Transparency and Accountability from the Bottom-Up: Lessons from Social Assistance and Humanitarian CVA Programs in Lebanon

Policy Paper

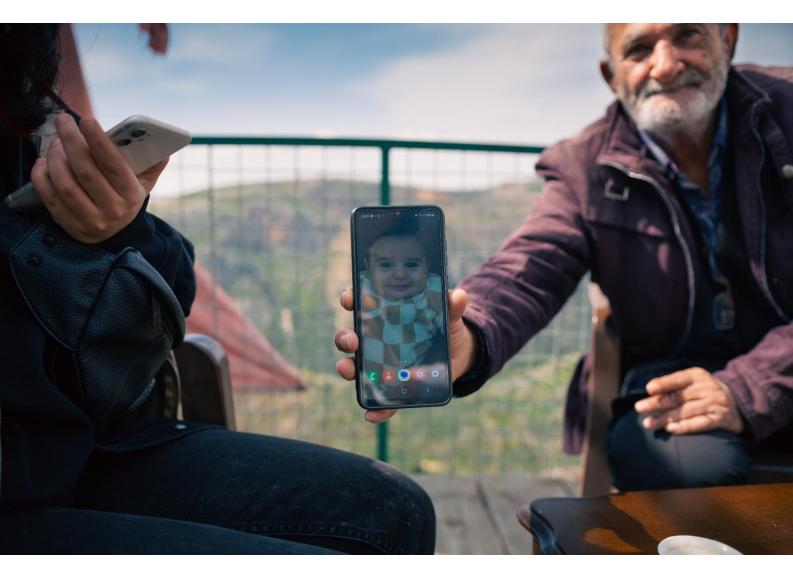## September 2025

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Executive Summary

Following six years of multiple protracted crises, a majority of Lebanon's population is affected by multidimensional poverty, but social safety nets are the primary source of social protection for the poorest and most vulnerable and are largely dependent on international donors. In an effort to transition out of the crisis, the Government of Lebanon has put forward a National Social Protection Strategy, which envisions a new social contract between people and the state.

This paper attempts to understand how transparency and accountability – which are fundamental to building trust and faith in institutions – are perceived by recipients and non-recipients of social assistance and humanitarian CVA. We draw on three studies conducted by CAMEALEON to examine the perceived transparency of various social assistance and CVA programs, from the perspective of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries and participants and non-participants in these programs. The findings highlight four major concerns: frequent and poorly communicated interruptions in assistance, perceived inequities in eligibility (particularly along nationality lines), opaque targeting mechanisms, and unresponsive communication and feedback channels. These challenges undermine trust not only in humanitarian aid providers, but also in the possibility of a renewed social contract between the state and its people.

In light of the findings, this paper concludes with several recommendations to strengthen and establish trust from a "bottom-up" lens in Lebanon consist of the following:

1. As per the NSPS, social assistance should transition from the safety net model toward a universal rights-based social protection system funded through progressive taxation.
2. The social protection system should cover all nationalities equitably to reduce community tensions, enhance social cohesion, and leverage international refugee protection funding to build the capacity of the national social protection system.
3. Programs need to make significant investments in outreach and communication to ensure that eligibility details are widely disseminated, call centres are responsive, and misinformation is actively countered.

Acronyms

CAMEALEON	Cash Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning Organizational Network
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
CVA	Cash and Voucher Assistance
ESSN	Emergency Social Safety Net
EU	European Union
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
GoL	Government of Lebanon
IDIs	In-Depth Interviews
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
LAU	Lebanese American University
MoSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
NDA	National Disability Allowance
NPTP	National Poverty Targeting Program
NSPS	National Social Protection Strategy
OPDs	Organizations for People with Disabilities
PCM	Presidency of the Council of Ministers
PDC	Personal Disability Card
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
PMT	Proxy-Means Testing
SRSP	Shock-Responsive Social Protection
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Higher Council for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRWA	United Nations Agency for Palestine Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme

