disbelief and nonchalance. Much of peoples’ beliefs around COVID-19 were linked to distrust in the government’s ability and motivation for responding to the virus: ‘They are just trying to keep us home so we die of hunger’, is a common sentiment expressed by Lebanese and Syrians most impacted by Lebanon’s deteriorating economy. ‘Covid kizba [Covid is a lie], nothing travels faster than this phrase’, mentioned one Syrian interviewed in Beirut.

But as Lebanon reached a stage of massive community spread and outbreak in late 2020, this distrust was further influenced by fear. One of the most common rumors collected in late 2020 by Internews was

that hospitals were mistreating and killing patients to exaggerate rates of COVID-19 to receive more foreign funding. Such a sentiment was collected from social media by Internews as well as in refugee camp settings by UNHCR in late 2020.

For both Lebanese and Syrians interviewed and surveyed by Internews, trust appears most directly linked to proximity and relationship building. **For both communities, strong relationships are built at the community and familial level. Such relationships are increasingly relied upon as trust in the Lebanese government and the international community has waned.** The Lebanese journalist in northern Lebanon mentioned how this dynamic shifts peoples’ reliance towards grassroots civil society and personal networks instead of more systematic methods of support:

“We trust each other in our community. Someone in the village will help you or connect you with someone that can help. My friend is the head of one of the ●●●

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●●● *governmental hospitals. I trust the hospital because I know and trust him, and I'll refer people needing help directly to him.*"

Proximity is a particularly crucial trust-building factor for humanitarian activities, as Syrians have grown frustrated with the stop and go nature of humanitarian support over the years.

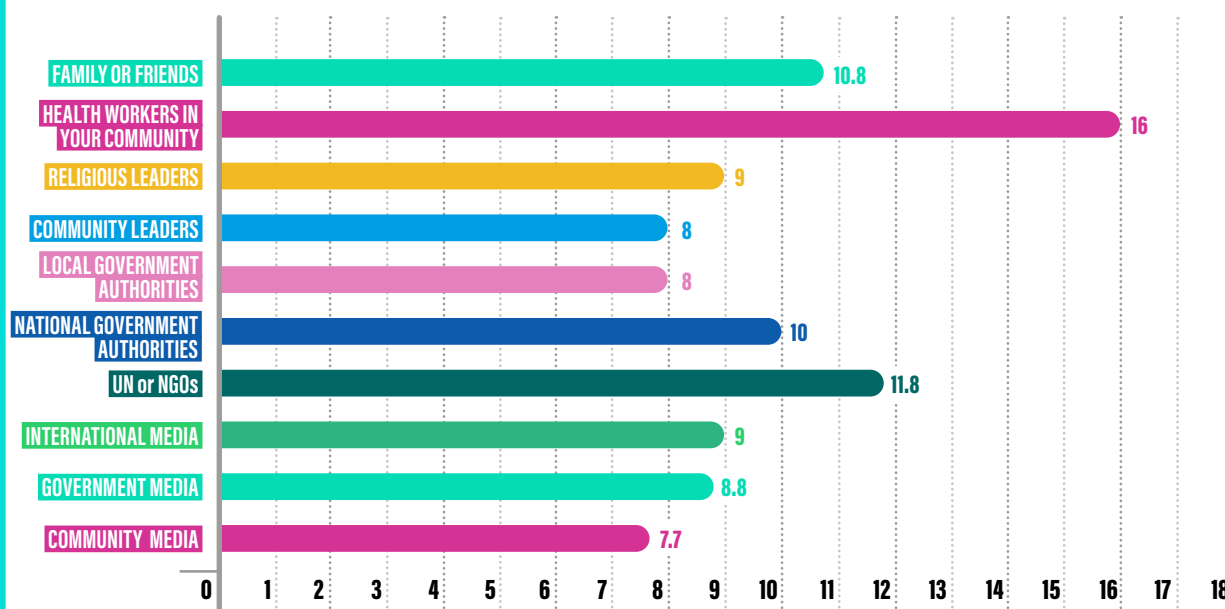
Local and international charities with a physical presence where interviewees reside were more commonly referenced as a trusted source of information than official sources that did not have a direct presence in the community. When asked to rate the most trusted sources for COVID-19 information, two Syrian-Palestinian women mentioned that they did not trust anyone that was not physically present in their community. One Syrian man surveyed in Bar Elias mentioned that he would not trust anyone who provides him information over the phone. He went on to mention, "UNHCR or any other NGO calls us and tells us how to wash our hands and sterilize—we don't even have anything to sterilize with."

This reliance on proximity has also created distrust for more official sources on COVID-19. 'For a while people in my networks were taking [COVID-19] information from social media,' mentioned a Syrian woman living in the Karam Zaytoun district of Beirut. 'But then as people here started getting infected more, we relied more on them. I was surprised

to see how many people were sick and had died of COVID in the country—it's not like anyone in our area has died in front of us, even until now.'

While proximity plays a role, responses gathered from the 78 Syrians surveyed by Internews also indicate trust in a diverse set of information providers. ●●●

