

# 'WE FELT LIKE BEGGARS':

ASSISTANCE, RECOVERY AND SOCIAL TENSIONS  
AFTER THE BEIRUT EXPLOSIONS

RESULTS FROM A QUALITATIVE WHATSAPP SURVEY, FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS  
AND INTERVIEWS IN BEIRUT



## Acknowledgments

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# Executive Summary

2020 was a horrific year for Lebanon. The COVID-19 pandemic, the financial crisis and the Beirut Port explosions in August 2020 compounded pre-existing economic and political woes and put additional pressure on social stability. In January 2021, UNDP Lebanon commissioned a research study centred around a qualitative WhatsApp survey to analyse the impact of the Beirut Port explosions and the immediate response on intra-Lebanese and inter-communal tension dynamics. The WhatsApp survey adds an in-depth, people-centred and localized perspective on how the post-explosion response has shaped community relationships. This method was particularly valuable, as the global pandemic has impeded face-to-face-research. Overall, 260 people (Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian) participated in the WhatsApp survey. We also conducted Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with aid providers and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with local inhabitants to triangulate data from different sources. Based on this research, the report analyses and compares perceptions of the effectiveness and fairness of the post-explosion response between Beirut neighbourhoods at the centre of the response (Karantina) and those that have received much less attention (Zoukak Al Blat and Khandak Al Ghamik).

## Key Findings

### Impact of the Explosions and Needs Assessments

- **The explosions generated a collective trauma, which affected everyone, whether or not they suffered physical and material damage.** The ubiquity of references to ‘trauma’ and ‘anxiety’ in the survey suggests the importance of mainstreaming psychological support in the response. Beirut’s residents are still in survival mode and struggle to meet their daily needs not least because of the collapse of the Lebanese Pound. The future has become unplannable and people expect life to get worse.
- **Needs assessments were neither coordinated nor conflict sensitive and raised questions about the accountability of the response.** Most survey respondents expressed their frustration about the manner in which needs assessments were conducted. Organizations did not coordinate needs assessments leading to both duplications and gaps. Data collectors were not sensitive to the fact that people were still in shock after the explosions. Respondents felt that needs assessments were not only intrusive but also a waste of time, as they did not seem to inform aid distribution systems. Many people never heard back from the organizations that visited them, which has worsened their perceptions of the UN, NGOs and public institutions.
- **The abrupt decline in aid since the beginning of 2021 is feeding anxieties and tensions as vulnerable communities are still struggling to meet daily needs.** The survey suggests that partners should continue to combine emergency relief and long-term recovery to ensure the response is conflict sensitive.

### Emergency and Recovery Assistance

- **Chaotic and uncoordinated aid distribution fuelled distrust of UN, NGOs and local intermediaries.** The response relied disproportionately on local intermediaries for creating beneficiary lists and distributing assistance rather than setting up more accountable neighbourhood committees. This created pathways for local political rationales to shape aid allocation as well as for the diversion of aid for sale in local markets. The fact that much assistance was handed out on the street also led to misallocations. Survey respondents overwhelmingly felt that door-to-door assistance would have been a more conflict sensitive and dignified method of distributing assistance especially as skirmishes often erupted around street distribution sites.

- **Perceptions of unfair assistance and misuse created conflicts between neighbours.** Beirutis were less concerned about the quantity of aid and more about its distribution. Unclear criteria, especially for financial assistance and house reconstruction/repair created suspicions of nepotism, political and sectarian bias. Respondents saw or heard that neighbours, who they judged to be equally or less vulnerable, received such assistance. They also expressed frustration about neighbours who hoarded or did not share assistance. Clear communication of criteria for assistance might have defused some of these tensions between neighbours.

### Intra- and Inter-community Relationships

- **Tensions between Beirut neighbourhoods revolved around the targeting of less vulnerable areas.** Residents of Khandak Al Ghamik and Zoukak Al Blat felt that their areas had fallen through the cracks of the response. They were particularly frustrated about the prioritization of areas that they perceived to be significantly less vulnerable such as Ashrafieh, Gemmayze, and Mar Mikhael. While Karantina residents were concerned about sectarian biases in aid distribution, residents of Khandak Al Ghamik suspected political interference with aid.
- **Lebanese solidarity cushioned the shock of the explosions but that effect is wearing off.** WhatsApp respondents talked enthusiastically about a new form of ‘people’s solidarity’ that cuts across old divides (‘the catastrophe unites us’). They especially recalled the immediate aftermath of the explosion when ordinary people came in droves from all over Lebanon to help those in need. Some of this initial solidarity has worn off as the distribution of assistance, the economic crisis and the pandemic created distance and distrust between people. Tensions around access to aid and basic commodities are becoming more pressing in this new economic climate.
- **Lebanese/Syrian tensions were of secondary importance in the WhatsApp survey.** Lebanese respondents sometimes complained that Syrians who did not live in affected areas received assistance. Syrians retorted that certain types of assistance were designated as ‘Lebanese only’, and insisted that they, too, have been affected by the explosions. Syrian/Lebanese tensions eased somewhat after the explosions not least because Syrians also participated in the outpouring of collective solidarity and mutual aid.

These findings suggest that the response itself exacerbated tensions and created additional social and psychological harm. Many survey respondents experienced needs assessments and aid allocation as humiliating and intrusive, which explains the title of this report. They did not feel included or consulted in the design of the response, which contributed to perceptions of unfair aid distribution. That said, respondents’ assessments of what exactly went wrong in the response differed with different implications for social stability:

- **‘Structuralizing’ or ‘personalizing’ injustice leads to different social stability outcomes:** Broadly speaking, two tendencies were noticed: there were those survey respondents who perceived injustice as structural and those who personalized injustice. The former located the problem with the distributors, the latter with affected populations. The former blamed corruption, bureaucracies and power structures, the latter blamed ‘greedy and selfish people’ including neighbours and friends for not sharing assistance. These two tendencies create tensions at different societal levels. ‘Structuralizing injustice’ may lead to political mobilizations across traditional divides against the political system (e.g., national protests, strikes), while ‘personalizing injustice’ can spark local conflicts and racist attacks.
- **Good macro-level, bad micro-level relationships?:** Curiously, it seems that the explosions and the response created better relationships/perceptions on the macro level and worse relationships on the micro level. Beirut’s residents celebrate national unity and endurance while eyeing their neighbours suspiciously. This is exactly the opposite of what happened in previous WhatsApp surveys of Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians where people were more willing to use negative national stereotypes while applying more nuanced analysis when speaking about neighbours, friends and people they interact with on a daily basis.



## Introduction

2020 was a horrific year for Lebanon. In addition to the impact of the Syrian refugee situation and the political destabilization following the October 2019 protests, the COVID-19 pandemic, financial upheaval and the Beirut Port explosions in August 2020 compounded pre-existing economic and political woes. The World Bank estimates that over half of the population will fall under the poverty line in 2021<sup>1</sup>. These socio-economic hardships are putting pressure on social stability. A UNDP/ARK perception survey conducted in the immediate aftermath of the explosions in August 2020 found that the impact of the port explosions accelerated and intensified pre-existing tension dynamics and trends.<sup>2</sup> Positive relations between communities in Lebanon witnessed a sharp decline, reaching their lowest point recorded in August 2020 since the tension monitoring began in 2017. Specifically, those citing negative relations between Lebanese groups in their area sharply increased from 4% in July 2018 to 40% in August 2020. These perceptions improved in the latest perception survey in April 2021 to 29% but it remains evident that social dynamics between communities, including between Lebanese are shifting whereas drivers are becoming less political, more socio-economic in nature and region specific. While the tension monitoring system, set up under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), initially focused on tensions between host communities and refugees, the multiple shocks of 2019 and 2020 have required an expansion to also include monitoring and in-depth analysis of tension dynamics within the Lebanese society more generally.

This study focuses on the impact of the Beirut Port explosions and subsequent immediate response on community relationships and tension dynamics in the city. It analyses how assistance and aid distribution have impacted inter- and intra-community relationships. It provides a qualitative understanding of the tensions landscape, as well as lessons learned on conflict sensitive response planning. It assesses the post-explosion response in three different neighbourhoods in Beirut: Karantina, Zoukak Al Blat and Khandak Al Ghamik.