1. Background

Over the past 6 years, Lebanon has been affected by a series of disastrous events that have severely affected a majority of the population. Since late 2019, a severe shortage of liquidity instigated a financial crisis involving hyperinflation, lost deposits, de-valued salaries, and a major economic recession. The economic fallout was exacerbated the next year by the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid devaluation of the Lebanese Pound has erased the savings of many depositors and has disproportionately impacted the poorest and most vulnerable, including older persons, people with disabilities and female-headed households. The crisis did not stop with financial and economic damage; in August 2020, large sections of the northern part of the capital were destroyed by the Beirut Port blast. And since October 2023, swathes of the South have been pummelled by the Israeli military. The assault escalated in 2024, expanding airstrikes to other regions of the country including the southern and central parts of the capital, causing massive destruction to homes and civilian infrastructure and displacing approximately 1 million people. A ceasefire was reached on November 27th, and a significant portion of displaced people have returned to their place of origin, but hostilities and aerial bombardment are still ongoing.

These intersecting crises have plunged many into poverty and worsened conditions for those who were already vulnerable. By 2022/3, between 70 and 80 percent of Lebanon's population was experiencing multi-dimensional poverty.[1] In response, the Government of Lebanon (GoL) scaled up its main social assistance program, the National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP), which uses proxy-means testing and a social registry to target the most vulnerable households. The GoL further expanded the scope of its Shock-Responsive Social Protection (SRSP) by establishing the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) in partnership with the World Bank to benefit 150,000 of the poorest and most vulnerable households in 2022, where the ESSN employs a hybrid PMT and categorical targeting model and social registry.[2] Recently, the NPTP was phased out and its beneficiaries were revisited and rescored in mid-2024, and those that qualified for the ESSN were then absorbed into the unified AMAN program.

However, the public system of social protection has been argued to be both inadequate and highly inequitable. This is in part due to Lebanon's post-Civil War prioritization of neoliberal economic development and short-term economic gains at the expense of social welfare.[3] Even before 2019, only 3.5 percent of the population was covered by non-contributory social assistance.[4] The rest of the social protection system was primarily made up of insurance programs that disproportionately benefited government employees, subsidies that benefitted the upper middle class, inadequate public health services.[5] By the end of 2024, amidst the crisis, the ESSN's coverage of 160,000 Lebanese households falls far short of addressing the multi-dimensional poverty that affects the majority of the population.[6]

The shortfall in the quality of public services and in the government's capacity in supporting the resident population has often been argued to have resulted in an overreliance on humanitarian actors and local

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[1] World Bank. (2024). Lebanon Poverty and Equity Assessment: Weathering a Protracted Crisis. Washington DC

[2] World Bank. March 14 2023. Lebanon Announces Payment of Cash Transfers to Extreme Poor Lebanese households under AMAN. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/14/lebanon-announces-payment-of-cash-transfers-to-extreme-poor-lebanese-households-under-aman. The ESSN is also unfunded through loans from the World Bank.

[3] Proudfoot, P. (2025) The Political Economy of Lebanon's Financial Crisis: State Fragmentation and the Structural Limitations of Shock-Responsive Social Protection (SRSP), BASIC Research Working Paper 42, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2025.011.

[4] Human Rights Watch. December 12 2022. Lebanon: Poverty, Hunger Amid Economic Crisis. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/12/lebanon-rising-poverty-hunger-amid-economic-crisis.

[5] Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan. 2021. Social Protection Spending in Lebanon: A deep dive into State Financing of Social Protection. Budget Review Policy Brief. https://www.ilo.org/publications/social-protection-spending-lebanon-deep-dive-state-financing-social

[6] Fatih Ortakaya, A. February 11 2025. Lebanon: Lessons from social protection delivery systems during the pandemic. World Bank Blog. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/arabvoices/lebanon-lessons-from-social-protection-delivery-systems-during-the-pandemic?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

NGOs to fill in the gap in coverage. Moreover, the absence of social assistance from the state has forced many in Lebanon to rely instead on alternative sources of support from local political actors, resulting in clientelist system that undermines the state and entrenches the country's already deep sectarian cleavages. While some predicted that the crisis might disrupt these patronage networks, Proudfoot and Zoughaib argue that these sectarian-clientelist structures have persisted. They argue that instead of leveraging subnational actors to reach local populations, international actors should prioritize support to the establishment of a national state-led social protection system, paving the way for a new social contract between the state and its people.[7]

In February 2024, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM) passed the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS), which provides a roadmap for the establishment of a new social contract to build trust and a rights-based social protection system that protects everyone from lifecycle vulnerabilities.[8] Another major sign of progress in the social protection sphere in Lebanon was the establishment of the National Disability Allowance (NDA) that only came into fruition through the collective advocacy and awareness raising efforts of local civil society organization (CSOs), namely the Organizations for People with Disabilities (OPDs), and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and UNICEF along with the support of the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) and the funding from the European Union.[9] The NDA is the first ever life-cycle universal social grant that provides income support to people with disabilities of all nationalities (Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians and migrants) between the ages of 0 to 60.