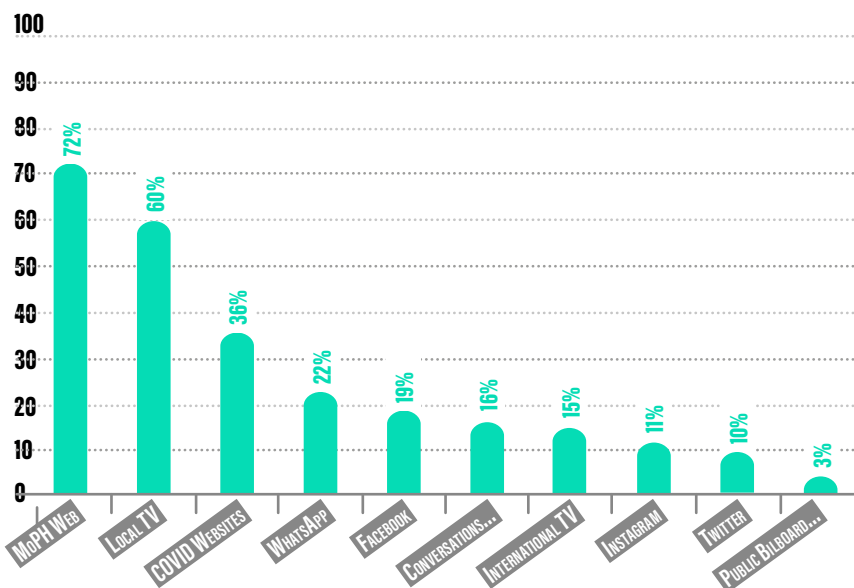
Figure 11. Trusted information sources



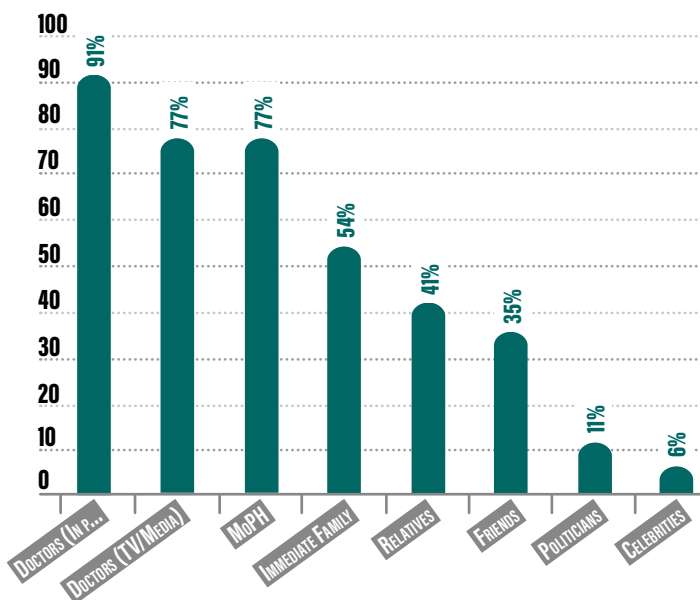
Source: Most trusted information source survey responses

Figure 12. What channels and sources do people trust for information on COVID-19

CHANNELS CITED AS TRUSTWORTHY



PEOPLE CITED AS TRUSTWORTHY



Lebanese respondents also mentioned a diverse array of trusted sources for COVID-19 information. Similar to Syrian respondents, local health workers were among the most-trusted sources. Source: UNDP Accelerator Lab Survey on COVID-19 in Lebanon

Survey data and interviews with over a dozen Syrians point further to the idea that people rely less on the most trusted or single information source, but instead cast a wide net for information and in the end decide for themselves. “Tomorrow we’ll see what happens,” was a common sentiment expressed among interviewees

and discussion participants.

Distrust is at an all-time high in Lebanon and is already seeping into peoples’ perceptions about the COVID-19 vaccine as well as about reform in the wake of Lebanon’s economic and political crises. At the same time, trust is still present

and indeed growing in more localized, personalized settings throughout Lebanon. Those looking to support marginalized communities in navigating Lebanon’s compounding crises would be well served to invest in trust-building through these local mechanisms. ●



5.2 TRANSMISSION

Due to the tight-knit nature of Lebanese and Syrian communities alike, information is primarily shared by word of mouth and digitally amongst one's immediate community. Social media is widely used as a method for information sharing, particularly via private WhatsApp groups and local Facebook groups. A Lebanese journalist living in the Chouf mountains summarized the role of social networks for sharing information in his area: *"Word of mouth is very powerful here. When Michele Khoury wanted to do a political campaign, he did a WhatsApp campaign."*

Public forums for discussion are used by Syrians to share and receive information about more universal procedures. In these cases, Syrians rely heavily on groups like Dubarah, *'Ana Souriye fi Lubnan* (I am a Syrian in Lebanon), and

other regional groups.

Information-sharing between communities is a social-support mechanism when aid support and governmental policies are intermittently applied or change from one month to the next. This presents an opportunity for information suppliers looking to build awareness around a certain issue: **Concise and trusted information shared locally is likely to spread further than the immediate recipients.**

However, these pathways also leave space for rumors to spread. Through its rumor tracking and regular engagement with NGOs working in Syrian refugee camps in late 2020 and early 2021, Internews has seen that rumors are largely consistent across Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian communities in different parts of Lebanon, and WhatsApp and Facebook have been a primary method for their spread. ●

5.3 INFLUENCE

Knowledge gained from information and key features for influence

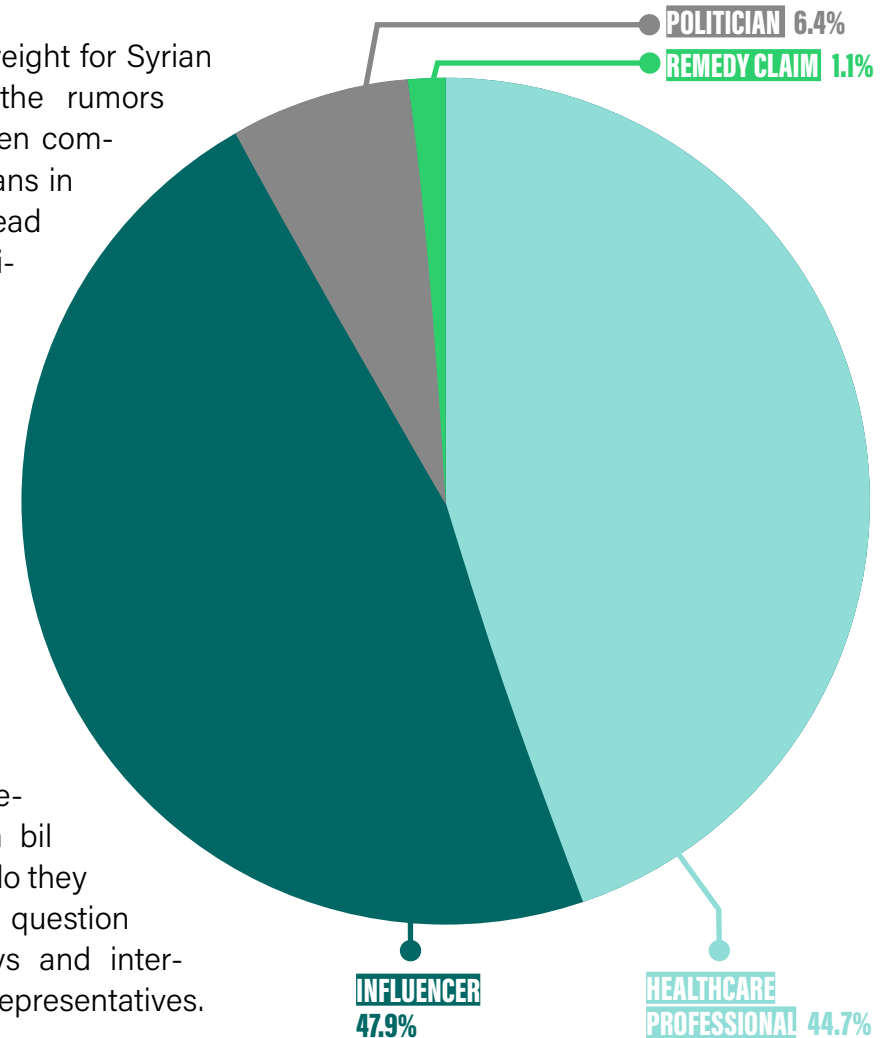
The pandemic has shown the way that social influencers such as singers, artists, and social media commentators play a primary role in spreading information among Lebanese. UNICEF has partnered with some influencers to increase trust in the COVID-19 vaccine and to spread information about the virus. The onset of COVID-19 has also sparked prominence of ‘healthcare influencers’—Some Lebanese doctors and health professionals have developed celebrity-esque status from publicity since the start of the pandemic. Traditional media outlets in Lebanon regularly host many of these newly famous doctors to comment on COVID-19’s development. Some influencers and doctors have used these platforms to spread rumors about COVID-19 and more recently about the vaccine.