Karantina is a low-income area that was heavily damaged by the Beirut Port explosions. At the time of the explosions, it comprised approximately 700 to 800 households.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> World Bank (2021).

<sup>2</sup> UNDP/ARK, Perception Survey Dashboard (2021).

<sup>3</sup> UNDP, 'Leave No One Behind' (2020).

It is a cross-sectarian, multi-national area including migrant workers, Syrian refugees and impoverished Lebanese families. The explosion severely damaged the public hospital in Karantina that has served vulnerable populations in the area. While immediate response efforts have focused on Karantina, this has not necessarily eased tensions in the area. A tension task force held in August 2020 suggested that conflicts erupted around aid distribution, especially between Lebanese and non-Lebanese groups (e.g. Syrians).<sup>4</sup>

Khandak Al Ghamik is an impoverished neighbourhood in central Beirut with a majority Shia community along what used to be the Green Line between East and West Beirut. Its residents have long feared rent increases, developers and gentrification due to the neighbourhood's central location. Khandak Al Ghamik is often portrayed in the media as a hub of young male 'trouble-makers'.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Karantina, Khandak Al Ghamik has been largely neglected in the response which has fuelled discontent and the perception that non-Christian areas have been marginalized in the immediate response and recovery efforts.<sup>6</sup>

Zoukak Al Blat is adjacent to Khandak Al Ghamik and similar in its socio-economic composition but with a more mixed demographic. It used to be a wealthy part of Beirut with many impressive Ottoman era heritage buildings but became a low-income area after the civil war.<sup>7</sup> Similar to Khandak Al Ghamik, Shia communities fleeing Israeli attacks in the South settled here. It also has received less attention in the post-explosion response due to a widespread assumption that areas not in the immediate vicinity of the port were less affected.

The rationale of comparing one area that has received (considerable) support (Karantina) to two areas which have not (Khandak Al Ghamik and Zoukak Al Blat) is to better understand how perceptions of the fairness and effectiveness of assistance relate to intra- and inter-community tensions. The comparison also allows to explore the role of other factors that differ between the three neighbourhoods (such as sectarian, national and political composition), as well as those that all three areas have in common (such as poverty, unemployment, and marginalization). As international partners consider the criteria for the geographical targeting of their recovery

efforts, it is important to probe the social stability implications of targeting strategies that primarily focus on the port explosions at the expense of a more holistic assessment of vulnerability and inclusivity.

### Methodology and Limitations

This report's analysis relies on three research components: a qualitative WhatsApp survey of Beirut residents living in the three selected areas, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIs). Qualitative research produces nuanced insights into social relationships and perceptions in times of upheaval through a close analysis of people's stories and ideas.<sup>8</sup>

As such, it helps to identify shifts in tension dynamics before they are picked up by quantitative surveying while also offering a deeper reading of such quantitative data. We conducted the research between 19 January and 3 March 2021, adjusting our research approach in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic made WhatsApp surveying an even more pertinent research tool as it allowed us to stay in close contact with research participants over several weeks while avoiding the public health risks of face-to-face research. With the onset of the pandemic, people around the world relied even more on WhatsApp for daily communication with friends and families, as well as with colleagues, employers and customers. A study by Kantar Consultancy suggests that WhatsApp usage saw a 40% increase beginning in late March 2020, as people started to work from home and reduced social contacts.<sup>9</sup>

Our survey tapped into every-day, informal WhatsApp communication using text and voice messages to ask survey questions and receive people's replies. The WhatsApp survey was designed around three principles:

- 1) To foster a bottom-up, people-centred analysis: the survey centres on the knowledge and perspective of Beirut's inhabitants while respecting their time and commitments. Survey participants can choose what they want to share with us, how (voice, text message, video or photos) and when. Some replied immediately and others on the way home from work or after bringing

children to bed.

- 2) To ask open-ended, general questions that are less intrusive and reduce biases in the analysis. For example, asking people directly about 'sectarian tensions' runs the risk of exaggerating the significance of these tensions in people's lives while also obscuring other dynamics that may be underlying drivers. Open-ended questions, on the other hand, create space for participants to provide their own analysis in their own words.
- 3) To protect participants' data: As no device is impregnable, the best way to protect personal data is to collect only data that is strictly necessary for the analysis. Following this principle, we collected as little personal data as possible. We also kept access to the phone and laptop on which the data was stored strictly restricted. As concerns over WhatsApp's new data policy spread in January 2021, we considered moving the survey to the messaging app Signal instead. Eventually, we decided to stick with WhatsApp due to its wide coverage and popularity in Lebanon, but also because the survey was completed before the new data policy came into force in May 2021.

UNDP ran the WhatsApp survey from 19 January to 9 February 2021 coinciding with a restrictive lockdown in Beirut. To recruit participants, we sent SMS messages to an anonymized data base of mobile phone numbers from the selected neighbourhoods inviting inhabitants to participate in the survey. Overall, 260 people opted into the survey and registered their consent with 55% of respondents identifying as Lebanese and 45% as Syrians. 69% identified as men and 31% as women. 77% of respondents were based in Karantina, 18% in Zoukak Al Blat and 3% in Khandak Al Ghamik. 19% indicated that they are unemployed, 8% identified as homemakers and 13% daily workers, meaning that 40% of the survey participants had no or irregular income. We asked 13 questions over three weeks and participants replied when it suited them with either a voice or a text message. All data was then translated from Arabic into English.

The WhatsApp survey adds an in-depth, localized and bottom-up perspective on how the

multiple crises (especially, the port explosions) have shaped Beirutis' perceptions of different societal actors and their relationships with each other. It sheds light on the everyday, personal, social and psychological repercussions of the explosions beyond economic measures such as the poverty and unemployment rate. It also provides a different soundscape as we hear the voices of survey respondents, crying babies, shouting family members, as well as the background noises of a wounded city. In this way, the WhatsApp survey centers human experience and people's knowledge, which are often eclipsed in technical assessments and quantitative surveys.

The WhatsApp survey also has important limitations. As most qualitative research, it does not statistically represent the areas of the study. The survey results are more pertinent for Karantina than for Zoukak Al Blat and especially for Khandak Al Ghamik given that 77% of respondents resided in Karantina. Women's voices were also underrepresented in the survey. The FGDs and KIs were designed to compensate for this imbalance and the report aims at an equitable representation of gender perspectives. As people's narratives were free flowing and spilled across questions, the report refrains from quantifying trends (e.g., 'a third of women said x'). Finally, researching vulnerable populations raises ethical questions especially as the survey may (again) raise expectations of concrete assistance that have been frequently disappointed in the past.<sup>10</sup> We tried to mitigate these concerns through a very clear introductory message that explained the purpose of the survey and by compensating survey participants with 10USD mobile phone recharge cards for their time and data use.

Complementing the WhatsApp data, we conducted four FGDs in Karantina and Khandak Al Ghamik on 17 and 19 February 2021 to gauge local inhabitants' perceptions of the immediate response as well as possible resentments against inhabitants of other areas.<sup>11</sup> In addition, two virtual FGDs with the UNDP teams in Karantina and 11 virtual KIs with NGOs, local authorities and volunteers, who provide services in the three areas, were conducted to ascertain the perspectives of different response actors.

4 BML Tension Task Force, August 2020.

5 Wehbe (2017).

6 BML Tension Task Force, August 2020.

7 Chedid et al. (2012).

8 See Ullrich (2019a) and Ullrich (2019b).

9 Kantar (2020).

10 Ullrich (2019b).

11 We held one female FGD (6 women per group discussion) and one male FGD (6 men per group discussion) in each locality. They took place in large spaces to facilitate social distancing and fully respected the sanitary standards of COVID-19 prevention directives.



## 1. The Impact of the Explosions and the Immediate Response

Beirutis were hit by multiple crises simultaneously. The port explosions happened when people could least absorb its effects, as severe financial disruptions and a global pandemic had already eroded their economic and psychological coping mechanisms. Our respondents described the explosions in terms of three effects. First, the explosions wrought physical and emotional damage as more than 200 people lost their lives and many more suffered injuries.