2. Aims & Evidence Base

The NSPS indicates renewed government commitment to creating an equitable and effective system of social protection, and the NDA could be an important first step toward realizing this. But if this new social protection is to lay the foundation for a new social contract between the state and the people in Lebanon, then its technical effectiveness must be accompanied by efforts to build trust. The NSPS goes some way in recognising this in its Fourth Strategic Goal – Accountability and Transparency – although much of the focus in this area has been on developing unified information systems, institutional accounting and oversight mechanisms, and data privacy.[10]

However, public *perceptions* of transparency and accountability – which are the basis upon which trust is cultivated or eroded – are not always determined by the institutionalization of accountability mechanisms. Perceived transparency can differ from de jure and de facto transparency,[11] such that even highly transparent decision-making procedures may not be perceived that way, depending on the cues by which people actually judge transparency.[12] Recognizing that bureaucratic transparency within governments or other institutions does not always satisfy the more humanistic ways that transparency

[7] Proudfoot, P. and Zoughaib, S. (2025) *The Politics of Social Assistance in Lebanon: Social Protection, Sectarianism and Lebanon's Fragmented Social Contract*, BASIC Research Working Paper 32, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/BASIC.2024.023

[8] ILO. February 13 2024. The Government of Lebanon Launches its First National Social Protection Strategy. https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/government-lebanon-launches-its-first-national-social-protection-strategy.

[9] ILO. April 26 2023. The Ministry of Social Affairs introduces a social protection programme for people with disabilities in Lebanon. https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ministry-social-affairs-introduces-social-protection-programme-people.

[10] GoL. National Social Protection Strategy for Lebanon: Towards a Rights-based Shock-responsive and Sustainable System. (2023). Available at: https://www.unicef.org/lebanon/documents/national-social-protection-strategy-lebanon-fact-sheets.

[11] Trautendorfer, J., & Eder, N. (2025). Does Transparency Reach Citizens? National Accountability Mechanisms and Public Perceptions in Europe. *Governance*, 38(4), e70041.

[12] de Fine Licht, J. (2014). Transparency actually: how transparency affects public perceptions of political decision-making. *European political science review*, 6(2), 309-330.

is assessed by people going about their lives,[13] this study attempts to shed some light on the meaning of transparency in the context of cash-based assistance in Lebanon.

To do so, this paper draws on three studies led by CAMEALEON in Lebanon, one of them complete and the other two ongoing. As shorthand, we will refer to these studies as "the Perceptions Study", "the Disability Study", and "the Bottom Poor Study". Their details are summarized in Table 1 below. What they all have in common is that they focus on the perspectives of CVA users and bring their concerns to bear on the design and implementation of social assistance programs. Their concerns and grievances reflect not only technical problems but also political grievances, which speak to the perceived legitimacy of the state and role in both social protection and governance.

Table 1: Summary of CAMEALEON Studies that Inform this Analysis

Study:	**"Perceptions"**	**"Disability"**	**"Bottom Poor"**
Research Focus:	Perceptions and popular narratives about CVA, and their impact on social cohesion	Experiences of people with disabilities accessing and using CVA	Experiences of highly vulnerable households accessing and using CVA
Sample (Method)	1. Over 300 social media posts and 13 traditional media articles (content analysis) 2. 18 media professional and humanitarian practitioners (KIIs) 3. 125 Lebanese and Syrian participants across three regions of Lebanon (IDIs)	1. 61 Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian people living with disabilities in different parts of Lebanon (IDIs) 2. Practitioners working at 7 aid organizations that serve people with disabilities (KIIs)	1. Existing survey data on 2. 50-80 vulnerable Lebanese (IDIs and FGDs) 3. 5-10 experts and stakeholders (KIIs
Status	Complete	Write-Up Ongoing	Data Collection Ongoing