These influencers do not appear to

carry the same level of weight for Syrian communities, however the rumors spread by them have been commonly expressed by Syrians in Lebanon. Field work instead showed that Syrians primarily rely on healthcare professionals in their immediate network for COVID-19 information, so much so that their trust in other local community leaders such as Shawishes or Mukhtars, representatives for a neighborhood or local community, for COVID-19 information was relatively low. ‘shu khasun bil COVID?, What business do they have with COVID?’ was a question posed in several surveys and interviews in regard to these representatives.

Prominent Syrian journalists and media outlets regularly covering issues for Syrian refugees were also cited as ●●●

Figure 13. Origins of rumors



Vaccine-related rumors logged on social media by Internews’ Rooted in Trust project between October 2020 and January 2021. Over 20% of vaccine rumors were shared by influencers and healthcare professionals in Lebanon.

V. INFORMATION DYNAMICS

¹⁹Alicia Medina, *The Endless Medical Advantage team meets with a Syrian family recently recovered from COVID-19 in an informal settlement in the Bekaa valley.*

●●● trusted sources in key informant interviews with Syrians, and likewise have a heavy following of Syrians in Lebanon and in the region, such as the Al-Jazeera show *Opposing Directions*.

UNHCR holds a particularly influential role for Syrian refugees. While the agency is criticized by Syrian communities in Lebanon and likewise during field work, refugees still regularly attempt to communicate with them and apply for UNHCR support. When asked why, several interviewees mentioned different versions of the same concept: if you keep calling, eventually they will have to respond. 'If UNHCR wants to make something happen they will,' mentioned a Syrian social worker who has faced challenges himself in communicating with the agency since he arrived in Lebanon. ●



5.4 IMPACT ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

Syrians cast a wide net to account for information gaps within Lebanon's disjointed information landscape. Each of the Syrians interviewed by Internews mentioned relying on multiple sources for information as opposed to one single source, while relying more immediately on sources close to home. This approach can however increase peoples' propensity for trusting rumors. A Syrian social worker interviewed by Internews hinted at the implications:

"Whether something is fake or real, a Syrian will try just to see what works. Let's try everything, they'd say. Try with the UN, try with fake Facebook pages, whoever."

Some of these behaviors are also impacted by potential security risks or insecurities when interacting with information providers. 'If a Syrian needs to interact with General Security, they'll

feel afraid,' a Syrian researcher based in Beirut mentioned to Internews. 'Even for something simple that they could do over the phone they would find a lawyer first who has connections to make sure they don't run into problems.'

While many sources were referenced within field work, reliance on a certain source does not tend to correlate with trust. "People say they don't trust the government", Internews Data Analyst mentioned. "Then when you ask where they get their information, they say the Ministry of Health." This could likewise point to the

Compliance and trust in prevention and treatment measures for COVID-19 seemed to host similar contradictions as the disconnect between trusted and relied upon sources.

diverse network of sources cited as "most trusted" by Syrian survey respondents. The COVID-19 pandemic did alter the behaviors of many in Lebanon and while compliance to mask-wearing regulations and distancing was varied, it was indeed evident during field work. However, compliance and trust in prevention and treatment measures for COVID-19 seemed to host similar contradictions as the disconnect between trusted and relied upon sources. All 78 survey participants successfully described at least two methods to protect against COVID-19, with mask-wearing and social distancing mentioned most often. However, several interviewees mentioned feeling more confident in vitamin doses and drinking tea to prevent COVID-19 over mask-wearing. **They knew that the latter was recommended by official bodies like the WHO and likewise they complied to these recommendations, but they did not hold the same type of assurance for them as some rumors.**

"In general, people [in camps] have information about COVID-19", ●●●



●●● mentioned a health care worker for a Syrian medical NGO. *"What they don't have is the information about why certain protection measures work."* Such a sentiment also hints at where top-down communications fall short of showing people the scientific research behind humanitarian recommendations.

Stigma has also had an impact on behaviors during the pandemic. For Syrian communities, the added scrutiny from authorities and Lebanese communities means they take care to wear masks and distance while among Lebanese. Many Syrians mentioned abiding by mask-wearing and distancing regulations in public but not in their own camp. In this case, the prospect of stigma could be more effective than a genuine trust in recommended prevention methods. Some Syrians have also expressed reluctance to conduct UNHCR-funded PCR tests if they suspect they have COVID-19 out of fear of raising concerns among their community and fueling perceptions of Syrians spreading

**Like everything
in Lebanon,
COVID has become
an ideology.**

the virus²⁰. This stigma likewise extends to some Lebanese communities: *"Like everything in Lebanon, COVID has become an ideology."* Mentioned the Lebanese journalist in the Chouf. *"Some of my friends have gotten shy about wearing masks because everyone will know they believe in the virus."*

Behaviors around COVID-19 are also linked to distrust in the government's motives and foreign intervention into the country. *"On an emotional level there is a sort of revolution against external involvement in Lebanon"*, mentioned the journalist. Such a perception has trickled down to even a behavior as simple as wearing a mask. ●

VI. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION



Alicia Medina for Syria Direct. Mahmoud al-Kanu walks through the debris at the destroyed entrance of his family home, where his father works as natour (concierge) in Beirut, 10/08/2020.

6.1 NATIONAL COVID-19 RESPONSE PLAN AND PARALLEL RESPONSES

Lebanon witnessed three humanitarian crisis response plans carried out in 2020. The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), implemented since 2015, directly responds to the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon who have fled the crisis in Syria. The National COVID-19 Response Plan and the Beirut Port Explosion plan were each added onto Lebanon's existing humanitarian framework in the wake of the pandemic and the August 4 Beirut port explosion. These more recent responses have incorporated several of the same humanitarian bodies involved in the LCRP over the years including local Syrian organizations, international NGOs (INGOs), and UN bodies such as UNICEF and UNHCR.

The LCRP has been one of the best funded humanitarian responses in the world ●●●

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●●● but has faced funding gaps over the years as donor fatigue and shifting political priorities have moved attention away from the Syria-related refugee response. As of November 2020, the updated 2020 LCRP plan had only covered 17 percent of its funding needs²¹. The intersectional COVID-19 response plan experienced lower but still significant funding gaps in 2020, with 72 percent of funding needs filled²².

Early in the COVID-19 response, humanitarians created and disseminated informational materials and conducted awareness raising about risks and known prevention measures for COVID-19. Similarly, the start of the pandemic saw the creation of the Health Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan by the MOPH in March 2020, where UN bodies such as UNICEF and UNCHR serve in an advisory role. The MOPH and other health agencies play a primary role in providing medical assistance, public health messaging, and reporting on the COVID-19 response. The Rafik Hariri University Hospital was also established as the leading governmental hospital responding

to COVID-19 and has been a leader in the response since the early months of the pandemic. Generally, the COVID-19 response has focused on programming related to health, risk communications, and community engagement to broadly respond to needs brought about by the pandemic whereas livelihoods support to account for the economic impacts of the pandemic has been less systematized.