Second, the explosions caused material damage as Beirutis lost their homes, their furniture, their work material and their jobs. A few of our respondents used to work at the port and are now out of work. Material damage varied significantly between people but so did their capacity to absorb it. Many WhatsApp respondents had already incurred debt or lost their jobs before the explosions and were unable to cope with yet another crisis. The massive devaluation of the Lebanese pound skyrocketed costs of living, pushing many below the poverty line. They could barely afford everyday necessities such as food, baby milk or medicine, not to speak of replacing broken furniture or kitchen appliances, which in an import-dependent country are now many times more expensive than when they were bought in the first place.

Third, the explosion generated a collective trauma affecting everyone whether or not they also suffered physical and material damage. The use of psychological language was ubiquitous in the survey ('Lebanon is like a psychiatric hospital'), as people reported suffering from depression, stress, exhaustion and anxiety. As a male Syrian baker, 33 years old, from Karantina put it:

“Here in Karantina, everyone is worried and traumatized. A while after the explosion, there was smoke in the air, so we directly took our families out of the neighbourhood,

*afraid that another explosion might happen. As a father, sometimes I don't sleep at night, for I'm always worried about my kids, so I keep checking up on them during the night.*

Many WhatsApp respondents feared that another explosion could happen. Any unexpected noise, such as the roaring of fighter jets, triggers panic especially among children: *'We're literally living in trauma due to the explosion. Whenever we hear the sounds of fighter planes, we immediately feel terrorized, and we hold our bags to run away, but we don't know where to go.'* For others, the explosion has become a metaphor for a new mode of successive shocks: *'COVID-19 is another kind of explosion, which we're living on a daily basis. The explosion happened and ended, but COVID-19 and the difficulties of life that we're facing are everlasting.'*<sup>12</sup>

When we conducted the survey, our respondents were still in survival mode. This no doubt also related to the timing of the survey, which took place as Lebanon entered a total lockdown with a 24-hour curfew to curb the spread of COVID-19.

“Our main issue is the inability to go to work during the lockdown, one respondent told us, 'we need to work in order to be able to pay for our needs. We don't have money or food.'<sup>13</sup>

People worried about paying rent this month and providing for their children's needs tomorrow. Their time horizon shrunk to daily survival:

“In this country, we live day by day, because we're always afraid of tomorrow. We're afraid that the next

<sup>12</sup> Lebanese Housewife, 57 years old, Karantina.  
<sup>13</sup> Lebanese, female, Zoukak al-Blat

*day we won't be able to buy food or medicine. We're afraid that the next day August 4th will be repeated.*<sup>14</sup>

Given these continued struggles, the scaling down of the emergency response is worrisome. Both local aid workers and survey respondents reported a significant decrease of the Beirut response since the beginning of 2021. Most NGOs have cut down their humanitarian operations or withdrew altogether due to shrinking funds. Those who remain will be working on medium and long term interventions through the 'Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework' (3RF), an initiative of the World Bank, EU and UN to implement recovery and reconstruction efforts (World Bank, 2020). This decline in assistance is fuelling considerable anxieties as people are still struggling with daily survival and worry about the lifting of subsidies for essential goods. Response partners should consider integrating emergency relief and long-term recovery rather than transitioning from one to the other to ensure no one is left behind.<sup>15</sup>

The future has become unplannable and has even disappeared from the calculus of many Beirutis as they expect life to get worse. Some respondents expressed the idea that Lebanon was effectively undergoing a negative development. *'The explosion, along with COVID-19, have taken the country 50 years back'*, a Lebanese taxi driver from Karantina said. This was understood not as a temporary setback but as a turning point:

“*Farewell to Lebanon. What future are you talking about? Everything has returned to level zero in Lebanon. Tourism, finance, and agriculture were all destroyed. We have nothing left in this country, and the prices of goods are increasing day after day, and the government is going to stop all the support it's giving to traders. How would we have a future when we have such a huge number of poor families? Lebanon was way better in the 60s.*”

*We've never suffered such horrible crises in Lebanon. We're living in a very dark tunnel, with no source of hope or light. Farewell to Lebanon. It was a great country. It's all the fault of politicians.*<sup>16</sup>

Many respondents could not imagine their future in Lebanon despite their attachment to the country and expressed their hope to pursue their lives elsewhere. A young bank employee pondered: *'Honestly, when I think about my future, I don't picture myself in Lebanon. As long as the main interest of our politicians is themselves, and not their people, I'd never think about a future in Lebanon. Unfortunately, I'm picturing my future outside Lebanon.'*<sup>17</sup>

Others hope for a better future where lessons from the current crises will have been learnt and better ways of caring for people's needs will be found:

“*Only God knows about the future. We hope that there will be safety, and we hope that they will form a government, and provide the elderly people with insurance and monthly salaries. We need a system to care for the elderly people who are dying on the streets in this country.*”<sup>18</sup>

Worryingly, Lebanese respondents talked about their futures in similarly bleak terms as Syrian and Palestinian respondents did in previous WhatsApp surveys we conducted with many insisting that there is no future for them and their children in Lebanon.

## 1.1. The Immediate Aftermath of the Explosions

This section will shed light on the immediate aftermath of the explosions. This was a time of contradictions; it was a time of loss, shock and abandonment as well as strong solidarity and support. In the days following the explosions, people from across Lebanon rushed into the most affected Beirut neighbourhoods to support those in need. These areas, including Ashrafieh, Geitawi, Mar Mikhael, Gemmayze and Bourj Hammoud, were mostly identified

based on their proximity to the port and widely circulated images of destruction of well-known streets and buildings. While some NGOs and volunteers also visited Karantina, there was overall a delay in supporting Karantina due to limited media coverage of the area.<sup>19</sup> Youth volunteers and local organizations drove the interventions during the first couple of weeks. Ad-hoc emergency initiatives such as backfill removal, and medical services for the injured and people at-risk were hastily put in place in order to address the multiple needs that the explosion has caused. These early, self-organized, people-centred efforts crucially shaped perceptions of social relationships in Lebanon, as will be illustrated later in the report.

## 1.2. Needs Assessments and Consultations

As international and local organizations started to manage the response, they began to conduct household needs assessments in affected areas. The survey asked whether people affected by the explosions were consulted in needs assessments and whether these consultations were appropriate or added undue pressure. Most respondents expressed their frustration about needs assessments, observing first of all, that their implementation was chaotic as many organizations visited the same household multiple times while other households were ignored.

“*A million organizations visited us, asked too many questions about our lives, and took many photos, but we never received anything from them all,*” a 62-year old Lebanese woman from Karantina told us, echoing wider sentiments expressed in the survey. A Lebanese man added, *'yes, the long questionnaires added pressure on people. Also, some of those who consulted us were liars, and they wasted our time for nothing in return. All of us are fed up with useless questionnaires.'*<sup>20</sup>

Second, many people felt that the needs assessments were intrusive. Multiple organizations collected a lot of personal data

(‘they even asked about menstrual pads’), entered homes without giving prior notice and lacking appropriate safety measures, and took photos inside the home and of children. A Syrian respondent from Zoukak Al Blat complained, *'we gave information to people we didn't know, and we let them enter our house, and we caught COVID-19 from them, but we didn't benefit from their questionnaires at all.'*<sup>21</sup>

Some people felt that needs assessments were not only useless but even harmful, causing secondary traumatization. Pain was used to raise money for relief organizations but those who suffered had little say in how their pain was represented. A Syrian respondent from Karantina recounted:

“*The most horrible thing is that we spent so much time in front of their cameras, talking about the painful and horrid moments of the blast, remembering the same painful memories over and over again ... My kids would ask me why they are taking photos of them, and why are they asking them about their wounds, while the wounds are too obvious and need no explanation.*”<sup>22</sup>

Others felt like they were being investigated as data collectors interrogated them for 45 minutes to an hour, asking them to prove damages which were evident. It made those affected feel as if they were lying, as if they were not really harmed. Some respondents expressed that the way needs assessments were conducted made them feel like beggars. *'We were humiliated when we took aid from organizations, we felt we were beggars, as though we weren't affected by the blast'*, a 54-year old Lebanese woman from Karantina observed.

Third, needs assessments were not necessarily consultative. In the words of one Lebanese respondent:

“*No, they didn't consult anyone. They only asked about things that they wanted to know, and not what we wanted to say.*”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Lebanese Mechanic, male, 33 years old, Karantina.

<sup>15</sup> UNDP, 'Leave No One Behind' (2020).

<sup>16</sup> Lebanese, male, 70 years old, unemployed, Zoukak Al Blat.