3. Perception and Experiences from the "Bottom-Up"

It is important to note that much of the feedback provided by people cannot easily be tied to a particular social assistance and humanitarian CVA program because respondents often referred to cash assistance programs by the organization with whom they had contact (e.g. UNHCR, WFP, "UN", the government), the funder (e.g. "that EU program"), or something distinctive about the modality (the "red card", or the "blue card"). For this reason, there is often ambiguity about the specific program being referred to. It was sometimes possible to determine the program by triangulating several details provided or consulting with provider organizations. But even when it was not, their input provided useful insight into people's experiences with and perspectives on cash assistance generally.

In this section, we describe some of the complaints shared with us from current, past or aspirant participants in a variety of cash assistance programs in Lebanon, many of them funded and run by humanitarian organizations. These concerns illuminate a "bottom-up" perspective on transparency and accountability that differs from conventional institutional conceptions of these qualities.

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[13] Koensler, A. (2018). Reinventing Transparency: Governance, Trust and Passion in Activism for Food Sovereignty in Italy. Ethnologia Europaea. Journal of European Anthropology, 48(1), 50-66.

3.1 Interruptions and Uncertainty about Future Access to Assistance

The first problem highlighted in our studies is that much CVA and social assistance is characterized by frequent interruptions and short duration of coverage. Many CVA recipients expressed frustration about the lack of reliable medium- to long-term assistance programs.

> *"I used to go every 20th of the month to redeem my assistance and buy groceries using the WFP card. But the cash assistance was stopped only a few months after it was activated." (Syrian man, Disability Study)*

> *"The ESSN was stopped for a while - all winter it was cut off. It only came back now with [the appointment of] the new Prime Minister." (Lebanese woman, Bottom Poor Study)*

The length of these disruptions varied significantly—some lasted only a few months, while others extended for years. From the perspective of service providers, these interruptions are often linked to inadequate or inconsistent donor funding, which has worsened globally since 2022. As a result, many organizations have been forced to decrease the value of CVA transfers, reduce the number of recipients, or shorten the period of support. For example, as of April 2025, the World Food Programme (WFP) could only provide CVA recipients with three months of cash; funding beyond that horizon was contingent on arrival of additional funds.[14]

While these interruptions are a strategic and often necessary measure for CVA or social assistance providers facing budget shortfalls, only minimal information is provided to recipients and non-recipients. Unlike budgetary decisions that are debated in government and discussed publicly by elected officials, humanitarian funding and budgeting decisions take place behind a bureaucratic screen. While there are SMS systems to inform recipients of changes to their assistance and call centres to receive their questions and grievances, the decision-making behind these changes is largely opaque. Many current recipients' anxiety about their future access to cash assistance, and those who lose access – even temporarily – may face long-term consequences if they must take on debt to cover essentials, or forgo basic needs when money runs out.

> *"At some point, the transfers were halted for about two months. Then it resumed and stopped again completely after eight months. We still don't understand why this happened... We have months' worth of rent that is long overdue. Electricity as well. Now we only have electricity from a battery to power some LED lights." (Lebanese man, Disability Study)*

The increased reliance on international funders and humanitarian organizations was a necessary response to the rise in vulnerability and the evaporation of public funds during the crisis. Even the government's limited social assistance programs, including the ESSN and the NDA, are almost entirely funded by international donors, where the interest of donors tend to guide the direction of funding and play a critical role in Lebanon's social policies.[15] But in the long-term, external funding is unsustainable and exposes vulnerable households in Lebanon to the uncertainties of humanitarian triage and foreign governments' budgeting priorities. In such a scenario, assistance can provide much needed support to some struggling households, but it will not be sufficient to help them attain some level of stability and attempt to recover their livelihoods, which is fundamental to the country's transition out of crisis.