Through surveys conducted by Internews and other NGOs early on in the pandemic, it is clear that Syrian refugee communities possess information about COVID-19 risks and basic protection measures. Many humanitarians conducted awareness sessions early in the pandemic on these topics and others. NGOs and UN bodies involved in the LCRP were primarily responsible for localizing communications materials created at the national level for refugee communities. In late 2020 several NGOs mentioned challenges in localizing information to the mounting challenges faced by Syrian refugees, particularly those residing in camp settings. At the same time, many Syrians also

mentioned receiving information about COVID-19 directly from TV and radio in Lebanon where information from the national COVID-19 response was regularly disseminated.

NGOs made a point to conduct awareness sessions and spread information about COVID-19 early in the pandemic, and likewise bodies several also collected data and feedback from refugees gauging their understanding of COVID-19. Such initiatives were less common in late 2020. While refugees interviewed by Internews reflected a basic understanding of COVID-19 in the late months of the year, they did seem to possess updated information, for instance some still believed that COVID-19 was simply the flu and that people could not be reinfected. Lockdowns in late 2020 and early 2021 also limited community-level engagement to only the most essential humanitarian services, forcing many humanitarian projects to go online or keep their programming on pause. The community engagement subgroup of the RCCE was likewise defining its own indicators and activity plan at the end of the 2020. ●

6.2 HUMANITARIAN ACTORS OPERATING IN LEBANON

The leading international humanitarian actors in Lebanon are widely recognized as UNHCR, WHO, UNRWA, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), the Lebanese Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Oxfam, and Médecins du Monde (MDM). Lebanese and Syrian civil society organizations (CSOs), NGOs, local authorities, and the private sector have played an important role in facilitating international programming at the local level, particularly in rural and remote areas of Lebanon.

Both the LCRP and COVID-19 responses take this multi-pronged approach to their programming. However, international institutions and NGOs approach humanitarianism—and likewise how they consume and provide information to be-



Volunteers and staff from the Syrian-led NGO Basmah and Zeitooneh supported with cleanup and reconstruction efforts in some of the worst-affected districts of Beirut after the August 4 port explosion. ²³

neficiaries—differently than grassroots, CSO-led responses to these two crises.

International humanitarians—namely INGOs and UN bodies—build trust at the local level

through recruiting and training volunteers residing in the targeted community of beneficiaries. Volunteers support in everything from health and hygiene promotion to COVID-19 messaging and protection ●●●

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●●● awareness. While this approach is useful in creating a network of trusted information sources and NGO representatives present in the community, they are limited from playing an active role in fostering long-term trust and partnerships between humanitarians and beneficiaries. Humanitarians cannot legally employ Syrian refugees in Lebanon and thus must rely on small, often symbolic forms of payment for volunteers. This also limits their ability to train and employ a skilled cohort of refugees to serve and respond to needs at the local level. Aside from funding, an Internews staff working for several years in Lebanon's NGO sector mentioned that NGOs could do more in terms of training and follow-up for community volunteers. "[Our NGO] would do a training once a year," she mentioned, "then it was up to the volunteer supervisor and their own initiative to continuously support the volunteers," as opposed to continued and more systematic forms of mentorship.

Local Syrian CSOs and NGOs inevitably have an advantage in building trust and relationships with the Syrian beneficiaries they serve by being perceived as part of

the larger Syrian community in Lebanon. The grassroots make-up of these organizations allows them to adapt to needs as they change on the ground faster than larger, more bureaucratic international organizations. Many Syrian NGOs displayed this adaptability in the wake of the August 4 Beirut port explosion: several sent teams to Beirut to support in relief efforts and gathered thousands of dollars of funds abroad through fundraising platforms like GoFundMe. However, while this make-up affords adaptability, Syrian NGOs face many of the same legal and bureaucratic challenges that Syrian refugees themselves face in Lebanon. For Syrian employees, this means maintaining a low radar about your involvement in the NGO sector. At the organizational level, it means operating in a legal gray zone that can always be cracked down upon by authorities.

The pandemic highlighted the limitations of both types of humanitarians in continuously and safely accessing remote beneficiary communities. Local NGOs and even some UNHCR programs had limited access to the communities they serve in 2020 and had to

shift their communications online and over the phone in 2020²⁴.

In some cases, the pandemic shifted refugees' attention to trusted information sources online: UNHCR mentioned gaining 90,000 followers to Lebanese communications pages in 2020 alone. This shift did little to account however for the intermittent digital connectivity of refugees financially impacted by rising food prices, restricted employment opportunities, and rising costs of internet bundles in 2020.

Both local and international humanitarians have a large presence in camp and urban settings which host a large refugee population in Lebanon, such as camps in the Bekaa valley and the northern city of Tripoli. As mentioned in [Section IV. 4.3: Main determinants and barriers to access](#), smaller, more remote informal tent settlements and urban areas outside of humanitarian hotspots tend to be more overlooked for information dissemination. Continued reliance by humanitarians on digital communications in 2021 and beyond could widen gaps between more remote or poor communities. ●

VI. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION

Workers unload WFP food aid at the Karageusian Center in Beirut, Lebanon.



6.3 RISK COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

UNICEF is leading the Risk Communications and Community Engagement (RCCE) component of the COVID-19 response. The RCCE includes approximately 40 members and coordinates

alongside government ministries, including the MOPH, the Ministry of Information, the National Disaster Risk Management Unit (DRM), municipalities, CSOs, NGOs, the WHO and other UN agencies, inter-religious groups, and academic institutions²⁵. Implementing partners including UNHCR and local NGOs which serve Syrian communities are responsible for localizing communications materials made by the RCCE at the national level²⁶.

The COVID-19 response, particularly the Risk Communications and Community Engagement component of the COVID-19 response has primarily been led by UN and international health bodies like the WHO in coordination with the MOPH and local hospitals in Lebanon. Local NGOs, oftentimes implementing partners of larger humanitarian bodies commonly present in the RCCE, were less active within this aspect of the response. ●●●

●●● Such a dynamic has further disconnected communications materials created by the RCCE from marginalized communities through a lack of involvement: Some NGOs mentioned to Internews not attending such meetings because they appeared irrelevant or unhelpful to their own programming. This difference in communications and engagement approaches has also created distance between larger and smaller humanitarians active in the COVID-19 response.

Between October 2020 and February 2021, Internews engaged directly with the RCCE and implementing partners as part of its Rooted in Trust (RIT) rumor tracking project. During that time, most RCCE communications materials were created and disseminated by UNICEF amongst implementing NGO partners and local Lebanese media partners. This information was crucial for spreading awareness about the importance of social distancing, basic protection practices, and showcasing the work of doctors and nurses responding to COVID-19. Much

Humanitarians tend to communicate information down to media and local partners in ways which limit space for partners to voice questions, concerns, and hesitations.

of this information was created by the RCCE and then disseminated down to the public through medical networks, media agencies, influencers, and NGO partners.