<sup>17</sup> Lebanese bank employee, male, 35 years old, Karantina.

<sup>18</sup> Lebanese, male, unemployed, 54 years old, Karantina.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with local aid worker.

<sup>20</sup> Lebanese, male, Karantina.

<sup>21</sup> Syrian, male, 42 years old, Zoukak Al Blat.

<sup>22</sup> Syrian employee at a butchery, male, 51 years old, Karantina

<sup>23</sup> Lebanese, male, unemployed, 34 years old, Karantina.

People had to fill in questionnaires, but were not consulted on what assistance would be appropriate and how it should be distributed. This created the impression that they were only feeding information into a pre-determined agenda that is decided elsewhere. The voices of those affected did not sufficiently inform the design and implementation of the response. Needs assessments that did not only extract information but also provided some form of support were perceived more positively. One Lebanese woman told us:

“No, they didn’t consult us; they only asked us some questions. They also sent us psychologists, and they were really good. The psychologists have helped my kids to heal.”<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, and this was the crux of people’s frustration, needs assessments did not seem to inform distribution systems. People felt that the information they provided was only ‘ink on paper’ that did not influence the distribution of assistance. Instead, assistance was either chaotically distributed on the street or based on flawed lists drawn up by local intermediaries. As one respondent put it,

“there were too many queries, but aid wasn’t distributed based on the data we provided in those queries.”<sup>25</sup>  
A Lebanese security guard from Zoukak Al Blat observed that ‘organizations were distributing assistance based on what suits them and their budgets, and not on people’s needs.’<sup>26</sup>

Respondents wondered why the organizations wasted their time if they then distribute aid as they please, especially as those who lost their homes had more urgent things to do than to fill out surveys.

Apart from this largely critical perspective, a significant minority felt that assessments were appropriate or even provided a form of psychological support. A Lebanese nurse from Karantina told us, ‘no, the questionnaires didn’t irritate us at all. We felt that someone cares about us, and wants to hear our

stories and issues. We found that a source of support, especially after the disaster that happened to us.’<sup>27</sup>

Others were happy to provide information despite its detailed nature. One Lebanese man reflected:

“Good evening dear. Many organizations consulted us, but I didn’t feel any pressure. They asked about details, like our educational background, id number, and health condition ... Some people were bored with all those long questions, but I wasn’t. I was cooperative and responsive ... Questions were too detailed. They even asked about menstrual pads. Thanks for your help.”<sup>28</sup>

Some people pointed out that certain local organizations addressed at least some of their needs, and also did better follow-up than the majority of aid providers.

These findings on needs assessments demonstrate how the response itself may create psychological harm and social tensions. At the very least, they raise the question to what extent the response is accountable to affected populations and how this is reflected in the design of its mechanisms (e.g., needs assessments, aid distribution systems). The survey suggests that needs assessments were neither conflict-sensitive nor considerate of people’s psychological situation in a crisis. Neither people’s time nor their knowledge was treated as valuable. Organizations did not coordinate assessments, ‘made empty promises’ and failed to provide follow-up or explanation of why assistance was not forthcoming. This created distrust not only of aid providers but also of local intermediaries and neighbours who were perceived to benefit disproportionately from the response. If accountability, transparency and deliberative decision-making are not actively built into the design and implementation of the response, it will likely create tensions among crisis-affected populations.

<sup>24</sup> Lebanese, female, Karantina.

<sup>25</sup> Lebanese, female, unemployed, 30 years old, Khandak Al Ghamik.

<sup>26</sup> Lebanese security guard, male, 53 years old, Zoukak Al Blat.

<sup>27</sup> Lebanese nurse, female, 58 years old, Karantina.

<sup>28</sup> Lebanese, male, unemployed, 54 years old, Karantina.



## 2. Assistance

### 2.1. What type of assistance did people receive and did it cover their needs?

We asked people what type of assistance they or their neighbourhood received after the explosions, if any. In answering this question, our respondents focused on personal assistance they did or did not receive but much less on infrastructure rebuilding and public services. This likely speaks both to the emergency orientation of assistance in the first six months after the explosions and to people's continued preoccupation with their own situation. Many people received some food supplies and cleaning detergents; some respondents also received one-off payments by different organizations, or multiple-months cash assistance cards. All agreed that what they received was not enough to cover their needs. People who saw this assistance as immediate survival support were more satisfied than those who measured it in terms of the damage they had suffered. The question about the difference between assistance, and compensation or reparation for a man-made disaster loomed large in the survey.

Overall, there was less concern about the quantity of aid and more about its distribution. While assistance had been provided, especially in Karantina, financial assistance was not distributed fairly and the eligibility criteria were not clear. As a Lebanese daily worker from Karantina put it: *'I don't know how aids were distributed. Some people received lots of financial aids, while some only received little financial assistance or received none. We don't know if the distribution of aids was based on assessment, statistics, or if it was spontaneous.'*<sup>29</sup>

A Syrian daily worker from Karantina explained:

*'Yes, food supplies were given to all people. However, financial aids weren't equally distributed, and there was injustice. Some people*

*who pretended to be the trustees in the area were assigned by the organizations to create lists with all the people in Karantina that were affected by the explosion, so they added names of people who didn't live in Karantina, so they can benefit from those aids as well.'*<sup>30</sup>

Many people described what assistance they had personally received and how that compared to their neighbours and relatives. A Lebanese housewife from Karantina recounted:

*'Our neighbours and relatives received financial aids and food supplies. We only received the red card from WFP, but it didn't cover our needs, because the material damages were huge. We didn't receive anything from the government or the Red Cross, while all families in Karantina received 600\$ from the UN, but we didn't receive anything.'*<sup>31</sup>

Not only did people receive different amounts of financial assistance, they also received it in different currencies, some in US Dollars and others in Lebanese Pounds. The latter saw its value vanishing before their eyes:

*'I want to mention that the financial assistance we received was in the Lebanese currency, which is nothing compared to the rate of the dollar exchange. For example, we received 400,000 LBP, which equals 50\$. What would 50\$ do in a house that has collapsed? We lost everything.'*<sup>32</sup>

Beirutis received assistance for one crisis while they were hit by multiple crises. At the beginning of March, a galloping inflation sparked protests in Beirut and across Lebanon as the Lebanese Pound hit a record low with

one USD trading for LL10,000 (85 per cent below the country's official exchange rate) on the black market (Financial Times, 2021). At the time of writing, the currency is still fluctuating at unprecedented levels amidst continuing political deadlock.

### 2.2. What does fair assistance mean?

Most people agreed that assistance was unfair. Yet, they expressed different ideas of what fair assistance means. Some focused purely on the damage caused by the explosions while others expressed the view that assistance should be given according to needs rather than damage. As one Lebanese respondent from Karantina pointed out: *'All people in need should be given assistance, and not only to those who were affected by the explosion. The economic situation in Lebanon is disastrous. Why are those who live close to the port the only ones receiving aids while most people all over Lebanon are suffering from extreme poverty?'*<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, the World Bank projects that poverty in Lebanon in 2021 increased to 45% and extreme poverty to 22% (World Bank, 2021). Those who had less to begin with might have lost less (those who didn't own a house or a car couldn't lose a house or a car), but that does not mean they were less affected. A Syrian refugee, for example, complained: *'I was neglected by all organizations, just because I'm a Syrian refugee who is living in a rented house, and doesn't own a house in the area. However, the explosion didn't discriminate between a tenant and a landlord; all of us were affected.'*<sup>34</sup> Those who were vulnerable before the explosions were oftentimes less resilient than those who had assets and jobs. Despite these differences, most respondents expressed the idea that fair assistance takes into account both how much people were affected by the explosions (and the compounded crises more generally) and their ability to absorb these effects.

### 2.3. What went wrong?

While people's analysis differed on what exactly went wrong, several factors were mentioned frequently across the survey:

**Lack of coordination:** Aid distribution was allegedly chaotic and uncoordinated especially in the beginning of the response. After the first couple of weeks, international organizations created a map of affected areas that split Beirut into zones and assigned organizations to different zones. When governmental organizations became involved in aid coordination, they conducted another mapping with different zones which created confusion. By the time the new map was consolidated, many organizations had already started to operate in certain areas and were reluctant to change location. Lebanese organizations were reportedly quicker to operate than international organizations due to more flexible funding structures. Key informants acknowledged that NGOs concentrated in certain areas (Karantina) much more than in others (Khandak Al Ghamik and Zoukak Al Blat). There was duplication of certain forms of assistance (e.g., hot meals) and a shortage of others (e.g., home appliances, furniture, financial assistance). Organizations should have shared data and coordinated zones of operation better to distribute aid more equitably.