A more sustainably funded system that draws (at least in part) on a progressive tax system could provide a more reliable source of assistance. In theory, it would also return some level of political accountability to budgeting decisions about social protection. In the near term, combined funding from

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[14] World Food Program. (2025) "2025 Targeting Cycle, March Updates". Available at: https://help.wfp.org/lebanon/docs/2025-targeting-cycle#:~:text=Due%20to%20severe%20funding%20shortages,from%20April%20to%20June%202025.

[15] Proudfoot, P. and Zoughaib, S. (2025).

a gradually growing tax base and modest international support could distribute some of the risk of sudden funding shortfalls, so long as domestic crises do not overlap with international funding crises.

3.2 Uneven Eligibility Criteria

Another problem highlighted in our studies is the widespread perception that the distribution of assistance is biased toward certain groups. The most prevalent complaint expressed among Lebanese participants was that much of the humanitarian funding has been provided to refugees.

> *The tents (in refugee camps) even have solar power. The Syrians have all the things you asked me about, and they still get more help than us. They get help with salaries and cash. In the winter, they get gas and water. Our water is cut off and nobody comes to fill it up." (Lebanese woman, Bottom Poor Study)*

The Perceptions Study identified five widespread claims about assistance to Syrians that shape the Lebanese perceptions about CVA distribution: that the provision of aid is biased, that aid allows Syrians to compete unfairly for jobs, that refugees enjoy better access to services than nationals, that Syrians strategically manipulate aid eligibility rules to receive more, and that there is an international political agenda to keep Syrians in Lebanon. These narratives are spread through various kinds of media, but also through interactions with aid workers and the visibility of Syrians when they receive assistance at ATMs or other points of CVA redemption. These misperceptions lead to tension in everyday interactions between communities, as well as collective actions against Syrians such as enforcing local curfews, forced evictions, and property destruction. They also generate distrust in humanitarian agencies and encourage politicians to create a more hostile environment for displaced Syrians.

While host community grievances are the most conspicuous kind of complaint about nationality-based eligibility criteria, there were others. Palestinians lamented their exclusion from most of the major safety net schemes and cash assistance programs.

> *"Palestinians, disabled or not, benefit from nothing from the state, or any other actors, except for UNRWA, the PLO institutions, the Palestinian civil associations, and local organizations like Mousawat." (Palestinian Man, Disability Study)*

> *"I was told about several Palestinian organizations such as UNRWA that could help, I knew that Lebanese organizations were never going to." (Palestinian Man, Disability Study)*

These grievances reflect the fragmented way that assistance is provided in Lebanon, where program eligibility is often restricted to certain nationalities. Since the start of the Civil War in Syria, the largest portion of humanitarian assistance in Lebanon has been provided by the UNHCR, whose mandate is to protect refugees. Since that time, and especially with the onset of the economic crisis in 2019, more funding has become available to vulnerable Lebanese households. Yet many schemes remain divided by nationality. The UNHCR's Multi-purpose Cash Assistance Program is restricted to Syrians, while the ESSN is for Lebanese nationals.

The separation of nationality groups into different programs is relevant because redemption of cash assistance is a highly visible event that can shape public perception

> *"It is clear that the Syrians are receiving more attention in terms of aid programs and accessibility to them. Collection points for money withdrawals are a clear sign of this, with most queues serving Syrians seem to be more organized and effective." (Lebanese woman, Bottom Poor Study)*

These segregated queues draw attention to nationality-based differences in eligibility and constitute an informal "indicator" of bottom-up accountability. Even if, in theory, the quantities of assistance to

Syrian and Lebanese households were equitable, the visibility of separate redemption provides visual fodder for inflammatory narratives about unfair distribution of resources.

A more integrated system, on the other hand, might reduce the salience of these concerns. It is worthwhile noting that recipients of the National Disability Allowance, which is available to people with disabilities from any nationality, did not raise any concerns along the lines of nationality. This is despite the fact that there are uneven eligibility requirements to qualify for a personal disability card (PDC), which is main document required to access the NDA. Lebanese applicants are assessed at centres run by the Ministry of Social Affairs, which applies a more restrictive medical definition of disability; Syrians are assessed by the UNHCR according to more inclusive functional criteria based on the Washington Group Definition. This bias has not raised much public ire, perhaps because there is no visible segregation of nationalities at the money transfer shops where people redeem the NDA.