Despite the close connection between the traditional and non-traditional media sector and the RCCE, influencers, healthcare professionals, and the media themselves were a primary contributor to the spread of rumors about COVID-19 in 2020. This disconnect between humanitarian efforts and the networks they work with speaks to the nature of

their engagement style: Humanitarians tend to communicate information down to media and local partners in ways which limit space for partners to voice questions, concerns, and hesitations. This more informal communication could be useful in detecting early on the propensity of certain partners for spreading rumors and ensure that their concerns have been addressed openly and without judgement, an important component of helping people distance themselves from rumors.

Implementing partners were likewise responsible for localizing content created by the RCCE for the communities they work with. Some humanitarians mentioned challenges with continuously sharing information about the importance of handwashing , for instance, with communities that did not have regular access to clean water. This obstacle is not new with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Water and Hygiene sector of humanitarian programming has faced gaps for years and led to dismal conditions for water access in some refugee camps²⁷. ●

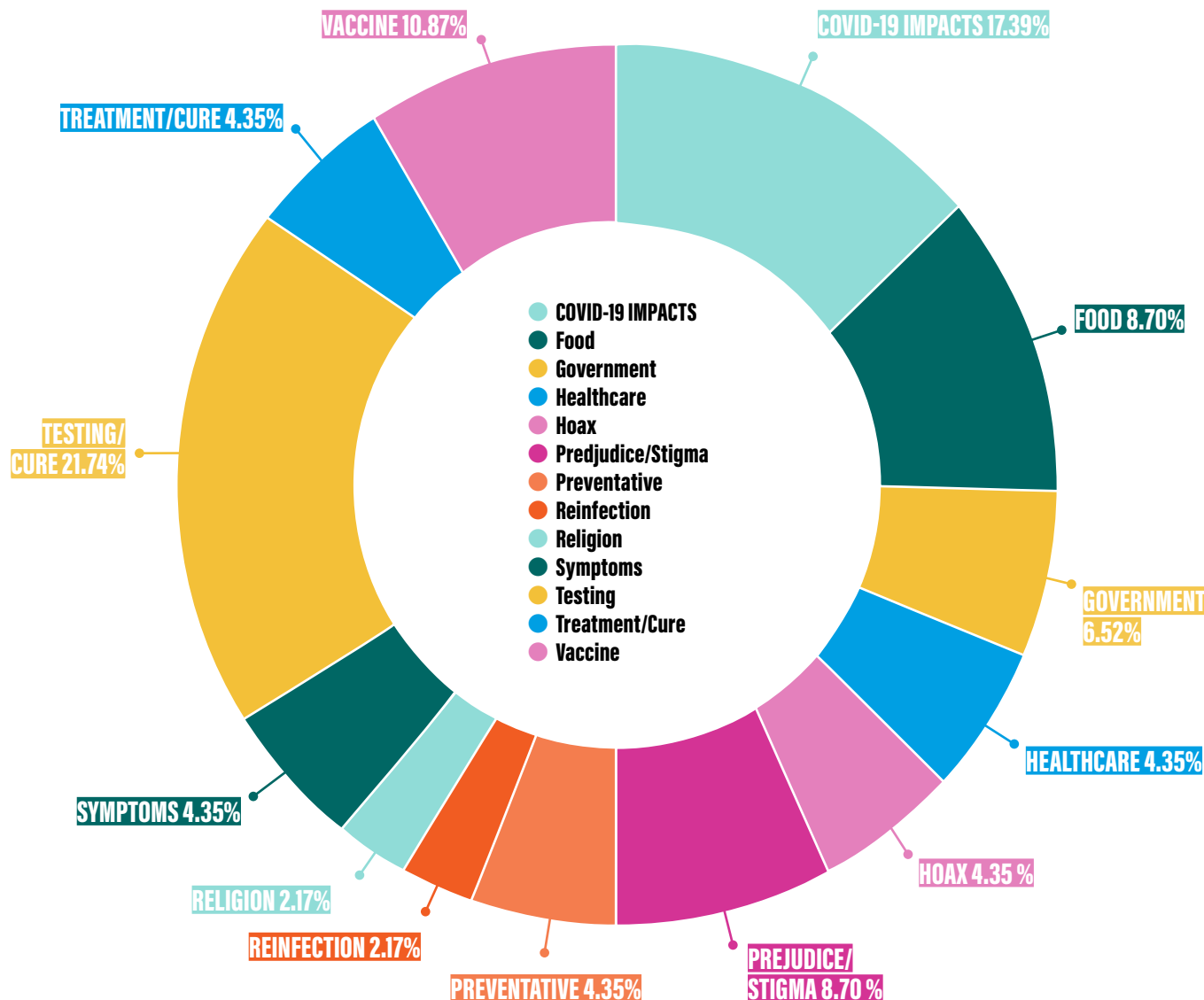
6.4 RUMOR TRACKING AND COMMUNITY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Several members of the RCCE and LCRP have established rumor tracking mechanisms to counter the spread of misinformation around COVID-19. Rumor tracking mechanisms identified through this research are as follows:

- A collaboration between the WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, and the Lebanese Ministry of Information (MOI), formed in the early months of the COVID-19 response to collect and respond to rumors about the pandemic.
- A fact-checking website created by the MOI, which links directly to misinformation reported by Lebanese news sites.
- The UN Information Center (UNIC) in Beirut gathers rumors as part of its international Verified campaign and shares findings each week on social media.
- UNHCR collects rumors gathered anecdotally through Community ●●●

Figure 13. Main themes of rumors

Data collected from refugee-led social media pages frequented by Syrians and Palestinians in Lebanon.



VI. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION

●●● Based Protection activities and volunteers residing in Syrian refugee camps. These cases are then shared with UNHCR and RCCE partners and donors through internal reporting.

■ In September 2020, Internews began collecting rumors and misinformation present on prominent social media pages in Lebanon.

These various rumor tracking mechanisms show the way rumors have a profound impact on Lebanon's information landscape. However, this information is often collected and responded to bilaterally or on social media platforms of the collecting agency, meaning that some field officers, local community leaders, and likewise beneficiaries do not have equal access to the information itself. Rumor tracking is set to continue into 2021 and indeed is timely due to the pervasiveness of vaccine-related rumors in early 2021. However, without a mutually accessible platform for rumor data, relevant responding agencies—and likewise the public themselves—risk being ill-informed.