**Lack of accountable distribution mechanisms:**

The survey, interviews and focus group discussions suggested that the response relied too much on local intermediaries for drawing up beneficiary lists and distributing assistance rather than setting up more representative and accountable neighbourhood committees. This created pathways for personal or political preferences to shape aid allocation as these trustees decided who was on the list and who was not. As a daily worker from Karantina put it,

*'I think that the fault was in assigning people to distribute aids, but those people depended on nepotism and sectarianism, so they weren't giving aids equally to people.'*<sup>35</sup>

Survey respondents alleged that these intermediaries often misdirected funds adding people to the list who were not residing in the affected area or excluding people from assistance who had no connection to them. It was unclear how organizations decided who enjoyed local trust and should therefore be in charge of creating lists especially given widespread political distrust and corruption. One Lebanese resident from Karantina complained:

29 Lebanese daily worker, male, 35 years old, Karantina.

30 Syrian daily worker, male, 30 years old, Karantina.

31 Lebanese housewife, 49 years old, Karantina.

32 Lebanese staff nurse, female, 58 years old, Karantina.

33 Lebanese staff nurse, female, 58 years old, Karantina.

34 Syrian daily worker, male, 30 years old, Karantina.

35 Lebanese daily worker, male, 35 years old, Karantina.

“No, it wasn't fair. Organizations should have entered neighbourhoods and houses, instead of depending on people from the area whom they considered as “trustees” or “focal points”, to distribute aids.”<sup>36</sup>

**No clear criteria and communication:** Survey respondents emphasized that they did not know what the criteria were for receiving assistance, especially for financial assistance or house reconstruction/repair. When organizations did not follow up on the needs assessments, many people tried to call them but were advised that their requests were pending. One man from Khandak Al Ghamik told us angrily,

“I called [reference to a public Lebanese organization] 500 times and they would only tell me my request was pending. They just want more information, about my dad, my address, more details, then we would never receive anything. My dad is 86 years old, come and see him!”<sup>37</sup>

The human element gets lost in the scramble for data. Some people found out why they had not received assistance but felt that the criteria were too rigid (e.g., age) and not sufficiently sensitive to individual circumstances. A pharmacist from Zoukak Al Blat reported,

“I kept waiting for assistance until I lately knew the reason why I didn't receive aids. Only those above 70 years were eligible for those aids, but I was 67 years old, so they rejected my application.”<sup>38</sup>

**Door-to-door assistance rather than street distribution and intermediary delegation:** Door-to-door assistance would have been a fairer, more organized and less humiliating approach to assistance distribution. The fact that much assistance was handed out on the street led to misallocation. People from outside the area could appropriate aids and those who lived on the ground floor were more likely to hear the food truck enter the street and run

36 Lebanese, female, unemployed, 54 years old, Karantina.

37 Focus Group Discussion (male), Khandak Al Ghamik, 19 February 2021.

38 Lebanese pharmacist, male, 67 years old, Zoukak Al Blat.

39 Syrian housewife, female, 46 years old, Karantina.

down in time before a long queue had formed. Street distribution was also humiliating for residents:

“Sometimes cars loaded with aid came to our area”, one respondent told us, ‘and only those who would run after them and beg for help would receive some. However, my neighbours and I refused to be humiliated like that and run after the cars crying for help, so we were neglected.’<sup>39</sup>

Street assistance is not only chaotic and humiliating, it can also be a site of local conflict. Skirmishes sometimes erupted between neighbours and families queuing for assistance. Door-to-door assistance would have been a more dignified, conflict-sensitive method making assistance look less like charity and more like compensation for a disaster facilitated through political negligence. It would also have been more inclusive ensuring that all or most households in affected areas receive assistance (the people who live in the houses not necessarily those who own the property).

## 2.4. Assistance-related tensions: ‘structuralizing’ or ‘personalizing’ injustice

Beyond these common factors, there were also notable differences in how the injustice of assistance was interpreted with different implications for social stability. Broadly speaking, two tendencies were noticeable among survey respondents which, however, were not mutually exclusive. There were those survey respondents who ‘structuralized’ injustice and those who ‘personalized’ injustice.

The former see the unfairness of assistance as emanating from broader structures; they identify economic structures, political corruption, bureaucratic chaos and organizational indifference. The problem lies on the side of the distributors not on the side of the beneficiaries. They don't distribute enough, and they don't distribute it fairly. Systems rather than people are blamed: ‘Many political parties actually benefitted from the explosion, getting richer, and

taking and selling their donations’, a male resident of Khandak Al Ghamik emphasized.<sup>40</sup> Others focused more on the role of NGOs:

“The NGOs do it for the photos, the systems in which they distribute their goods are inefficient and flawed’, a woman from Karantina observed.<sup>41</sup>

The women we spoke to in Khandak Al Ghamik felt that bureaucracy was mainly to blame for the flawed aid distribution:

“It is not a religious or a sect thing, there was no preferential treatment. It is mostly chance with who gets more. There are some political parties in the mix. We had our assessments pending in the system for a while. It is all bureaucracy, some people receive double the aid whereas some people do not receive any. It is still *wasta*, if you know someone from inside the NGO, you'll get your aid.”<sup>42</sup>

Bureaucracy produces unpredictable outcomes that are not intelligible for outsiders. The only factor that overrides bureaucracy is personal contacts (*wasta*) – you need to know someone sufficiently important within the organization, but such contacts do not work strictly along religious or political lines.

Those who personalize injustice, on the other hand, tend to focus on the beneficiaries rather than the distributors. They identify ‘selfish and greedy people’ who hoard, misdirect and resell aid as the problem. The tendency to personalize injustice was pronounced in the survey and focused on neighbours, friends and even family members. As a Lebanese housewife put it:

“Yes, unfortunately, many people were horribly changed after the explosion, including friends, neighbours, and siblings. I don't know who they really are anymore. This is devastating. People have become like monsters. Even those whom

40 Focus Group Discussion (male), Khandak Al Ghamik, 19 February 2021

41 Focus Group Discussion (female), Karantina, 17 February 2021.

42 Focus Group Discussion (female), Khandak Al Ghamik, 19 February 2021.

43 Lebanese Housewife, 57 years old, Karantina.

44 Lebanese, female, unemployed, 48 years old, Karantina.

I've grown up with were changed. Sometimes I think that the only pro of the explosion is that it revealed who all those people really are.”<sup>43</sup>

Some felt their neighbours did not make enough effort to help them access assistance:

“neighbours didn't feel with each other. For example, if a man received aids from a certain organization, he wouldn't tell them about his neighbour who is also in need.’ Others focused on corrupt strategies to receive more aid:

‘Some people would receive appliances from an organization, but they would keep their old broken stuff so that when another organization visits them, it would see their broken stuff and also provide them with new ones. This way, they can sell the appliances that they won't need and gain extra money. Some people received more than two refrigerators, washing machines, and many other appliances, and then sold them. Hence, the explosion has not only affected people, but also revealed their true personalities ... We were really shocked by them, so now we can't trust anyone.’<sup>44</sup>

Many people were particularly outraged about the behaviour of local intermediaries. They rarely specified who exactly these people were, yet they emphasized that they abused their role in aid distribution. This is where personalizing and structuralizing tendencies intersect as these people are local power-holders and thus play a more structural role, but they were also personally resented for that abuse of power and local trust.

Both perspectives have different implications for social stability. Structuralizing injustice potentially leads to political mobilizations across political, class and racial divides against the political establishment. It could spark national protests against the political class and

its economic policies similar to what Lebanon witnessed in October 2019. Indeed, for some respondents, political insurrection seemed the only way left to effect positive change in Lebanon.

Personalizing injustice can fuel local conflicts and personal attacks as neighbours blame each other or minorities for their hardships. It eats itself into community life nurturing resentment in close relationships and can thus impede the inclusive rebuilding of neighbourhoods. Blaming neighbours or friends was rare in WhatsApp surveys conducted before the explosions, which highlights the possible role of the response in eroding the community fabric.