3.3 Opaque Targeting Methods

The third problem highlighted in our studies is the perception that vulnerability targeting is opaque or biased. Most of the social assistance provided in Lebanon is administered as social safety nets, in which targeting is used to direct assistance toward those most affected by poverty and vulnerability. Beyond Lebanon, many methods of poverty-targeting have drawn criticism for excluding large swathes of the most vulnerable.[16] Nonetheless, targeted safety nets remain the preferred option in many crisis contexts because they focus on sustaining the most crisis-affected and at-risk segments of the population, and because they minimize total expenditures by (in theory) excluding those who are less in need.[17]

In our studies, we found widespread scepticism about the targeting mechanisms used for distributing assistance. In the Perceptions Study, participants in 8 of the 12 FGDs expressed the perception that targeting of assistance is largely based on luck. A similar view was expressed by a Palestinian man in our Disability Study, who said, "For me, choosing to register was like signing up for the lottery. I didn't really care or have any expectations".

This sentiment reflects the opaqueness of many targeting methods. For most programs, applicants receive SMS-based notification of their acceptance or rejection from a program, but they are not given information about the reasons that they were rejected. This frustration was echoed by one respondent who had been rejected from the ESSN.

> *We submitted all the needed papers for the application, including a detailed medical report about our daughter's case. After a while, we received a message that we cannot benefit. We asked about the reason and tried to follow up but reached no response. (Lebanese woman, Disability Study).*

Moreover, vulnerability-based targeting is highly complex and difficult to comprehend without some level of technical expertise. The main form of targeting used in Lebanon is the hybrid proxy means test (PMT) and categorical targeting model recommended by the World Bank, which is used to identify vulnerable Lebanese households for the ESSN and also to select recipients for UNHCR's multi-purpose cash assistance to refugees. Such targeting has been criticized for its exclusionary nature, as social safety nets tend to miss a significant portion of the vulnerable households and groups that they intend to support. One significant cause of non-coverage is that safety nets rely on a social registry to reach

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[16] Kidd, Stephen & Diloá Athias. (2019). "Hit and Miss: An assessment of targeting effectiveness in social protection". *Development Pathways Working Papers*.

[17] Crew, Rory. (2023). "Community based targeting: The 'best-worst' thing for limited humanitarian resources?" CALP Blog, 16th January. (Available at: https://www.calpnetwork.org/blog/community-based-targeting-the-best-worst-thing-for-limited-humanitarian-resources/)

their target population; a household can't even be considered for targeting unless they are on the registry.[18]

Another problem with vulnerability-targeting – especially those that rely on PMT – is that the technical complexity of these calculations renders them inscrutable to most people. The hybrid targeting model used in the ESSN is valued because it goes beyond income to consider other observable indicators of poverty and vulnerability. However, reflecting on the questions asked to them during their assessments, respondents in our studies expressed doubt about the indicators used to score their vulnerability.

> *"If we've inherited this house years ago from my parents, it does not make us any less poor if we don't have rent to pay." (Lebanese woman, Bottom Poor Study).*

> *"They asked us if the house is tiled, if it's a rental. If the house is fully furnished, then they don't feed you?" (Lebanese man, Bottom Poor Study)*

Similar scepticism was raised in the Disability Study, often without any prompting about this issue by the interviewer.

> *"We do not know why we do not receive any assistance, but what makes us disappointed is that we see others whom we know do not need the assistance as much as we do. Yet they receive it, while we do not... We don't mind that they are benefiting, but our daughter [who is living with disabilities] has many needs, so her case should be prioritized." (Lebanese Man, Disability Study)*

> *"We were left with no explanation as to why we were no longer eligible to receive assistance. Some of our neighbours are relatively more comfortable than we are and are still receiving aid" (Lebanese Man, Bottom Poor Study)*

These concerns do not necessarily reflect veritable targeting inaccuracies. Users' perceptions of differences in need between themselves and others is itself often biased or based on inaccurate assumptions about the targeting process. Nonetheless, the *perception* that targeting is inaccurate or biased can erode trust in system of assistance overall. Past frustrations with vulnerability assessments can also leave people discouraged or disillusioned about social assistance. Some study participants explained that targeting assessments make them feel that they need to prove their vulnerability and beg for assistance. Such sentiments of frustration and indignity can drive people to self-exclude from future programs.