Feedback mechanisms between beneficiaries and humanitarians also funnel between humanitarians or to upper management to impact overall programming²⁸. However, public or individualized follow-up with beneficiaries is less common unless services are directly granted. Several Syrians interviewed and present in focus group discussions with Internews mentioned raising complaints and requests for services from UNHCR for years but receiving no follow up. "I call UNHCR once every 10 days or so," mentioned one Syrian refugee residing in Beirut, "they respond and say they will submit my request. They say this to everyone but then there isn't any follow-up." A Syrian living in Lebanon since 2015 mentioned similar troubles with implementing partners of the UN:

"When I first registered with UNHCR, they told me medical support would be through an NGO partner. The NGO told me I didn't need to register, they would just call and take my information. They never called, and a year later I called to ask about my case. They told me, 'don't call us. We said we would call you.'"

Even internal referrals between humanitarians require continued follow up from the referring agency. "Organizations make a point of mentioning to beneficiaries that even if they can't help them, they can help find an NGO that can," mentioned an Internews staff who has worked previously in NGO referrals. "But a lot of NGOs don't respond or confirm they've received a referral. So a case could be super urgent but you [as the referrer] don't know what happened with it."

In cases of referrals and other information gathering activities by humanitarians, information is often collected without the information provider seeing the direct benefit of their contribution. The UNHCR representative interviewed by Internews mentioned that reoccurring complaints collected across social media are often shared with senior management, and in some cases mentioned to administrators of the pages where the complaint was mentioned. However public responses are rare. Without this sort of follow-up, the humanitarian referral and community feedback system can fuel the same complaints it aims to respond to. ●

6.5 IDENTIFIED GAPS IN INFORMATION NEEDS AND PROGRAMMING

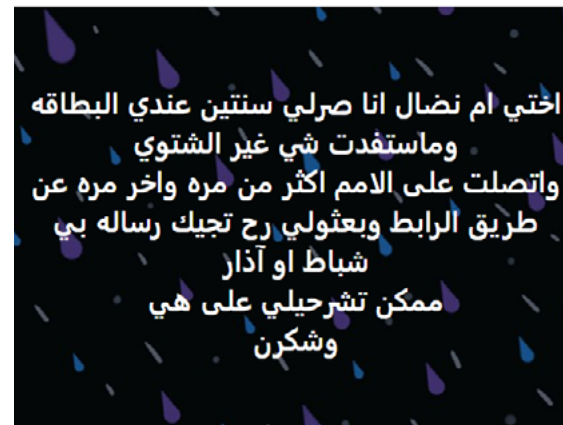
While humanitarians are adept at internal and top-down information sharing and bilateral referrals, public follow-up or public service mapping for beneficiaries themselves appears to be more limited. Likewise, while the humanitarian sector has been effective in covering needs of some of the largest and most marginalized Syrian communities residing in Lebanon, a disproportionate focus on this demographic has created a gap in humanitarian information for those Syrians on the periphery, namely smaller communities living in remote areas of the country and in places like Beirut and Mount Lebanon.

Gaps in humanitarian programming are indeed exacerbated by prolonged funding gaps and an increasingly volatile operating environment. As humanitarian needs expand in 2021, the LCRP will be

a leading force for humanitarian support as one of Lebanon's most long-standing responses. But as humanitarian programming expands to support newly vulnerable communities in Lebanon, so too will the limitations of the LCRP's approach. Longstanding issues with communication, feedback, and accountability will only worsen unless humanitarians invest in filling these gaps early on.

Smaller, grassroots organizations are disproportionately impacted by financial controls imposed by banks in light of Lebanon's current economic crisis. These organizations may be pressured to shift already limited resources to administrative and financial processing as Lebanon's financial crisis worsens, leaving gaps in programming on the ground. Larger humanitarians can buffer these smaller organizations by taking a stronger stance in their own banking processes and in engagement with government authorities.

Likewise, Lebanon's information ecosystem is at-risk of worsening alongside



Ana Souriyeh fi Lebanon's Facebook page. A group member asks for help understanding support and follow-up from the UN from other group members.

the degrading economic and health situation in the country if communications gaps are not filled. As described here, humanitarians have already laid the framework for engaging with communities and generating trust from the ground up. These mechanisms must be further reinforced, and gaps must be acknowledged transparently if humanitarians want to continue to be a trusted source for marginalized communities in Lebanon in the months and years to come. ●

VII. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS – TOWARDS A HEALTHIER INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

7.1 KEY FINDINGS ON THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE AND COMMUNITIES' INFORMATION PRACTICES

Main challenges across the information ecosystem

- The institutionalized politicization of Lebanon's media sector causes politically polarized issues such as the refugee crisis and even COVID-19 to be reported in Lebanese media with a bias. This is particularly common from media outlets which operate on TV and radio and are generally regarded as politically affiliated but host a large viewership across Lebanese and refugee communities. Digital media offers more balanced coverage but reaches smaller audiences than this more 'traditional' component of Lebanon's media sector.
- The Lebanese government has gradually disenfranchised itself from Syrian refugees

over the years while humanitarians have struggled with intermittent and incomplete funding for the refugee response. Syrians today regard these two institutions with apprehension and a pragmatic awareness of their motivations and limitations, sometimes culminating into feelings of outright distrust. These dynamics likewise push people to rely more heavily on their most immediate networks for information and support.

- Syrians must rely on a variety of sources for information they need: Very few media outlets cover information needs specific to refugees, the government's own information is considered convoluted and insufficient, and humanitarians prioritize information directly related to their programming.
- While information about NGO services is more accessible, refugees reported information gaps about resettlement, legal and administrative procedures (registering births, deaths, or updating files with the Lebanese government or UNHCR), and more recently the COVID-19 vaccine.



- To cover these information gaps, Syrians tend to rely on multiple sources as opposed to a single information source.
- Misinformation is spread throughout communities via a variety of channels. Traditional media has spread fake news about COVID-19 prevention, treatment, and the vaccine since the start of the pandemic. Fact checking and follow-up is rare on informal information sharing channels thus these too have been a conduit for rumors as identified through Internews' rumor tracking activities in late 2020 and early 2021. ●●●

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■ Because media literacy among Lebanese and Syrian communities is low, people tend to lack the tools needed to scrutinize information they receive. While the political nature of traditional Lebanese media is widely known, the scope of misinformation and disinformation within Lebanon's information landscape is more obscure.

Lebanese communities tend to rely on popular influencers to a higher degree than Syrians. Lebanese communities closely follow commentary from popular singers and artists, many of whom have shared rumors and hesitations about the COVID-19 vaccine. On the other hand, Syrians tend to be influenced by more traditional medical sources present and supporting their communities. Vaccine hesitancy was still apparent among most Syrians who contributed to this research. Vaccine hesitancy appeared to be sparked by rumors and videos showing side effects in other countries. These rumors were circulating heavily across Lebanese social media in early 2021 in the period leading up to Lebanon's vaccine rollout.

■ While official information on preventing and treating COVID-19 is generally known, some people place more trust in so far unconfirmed techniques such as drinking herbal teas, vitamin supplements, and over the counter medicines. This phenomenon shows that awareness of protocols recommended by public health experts does not impact behaviors as much as some widely circulated rumors.