## 2.5. Discrimination vs. Neglect

Zooming in on the replies of those who attributed responsibility to the distributors, we can distinguish between two explanatory logics: discrimination and neglect. Many people claimed that distribution of assistance was discriminatory, i.e., that people with certain characteristics or certain groups were systematically discriminated against. Race/nationality, gender, class, political affiliation and sectarianism were identified as factors of discrimination.

Syrian respondents, for example, claimed that they were discriminated against due to their nationality. One Syrian respondent from Karantina lamented:

“We’re a Syrian family that has been living in Lebanon since 1972. Unfortunately, we’ve discovered how hateful and selfish some Lebanese people are. Thank God those are just a minority of the Lebanese people, but the majority are good people who have suffered from those greedy people who didn’t let all people receive assistance, saying that those aids are only for the Lebanese. Those words were too hurtful, because they forgot all the Syrian martyrs that were together with the Lebanese martyrs when the explosion happened,

45 Syrian employee at a butchery, male, 51 years old, Karantina.

46 Syrian daily worker, male, 30 years old, Karantina.

47 Lebanese male, Karantina.

*so their blood has become one. May all the martyrs rest in peace.*<sup>45</sup>

Syrians also died, were injured or lost their homes during the explosion. Many Syrians worked at the port and lost their jobs. Unregistered Syrian refugees told us that they were completely excluded from assistance as organizations asked for their registration numbers before they agreed to hand out assistance.

Discrimination reportedly also happened based on family situation. Single men reported that non-family arrangements were discriminated against:

“Hello, aids were only given to families, and single men weren’t given anything. Whenever I talked to organizations, they’d tell me that I can’t receive any aids because I’m single and I don’t have a family, even if I was injured by the explosion.”<sup>46</sup> This was especially a problem for young Syrian daily workers who live in shared accommodation.

People also complained about widespread class discrimination: *‘those who were seriously affected and needed so much help have received little assistance, while those who were less affected have received much more aids.’*<sup>47</sup>

Better-off people are more likely to have relevant networks or to know intermediaries that can help them to access assistance (wasta):

“Most organizations were like mafias. We were rejected, and they refused to give us anything although we are really in need for those aids. However, some people came with Range Rovers, and they still received money,” a 62-year old Lebanese woman from Karantina asserted.

One class conflict that surfaced in the survey was between landlords and tenants. ‘Some landlords kicked the Syrians out of their homes, just because they refused to give them the carton of food supplies they

received from organizations,’ we were told.<sup>48</sup> Some landlords even evicted tenants to receive aids or doubled the rent to force vulnerable tenants to move out. UNDP’s ‘Leave No One Behind’ report already identified conflicts between landlords and tenants as a potential source of tension as many vulnerable people live in precarious tenancy arrangements and some landlords insist that rent should be paid in USD rather than LLB.<sup>49</sup>

Political and sectarian discrimination also figured in people’s discourse about assistance albeit more strongly in the focus group discussions (FGDs) than in the WhatsApp survey. In Karantina, people focused more on sectarian bias, while in Khandak Al Ghamik, they were more concerned about political parties’ interference with aid. *‘There is a great divide between Muslims and Christians in Karantina’*, some women said in the FGD. They felt that Christian residents of the area received more support, having access to NGOs that are more or less dedicated to them. NGOs in Christian parts of the area reportedly did higher-quality reconstruction work than in Muslim parts. Syrians, too, received preferential treatment by some organizations. In Khandak Al Ghamik, men complained that,

“political parties were the ones that prevented all people from receiving donations.”<sup>50</sup> They contended that *‘even for [reference to a public institution], the political parties are the ones who approve, pay for, and tell them who they should help’*. *‘If we were registered with the parties’*, FGD participants claimed, *‘we would have received much more aid.’* One participant noted that *‘there was an NGO that came to distribute, but we are always unable to reach the top dog who is supposedly from our area, and that head will always be affiliated with a political party.’*<sup>51</sup>

Interestingly, inhabitants in both Khandak Al Ghamik and in Karantina expressed anger

48 Syrian farmer, male, 50 years old, Karantina.

49 UNDP, ‘Leave No One Behind’ (2020), 17.

50 Focus Group Discussion (male), Khandak Al Ghamik, 19 February 2021.

51 Focus Group Discussion (male), Khandak Al Ghamik, 19 February 2021

52 Focus Group Discussion (female), Khandak Al Ghamik, 19 February 2021.

not primarily at opposing political parties but precisely those that are supposedly very popular in their areas. They felt ‘their’ own parties had let them down.

### Karantina first

There was a consensus across FGDs and interviews that Karantina was one of the areas most affected by the Beirut port explosions. This was recognized by all civil society actors, as well as by the local inhabitants in Khandak Al Ghamik, including the key informants interviewed there. Consequently, local inhabitants in Khandak Al Ghamik did not resent the attention given to Karantina. They acknowledged that Karantina has always been an underprivileged area that would have deserved attention even before the explosions.

That said, residents of Khandak Al Ghamik observed that their area fell through the cracks of response efforts. Assistance to the area reportedly only started 40 days after the explosions and stopped immediately before the lockdown. Residents felt that they had only received symbolic assistance such as food parcels and cleaning detergents. Key informants conceded that there were less interventions in Khandak Al Ghamik and Zoukak Al Blat. These areas suffered less structural damage from the explosions but were hit hard by the economic crises, especially unemployment, and the exploding costs of living. Their residents were in dire need of cash and food assistance, and medical care.

Yet, this discrimination was interpreted less in sectarian and more in class and vulnerability terms. The problem was not Karantina but Ashrafieh. Residents in Khandak Al Ghamik complained about the prioritization of areas that were perceived to be significantly less vulnerable such as Ashrafieh, Gemmayze, and Mar Mikhael.

“It is okay for Karantina to have more donations, because they were closer to the blast site,’ women in Khandak Al Ghamik told us.<sup>52</sup> Yet, *‘Khandak Al Ghamik was affected more than Ashrafieh, yet Ashrafieh area received*

more aids than we did.<sup>53</sup>  
A Lebanese housewife in Zoukak Al Blat agreed: ‘

“Aids were given to some areas more than others. For example, our area Zoukak Al Blat didn’t receive much aid, but other areas received more ... We had to leave the house for a whole month, but no one has helped us.<sup>54</sup>

## Neglect

Others felt that the problem of aid distribution was neglect rather than discrimination. Neglect is less systematic. You might be neglected because aid distribution is chaotic, because you live on 5<sup>th</sup> floor and organizations rarely go up there, because they overlooked your street, because your area has been deemed less affected. You might be left out because of bureaucracy and mismanagement. Neglect happens less at the personal or the group level and more at the level of geography and space. Residents in Khandak Al Ghamik oscillated between interpreting the lack of assistance they received as discrimination or as neglect. In relation to Karantina, they regarded it more as neglect, in relation to Asharifieh, they insinuated discrimination.

But neglect did not only happen between areas in Beirut, but also between streets, as a female resident from Karantina reported:

“Yes, our street was neglected in terms of assistance, while the neighbouring street received assistance. Also, organisations didn’t assess the damages in houses well, or when organizations came and visited our neighbourhoods, they would ask the guys they bump into about the most damaged houses, and they would guide them as they want, not as they should.<sup>55</sup>

People who left the area because their houses became inhabitable or who were in hospital missed out on assistance. One unemployed tutor from Karantina told us:

53 Focus Group Discussion (male), Khandak Al Ghamik, 19 February 2021.  
54 Lebanese Housewife, 50 years old, Zoukak Al Blat.  
55 Lebanese, female, unemployed, 35 years old.  
56 Lebanese, female, unemployed, 35 years old.  
57 Lebanese accountant, unemployed, 42 years old.

‘I’d like to say that our house was destroyed by the explosion, so we had to leave the house and go to the mountain and stay there for 4 months. Organizations visited the area every day, and they gave food supplies and financial aids to everyone who was present there. However, those who weren’t in their homes received nothing, just like us.<sup>56</sup>

An unemployed accountant from Karantina agreed:

“Those who weren’t present at home were neglected. There wasn’t any practical statistics regarding those who were affected by the explosion. Hence, many people had to leave their homes until they were fixed and became safe for inhabitation, but throughout this period of time they received nothing of the aids that were distributed in the area. In addition, the aids that were received were too little compared to all the damage that we faced. The aids didn’t compensate our losses, but they helped us a little to survive.<sup>57</sup>

The same was true of people who were at work during the day. They were not home when food trucks or organizations came by and thus would rarely receive any assistance.

A key question across the survey, focus group discussions and key informant interviews was ‘where was the government?’ Assistance was neither fair nor well-organized but at least the organizations (unlike the government) did something. The crisis essentially created a new front, people vs. the government:

“The blast has brought the Lebanese people closer. However, something really bad has happened. We felt neglected by our own government. The government didn’t notice us. They did nothing for us after the blast. The people united and supported

each other, but our government totally neglected us. The government is still absent from the recovery efforts until now. They haven’t done anything for the damaged areas. Organizations are the ones rebuilding the damaged areas.<sup>58</sup>

When people were asked more directly whom they are angry with in the FGDs they zoomed out of their immediate context and talked about the political establishment.

“We are angry at the figureheads, the people in power that sit in parliament,’ a man in Khandak Al Ghamik told us. ‘As people, we have nothing between us, but sour political parties that pit us against each other’, another local resident added. ‘I feel political disgust. I’m mad at the government, they didn’t come and help...’, a woman exclaimed in the Karantina FGD. Others noted the absence of the municipality of Beirut: ‘We are angry at the municipality of Beirut and the government who did not come to check on us.<sup>59</sup>

This section has shed light on common perceptions of assistance, and how they shaped tension dynamics. People’s frustration about unfair and unaccountable assistance was channelled differently depending on their analysis of what went wrong. While many respondents focused on the side of distribution, holding the government and the organizations themselves responsible for the lack of consultations with affected populations and the misallocation of aid, others located blame at the local level, finding their neighbours and local trustees guilty either of not sharing assistance or of misappropriation and corruption. The visibility of aid distribution on the street may have reinforced the ‘local blaming effect’ as small abuses were visible to the eye, while larger misallocations were less visible and more abstract. Rather than mitigating tensions through inclusive assistance, the response may have stoked new tensions among neighbours as people reinterpret their local relationships

58 Lebanese woman, unemployed, 47 years old, Karantina.  
59 Focus Group Discussion (male), Karantina.

amidst a crisis, which will be further explored in the next section.



### 3. Social Relationships Amidst a Crisis

Asked about assistance, many respondents blamed 'greedy and selfish people' in their neighbourhood who over-claimed or misappropriated aid. However, the narrative shifted when we asked people directly how the explosions and the immediate response have affected relationships among Lebanese. Here, the data was much more positive than we had expected after reading people's analysis on what went wrong with assistance.

#### 3.1. Relationships among Lebanese: A new form of unity?

WhatsApp respondents talked enthusiastically about a new form of 'people solidarity' that cuts across old divides:

“All the Lebanese people are united, regardless of their religion or political belonging. The catastrophe was mutual for everyone, so all of us united as Lebanese people, Christians and Muslims. We supported each other, because no one else supported us. Only God is our saviour,”

a Syrian farmer from Karantina observed.<sup>60</sup> The responsibility of the government for the explosions and their absence in the recovery response created unity among people. 'The blast has led to national unity against the ruling establishment,' a Lebanese man from Zoukak Al Blat summarized.<sup>61</sup> المصيبة بتجمعنا ('The catastrophe unites us'), people would say. A local priest told us:

“I had two persons who were helping me, one was Muslim and the other one was Christian, each one was supporting the others' community, although I felt the fear had remained somewhere, but it was like there was no more time

for this. One of them told me, if I see someone in need, what should I do? Stop to help or leave? We should help each other because we have no state to help us. This was the case for the first month let us say, but this did not last. Maybe because the funds decreased, now people are confined and the amount of problems is rising. The aid created problems inside the same community, over accessibility to resources, and eligibility for aid.<sup>62</sup>

Many WhatsApp respondents shared that assessment, observing that the initial solidarity wore off as the injustice of assistance created divisions between people: 'At first, the relationships were good. However, when aids started to be distributed, people became greedy and selfish, and they only cared about their own interest,' one Karantina resident reported.<sup>63</sup> Another Karantina resident qualified:

“I think that the blast, and the recovery efforts, have affected the relationships between the Lebanese people in two different ways. First, some Lebanese people have become more compassionate and supportive of each other. Second, some people have become greedy, selfish, and full of hatred. Thank you.”<sup>64</sup>

That said, overall, positive sentiments prevailed. People especially recounted the immediate aftermath of the explosions when no organization, no army and no parties were there, but only ordinary people. People came in droves from all over Lebanon to help those in need: 'They came from the North, South, Beqaa, and all the Lebanese areas. Not only Lebanese people were helping the afflicted people, but there were also many

<sup>60</sup> Syrian farmer, male, 69 years old, Karantina.

<sup>61</sup> Lebanese, male, 79 years old, Zoukak Al Blat.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Key Informant.

<sup>63</sup> Lebanese, male, unemployed, 55 years old, Karantina.

<sup>64</sup> Lebanese, female, unemployed, 37 years old, Karantina.

foreigners,' one Karantina resident recalled.<sup>65</sup> A 70-year old woman from Karantina elaborated:

“Being that we are Arab Bedouins living in Karantina, many people supported us. For example, Arab Bedouins from Beqaa brought us vegetables; people from Tripoli got us food supplies, and people from Saida brought us food. Some people from Saida were making falafel in the area and distributing sandwiches to people. After the blast, no one was able to cook at home, because most kitchens were destroyed. Everyone supported us. In addition, both mosques and churches supported us. May God protect you. We hope we will never live such horrible experience again. May peace and tranquillity prevail.”<sup>66</sup>

### 3.2. Relationships between different communities

In the WhatsApp survey, references to Syrians were not very common among Lebanese respondents. Admittedly, the survey did not ask directly about Lebanese/Syrian relationships but more vaguely enquired about relationships between different communities in Lebanon. Few respondents used this or any other question to talk about Syrian refugees. That said, Lebanese respondents sometimes complained that Syrians who did not live in affected areas would come and queue for assistance. For example, a retired Lebanese woman, 67 years old, from Karantina, told us:

“This is a sensitive issue. I've told you before that some people from certain religious sects were supporting only those who belong to their sect, and we didn't accept that. However, one sect - the Maronites - has helped everyone from all sects. Also, my neighbours and I didn't accept that aids were given to non-Lebanese people. These foreigners already

received aids from organizations before the blast, so after the blast those aids were doubled or tripled for them, because they took from other organizations as well. All people in our neighbourhood didn't accept the fact that foreigners were receiving assistance just like the Lebanese people.”<sup>67</sup>

Many Syrians complained that they were excluded from aid and insisted that they, too, have been affected by the explosions and were more vulnerable than many Lebanese who received assistance. A Syrian daily worker from Karantina observed:

“Some organizations were biased, and preferred to give aids to the Lebanese only. They would say that Syrians don't deserve those aids. Of course I'm talking about some of the organizations, and not all of them.”<sup>68</sup>

According to some key informants, Syrian/Lebanese tensions were more pronounced before the explosions than after.<sup>69</sup>

While the UNDP/ARK perception survey showed negative perceptions of Lebanese/Syrian relationships in the immediate aftermath of the port explosions (43.4%), these perceptions had improved considerably by January 2021 (24.5%) before dipping again (29.7%) in April 2021 (UNDP/ARK, 2021). Lebanese/Syrian relationships in Beirut are better than in many other parts of Lebanon with only 20.8% reporting negative relationships. Part of the reason for this tentative improvement may be that Syrians, too, were part of the outpouring of collective solidarity and mutual aid after the explosions:

“When the blast happened, all the Lebanese and Syrians hurried to help. Everyone has united to rescue the injured people and remove the rubble. Back then, ambulances and firefighters weren't there yet, and that's why people kept rescuing

each other until they arrived and helped them.”<sup>70</sup>

A Syrian respondent added,

“People have united, and the catastrophe made everyone forget about racism and sectarianism. They were helping each other no matter what.”<sup>71</sup>

In the FGDs, resentments against Syrians were expressed more frequently especially the allegation that certain organizations focused on assisting Syrians, but overall, inter-community relationships were overshadowed by tensions among Lebanese.