Foundations to build on for a healthier information ecosystem

■ Digital, grassroots media outlets practice more universal standards for reporting compared to more traditional, often politicized media operating on TV and radio. These digital outlets have gained prominence in recent years, especially after the 2019 October Revolution.

■ Information on COVID-19 is administered through a variety of platforms and has a large reach among different communities in Lebanon, including refugee and marginalized communities. All the Syrians surveyed by Internews had at least a basic knowledge of COVID-19 and relevant protection measures.

■ Syrians have created a robust and effective system for information sharing in Lebanon and throughout the diaspora. Pages created on Facebook and WhatsApp connect people with information and first-hand experiences about government procedures, resettlement opportunities, and humanitarian services. Due to ●●●

VII. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

●●● the mutually supportive nature of these groups, respondents mentioned a high level of trust and reliance on them.

■ For both Syrian and Lebanese communities, trust is built at the community and familial level. Proximity plays an important role for trust-building, especially for Syrian communities, thus information providers in close coordination with the community tend to be more trusted than distant, official sources of information. Examples include charities and NGOs with a physical presence among Syrian communities, Syrian doctors, and networks of family and friends.

Opportunities and potential for information ecosystem health improvement

■ Information sharing mechanisms created by Syrians are a healthy component of Lebanon's information ecosystem. Support and professionalization of these networks can help reduce the risks the spread rumors and will ensure that the information shared is more accurate and effective. NGOs could, for example,

contract community volunteers to respond directly to inquiries, questions, and complaints presented on these platforms. Any such support should be paired with media literacy training for page administrators and group members. Likewise, any support to these systems should not detract from the mutually supportive nature of these groups and humanitarians should instead build the skills and capacities of group administrators rather than directly engaging on these platforms.

■ The digital media space presents opportunities for more accurate and regular coverage of issues for marginalized and refugee communities. However, financial support to digital media should be paired with training for staff and marginalized communities in media literacy to ensure that more communities can scrutinize and question the information they receive.

■ Communications about the science behind health recommendations communicated by local, trusted information providers, can increase trust and help differentiate proven facts from rumors.

Risks to mitigate and negative trends to consider in ecosystem strengthening efforts

■ Misinformation and disinformation have been a component of Lebanon's information environment since the decades-long civil war. Such dynamics have only increased in the wake of Lebanon's 2019 Revolution, the financial crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging in Lebanon's information ecosystem thus means recognizing the historical and engrained tactics of narrative-building at play.

■ The information ecosystem is at risk of further degrading in parallel with Lebanon's various compounding crises: media freedoms are in retreat in tandem with Lebanon's ensuing political crisis. Likewise, the economic crisis is having adverse effects on low-income communities as internet costs continue to increase and bandwidth qualities worsen. Systematized support to Lebanon's information ecosystem should occur in tandem with support to combat Lebanon's other crises. ●●●



7.2 KEY FINDINGS ON HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION DYNAMICS

Main challenges across the information ecosystem

- Small, remote camp settlements and Syrian refugees residing outside of humanitarian programming 'hot-spots' tend to have more limited access to information on COVID-19 and relevant services.
- Humanitarians and health practitioners have communicated with communities from the top-down since the start of the pandemic. Many COVID-19 informational materials have been disconnected from the implications of Lebanon's economic crisis on peoples' ability to distance and stay at home. Likewise, this top-down approach has disconnected health communicators, the media, and the government from the communities they

serve. Recommendations have not been practiced by the bodies recommending them and thus have fueled hesitations about the pandemic as well as public criticism.

- Many humanitarians engage with media in the same way they communicate with beneficiaries: sending prefabricated informational materials for rapid dissemination with little bilateral communication or creative contribution from media to humanitarians. This risks the creating messages that do not fit the style of the media provider and feels inauthentic to the audience.
- Complaints and service requests are largely kept internal to the organization or to the larger humanitarian response, leaving little space for public accountability and follow up. This lack of transparency also complicates trust for humanitarian organizations.
- While information about services is available on NGO websites and communicated through informational

handouts and awareness sessions, people rely heavily on NGOs to refer them to the relevant service provider, rather than having direct access to service mapping at a regional or national level.

Foundations to build on for a healthier information ecosystem

- Humanitarians play a leading role in providing and gathering information from the Syrian refugee community about topics such as service provision, health and hygiene, and COVID-19. NGOs and charities were regularly cited as a primary, trusted sources on these topics.
- International NGOs and UN bodies rely on a cohort of volunteers from the Syrian refugee community to provide information and capture feedback, investment of time and resources into building relationships with communities they serve.
- Syrian NGOs have an added advantage in building trust and establishing strong relationships with Syrians as they are perceived as a supportive ...

VII. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

●●● component of the larger Syrian community in Lebanon. Likewise, the sustained presence and material support from Syrian NGOs in light of stop-and-go programming from larger humanitarians creates stronger relationships between beneficiary communities and Syrian NGOs.

Opportunities and potential for information ecosystem health improvement

■ Creating service mapping which is available to the community can save resources and time on service referral. Likewise, it will allow this information to be a component of Syrians' own information sharing practices across their community.

■ Further institutionalizing the role of community volunteers will help reinforce trust that may have eroded in recent years and help people know that humanitarians have their best interest at heart. This can start by preparing volunteers to not only collect and disseminate information relevant to a particular service, but helping

them obtain the skills and knowledge to be more general sources of information and support for their community.

■ Local NGOs and CSOs can play a key role in collecting perceptions and questions about COVID-19 that can inform communications materials and help reduce the spread of rumors related to the pandemic and vaccine response.

Risks to mitigate and negative trends to consider in ecosystem strengthening efforts

■ As humanitarian programming comes to encompass new communities impacted by Lebanon's economic crisis, information gaps and long-standing complaints are likely to only increase unless communications gaps are filled.

■ These gaps will be increasingly connected to social tensions between Syrians and Lebanese communities in new ways due to the rapid degradation of economic prospects for even previously middle-income Lebanese communities. ●

7.3 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

For everyone:

■ **Create space** for listening to the questions, concerns, and rumors present in different communities. The rapidly deteriorating situation in Lebanon means that needs and information changes quickly and should be combatted with regular and consistent listening sessions in camp settings, urban and rural communities, and online. Such engagement from journalists can help make media coverage more locally relevant, and for humanitarians can improve communications materials and build trust between communities and information providers.

■ **Invest in media literacy.** Most communities in Lebanon today are inundated with information but lack the tools needed to question it or fact-check it. This combination of overabundance and low literacy has adverse impacts on news consumption and likewise humanitarian programming, and should be addressed from multiple sectors to acknowledge the varied ●●●

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knock-on effects. Several Lebanese and Syrian NGOs are well-positioned to provide training in media literacy and can train NGO staff, community volunteers, journalists, and community members alike in the fundamentals of media literacy. Likewise, such efforts could be jointly executed by media and humanitarians to bridge gaps between these two sectors and create a space for communication and engagement between humanitarians, media and the community all in one space.

For humanitarians:

Leverage preexisting trusted networks and channels

- Support community volunteers and

field officers to become key sources of information and feedback between humanitarians and the community: invest in capacity building and sustained financial support for these networks to ensure they can support their communities in a variety of ways and for the long-term.

Communicate “with” rather than “to” refugee communities

- **Acknowledge the limitations** for some refugee and marginalized communities in practicing recommendations shared with them: suggesting things which are impossible at the local level will only cause frustration and generate distrust. This is directly pertinent for health and hygiene information, but also includes recommen-

dations which are difficult in light of Lebanon’s economic crisis such as distancing and stay-home recommendations.

- Rather than creating one-size-fits all communications materials, **help local organizations and information providers produce as locally relevant materials as possible.** This can start by creating more flexible mechanisms for information sharing: Connecting small NGOs and grassroots media with health experts to discuss topics like the vaccine rollout or relevant research can help build skills and improve information dissemination more than prefabricated communications materials. Likewise, create materials alongside trusted information providers such as Syrian journalists, Syrian NGOs, women-led networks, and youth groups to ensure information is more effectively localized to the situation at the community level.

Actively tackle misinformation and rumors through a mix of short term and longer-term actions

- Establish a public-facing, collaborative rumor tracking system acces-



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sible by NGO staff, local researchers, the media, and the public.

■ **Strengthen information sharing mechanisms** used by refugee and marginalized communities through skill-building and support to page administrators and trusted information providers. Connect these administrators with expert opinions in your organization to build knowledge of topics relevant to refugees and to create a space for them to pose questions and communicate concerns coming from the community. Likewise, groups collecting rumors should set up systems for regularly notifying administrators about new rumors and localized recommendations for how to combat them.

Consolidate trust in humanitarian actors

The relatively high level of trust many NGOs enjoy is a critical asset but should be leveraged to make sure refugees have trusted information on topics outside of NGO programming.

■ **Help communities better understand referral procedures and follow-up**

timelines, aid selection criteria, and why information is being collected from them. When information is collected for donors or partners, also create materials to deliver these findings to the people who provided the information. This will help combat 'survey fatigue' and give communities the opportunity to use the information to contribute to community-led solutions to problems. It can also be facilitated through Syrian-led information sharing platforms on Facebook and WhatsApp which are trusted by the community.

■ **Create service mapping accessible to the community** in different written, visual, and audio formats. If this information is made available at the regional and national level, Syrians can better serve as information sources for their extended networks throughout Lebanon, allowing the information to reach wider audiences.

For media:

■ **Recognize the magnitude of misinformation** in Lebanon and the need for due diligence in selecting 'expert perspectives.' Recognize the potentially harmful role of some social media

influencers and healthcare professionals in spreading misinformation and disinformation. Cite medical sources directly involved with the COVID-19 Vaccine Committee and the broader COVID-19 response.

■ For media start-ups, **find ways to reach traditionally politicized audiences and marginalized communities** who may not usually have access to your reporting. This can start with listening sessions between journalists and key members of marginalized communities to brainstorm with them how these communities can be more adequately represented in reporting and to identify ways to deliver your content on platforms preferred by these groups. This engagement is also an important step in preventative media outreach to ensure that marginalized communities at risk of experiencing social tensions are considered when reporting on topics like the vaccine roll-out and the economic crisis.

■ **Invest in fact-checking and media literacy practices for your staff** and find ways that these skills can also ●●●

VII. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



be disseminated to viewership such as through informational materials and press releases.

For Syrian and Lebanese civil society:

- **Invest in media literacy training** for the communities you work with. Lean on young people and women from the community who can be important support mechanisms for the elderly, female heads of households, and other integral parts of the community.

- **Engage with the media sector** where security sensitivities allow, to encourage accurate and respectful representations of marginalized communities.

- **Leverage the trust you possess at the community level** to raise awareness about the prevalence and risks of rumors. While rumors about COVID-19 might not directly impact your current programming, they hint at information and trust breakdowns which could have adverse impacts on other areas of programming in the future, such as cash assistance and vaccination campaigns.

- **Establish communications systems with larger humanitarian organizations** which helps you get better access to expertise and facilitate feedback to encourage these bodies to be more responsive to localized needs and perceptions.

For donors:

- **Incentivize bilateral information sharing** between humanitarians, the media and local communities. Identify with partners areas where added transparency can strengthen interventions, such as in funding and programmatic adaptations sparked by community feedback.

- Some of the most trusted sources of information and support to marginalized com-

munities—namely grassroots and community-led initiatives and Syrian NGOs—are disproportionately impacted by currency controls and liquidity challenges caused by Lebanon's current financial crisis. **Reduce barriers of entry to funding for these smaller, grassroots organizations** to afford them the financial and administrative flexibility to navigate the economic crisis in the medium term

- **Fund targeted reporting projects on issues for marginalized communities** grappling with Lebanon's compounding crises. This reporting could be more effective if it also builds the capacity of refugee-led media and Syrian NGOs to play this role for their community in the long-term. ●



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Ganaëlle Tilly created the graphic design and the sketches for this report and formatted the report.

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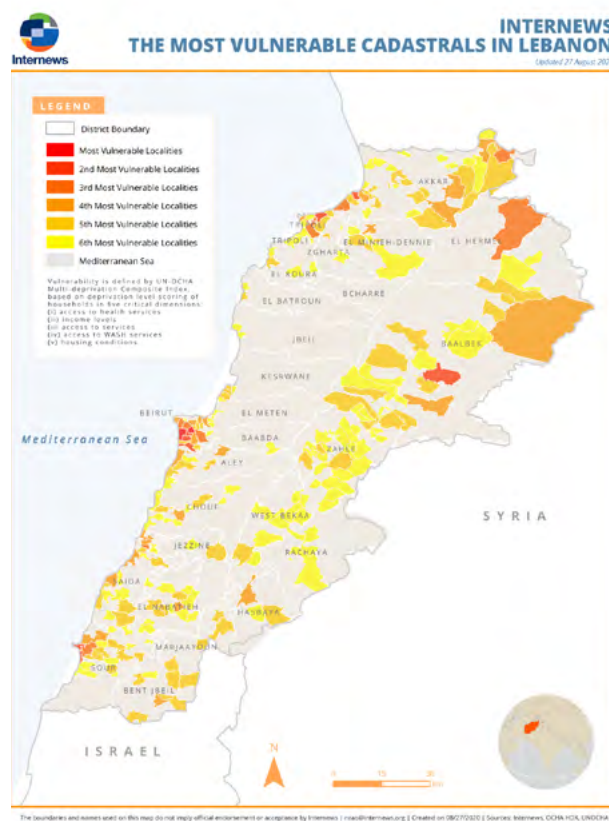
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Peeling the onion:
a multi-layered infodemic
and its impact on trust
for Syrians in Lebanon

AN INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT BY INTERNEWS

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