Curiously, the explosions and the response are associated with better relationships/perceptions on the macro level and worse relationships on the micro level. Beirutis celebrate national unity and endurance while eyeing their neighbours suspiciously. This is exactly the opposite of what happened in previous surveys of Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians where respondents were more willing to use negative national stereotypes while describing neighbours, friends and people they interact with in a more nuanced fashion.<sup>72</sup> They would rarely blame their situation on their neighbours. In this survey after the explosions, expressions of unity against a government that has failed its people coexisted with personal resentment against selfish and greedy people in the neighbourhood. This is concerning from a social stability perspective, as it is precisely those strong local support networks that have prevented social disintegration amidst political and economic crisis in Lebanon before.

65 Lebanese, male, unemployed, 40 years old.

66 Lebanese, female, unemployed, 70 years old.

67 Lebanese, female, retired, 68 years old, Karantina.

68 Syrian daily worker, male, 34 years old, Karantina.

69 Key Informant Interview

70 Lebanese, female, 65, Karantina.

71 Syrian, male, Zouk Al Blat.

72 Ullrich (2018), Ullrich (2019a), Ullrich and Abu Sharar (2020).

## 4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The survey's findings suggest three tentative shifts in the tension landscape in Lebanon. First, as Lebanon's own crises have overshadowed the Syria crisis, tensions within Lebanese society have increased, taking focus off Syrian refugees and migrants. Intra-community tensions have become more concerning than inter-community tensions. Second, the explosions had contradictory effects on tensions, creating more solidarity and unity at the national level, while stoking tensions at the neighbourhood level. The latter is concerning, as strong local support networks have not only shielded many people from economic disaster but also defused social tensions and antagonism. On the other hand, group-based tensions (sectarian or political) have been eclipsed by collective solidarity and anger against the political establishment. Third, drivers of tension have become somewhat less political and more socio-economic in nature, which is attributable to the economic hardship in Lebanon, and to the perceptions of unequal distribution of aid in the aftermath of the explosions. This exacerbates previous trends as competition for jobs, access to education and medical care were already identified as notable tension factors in 2019 (UNDP/ARK report, 2019).

These findings suggest that the response to the Beirut explosions has itself fuelled tensions and created additional social and psychological harm. In the UNDP/ARK survey in January 2021, more than half of Lebanese (51.5%) stated that aid/assistance did not go to the people who most deserved it. Lack of consultations and coordination in the design of the response contributed to these perceptions. Needs assessments and aid allocation were neither conflict nor psychologically sensitive. WhatsApp respondents complained that not only did they not receive the assistance they needed, but they also felt humiliated by a response that treated their needs, knowledge, time and dignity as of secondary importance. Collective solidarity in response to the crisis has somewhat eroded due to the unfairness of assistance. The crisis brings out the best and the worst in people, many respondents suggested. Local frustrations have sparked occasional skirmishes but so far, there is no evidence that they have carved deeper societal rifts.

### Recommendations

Most recommendations flow directly from the feedback of survey respondents on 1) immediate action and needs assessments, 2) emergency and recovery assistance, and 3) strengthening social relationships.

#### On immediate action & needs assessments

**Better coordination:** Research participants demanded better coordination between different organizations in distributing aid to avoid duplication on the one hand and neglect on the other. Especially at the beginning, aid distribution was chaotic and random and those with better networks or information were often more likely to access assistance than those who were more vulnerable and affected.

→ Better coordination ensures the response is more conflict sensitive, first, by not burdening people who are still in shock with multiple assessments and confusing information, and, second, by avoiding local resentments and accusations against neighbours that often arise when aid systems are not transparent and accountable.

**Conflict-sensitive needs assessments, more appreciation for personal data and more systematic follow-up:** Organizations did not coordinate needs assessments, which meant that the same household or family was subjected to long questionnaires multiple times. Organizations and data collectors were not sensitive to the fact that people were still in shock after the explosions while also having to manage an ongoing emergency (e.g., looking after relatives and friends, cleaning rubble and repairing their homes, providing for the daily needs of children without kitchens). People felt organizations were not only intrusive but also wasting their time.

→ Financial compensation for data or combining data collection with some form of tangible support shows respect for the value of their personal information and knowledge while mitigating at least some of the frustration when assistance is not forthcoming. In a world in which data has become a commodity, organizations should find ways of either collecting less data (shorter questionnaires less frequently) or financially compensating

people for using their data. There also needs to be more systematic follow-up with households that provided information explaining why they were not eligible for receiving assistance. Otherwise, people are less likely to cooperate with data collection efforts in the future.

#### On emergency and recovery assistance

**Clearer aid criteria especially for financial assistance:** Respondents did not know the criteria for receiving financial assistance, furniture, kitchen and house appliances and house repair or reconstruction. This created suspicions of nepotism, political and sectarian bias as they saw or heard that neighbours and friends, whom they judged to be equally or less vulnerable, received such assistance.

→ Clear and explicit communication of criteria for assistance might have staved off at least some of these suspicions and the ensuing local tensions. When the criteria for assistance are clear and consistent, people are more likely to accept if they do not receive assistance and less likely to blame those who do receive assistance.

**Accountable and dignified aid distribution:** Beirutis felt victim to a manmade and avoidable disaster and thus strongly felt they are due compensation and support. Instead, they had to participate in lengthy assessments and queue in the street to receive even the most basic assistance. They also perceived a contradiction between frequent data collection and questionnaires that render aid distribution supposedly rational and evidence-based, and their everyday experiences of chaotic and preferential aid distribution.

→ Door-to-door assistance has been identified as a fairer, more dignified and conflict-sensitive method of distributing assistance than either street distribution or distribution through local intermediaries or focal points. Representative committees (not connected to old power structures) with accessible complaint mechanisms should assist local distribution efforts. Creating accountable aid distribution is not only desirable in its own right but will also mitigate local tensions.

**More psychological support and trauma counselling:** One striking finding of the WhatsApp survey is how ubiquitous the psychological repercussions of the Beirut explosions are. Even those who did not live

close to the port reported severe trauma, anxiety, depression and, stress, and people often expressed that Lebanon was undergoing a collective trauma reminiscent of the civil war. The elderly suffer from loneliness due to the pandemic and family conflicts have exacerbated as people are locked in at home while struggling to make an income and worrying about the future.

→ Integrating psychological support and sensitivity into the design of the response from the start helps to ensure the response itself does not cause unintended psychological harm through insensitive programming. The compounded psychological effects of Beirut's crises threaten to undermine the recovery efforts if not addressed through targeted programming (e.g., outdoor walks and activities could be COVID-19 safe methods). Psychological support for both adults and children can also more generally help people to rebuild their lives.

#### On strengthening social relations

**More community and peacebuilding initiatives:** Assistance is not the only factor that created more fraught local relationships, as people were cut off from social contacts and networks due to COVID-19 restrictions. More generally, the financial and psychological pressures of continuous crisis in the last two years have taken a toll on relationships, ranging from family conflicts at home during lockdown, and alienation from friends and colleagues, to frustration about aid distribution simmering over into neighbourhood conflicts.

→ Peacebuilding initiatives that nurture mutual caring and cooperation could ameliorate some of the resentments around aid distribution generated by the crisis. These initiatives should be inter-generational to ensure the elderly are included and should include neighbourhoods that have been neglected in the response such as Khandak Al Ghamik and Zoukak Al Blat.

**Reconstructing the social and physical infrastructure of Beirut's neighbourhoods by employing local people:** Most people either lost their jobs, work reduced hours or receive reduced salaries due to COVID-19 and the financial crisis. The abrupt decline in aid since the beginning of 2021 has further fuelled anxieties as people still struggle with everyday survival and fear the lifting of subsidies on

essential goods like food and fuel. A holistic approach that integrates emergency relief and long-term recovery, and focuses on job creation, is key to achieving social stability and making people more optimistic about their and their children's future.

→ Injecting demand into the economy through infrastructure reconstruction (both physical and social) that employ people in affected areas will help to ease tensions. These efforts should not narrowly focus on those areas most affected by the explosions but include close-by, vulnerable areas such as Khandak Al Ghamik and Zoukak Al Blat. The pandemic has particularly highlighted the importance of a better public care and medical system, which could be a key area for interventions. Cash and food assistance need to be extended until such mid- to long-term reconstruction efforts are having an impact on local economies.

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