3.4 Unresponsive Communication

The last, and perhaps most obvious, problem related to transparency and accountability was the widespread frustration among study participants about communication barriers when trying to reach providers. Sometimes participants face challenges, such as unexpected interruptions to their services or an unexplained freeze on their assistance. Many CVA and social assistance providers have call centres to handle questions and concerns from recipients and non-recipients. But many participants described frustrating experiences trying to reach someone on a non-responsive line or lengthy delays in response to their questions.

> *"If you want an appointment, there is a whole process. You try to call them, and they put you on hold forever. If you mess up with the automated responder, you lose your credit. It's bad. When we first arrived, you just called the number, waited until someone joined you on the call, and*

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[18] Kidd, S., & Athias, D. June 2020. Hit and Miss: An assessment of targeting the effectiveness in social protection. Development Pathways Working Paper. https://www.developmentpathways.co.uk/publications/hit-and-miss-an-assessment-of-targeting-effectiveness-in-social-protection/.

then you had an officer to talk to. Now they just want to make it hell for you". (Syrian Man, Disability Study)

"They tell us to call the hotline, but it's cold as ice. They never reply on it" (Lebanese Man, Disability Study).

"We had assistance but it was stopped only a few months after it was activated. We are still trying to have the assistance re-activated, but UNHCR is not as responsive." (Syrian man, Disability Study)

Such problems are especially frustrating for women in single-headed households, especially if they have divorced or separated from the man who was previously recorded as the head of household. Updating their file can be a lengthy process, especially if staff are not responsive.

"My husband and I are separated. Technically, he should be receiving our assistance, but when my kids asked him if he's receiving any messages, he said no. We tried calling a number... but there was no answer. So the assistance goes to the head of the household... His number and name are on the database, but we are not in the same household anymore." (Lebanese Woman, Bottom Poor Study)

Limited communication can also affect people's understanding of eligibility criteria and targeting mechanisms. When the information from providers is unclear or difficult to access, people seek information through their social networks. Social networks have become an important "community infrastructure" that supplements formal outreach and communication channels. The most vulnerable are often missed when programs are announced over social media and other channels that require an internet connection and a digital device. Friends, neighbours, or associates at one's place of prayer can provide information and support that bridges that gap. When people have questions about eligibility or registration procedures and phone-based help-lines are understaffed, they can seek help from people who have already been through the process. But the reliance on informal channels of information also carries risks, as misinformation can take root and spread quickly. For example, three Syrian respondents in the Disability Study had recently been told that they were not eligible for the NDA on the basis of their nationality – which is not true – and thus had excluded themselves from a source of assistance to which they should have had access.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The overarching theme in the sections above is that opaque systems, practices and decisions can diminish confidence in social assistance providers. But most of the grievances that we highlighted – unexplained interruptions to assistance, uneven eligibility criteria, complex targeting systems and poor communication systems – have little to do with conventional strategies to improve transparency through bureaucratic rules and institutional oversight mechanisms. From the perspective of the people whom social assistance is intended to support, transparency is more about reliability, continuity, a sense of fairness in access to resources, and responsiveness to problems raised. By reading our findings through the lens of "bottom-up" transparency and accountability, we arrive at the following key recommendations.

1. Our first recommendation affirms the vision that Lebanon has already presented in its NSPS: to build a right-based universal system of social protection that covers all people across the lifecycle. Our findings highlight the limitations of social safety nets that rely on social registries and narrow targeting criteria, the opaqueness of the targeting methods (from the perspective of the target population) and the frustration or indignity that can accompany exclusion from assistance. Even if targeting makes sense to experts and practitioners as a pragmatic means of distributing scarce aid

in crisis-affected contexts, it is poor basis upon which to build trust and confidence in the way that aid is distributed.

Universal lifecycle non-contributory social assistance programs are regarded as a viable option to protect the most vulnerable and marginalized, from childhood through old age during period of crises by providing income support. Programs that support persons with diverse needs throughout the lifecycle through cash include child grants, disability allowances, and old age pensions. These programs have potential "to be an effective policy tool to promote solidarity, while at the same time strengthening the social contract".[19]

Equitable social protection in a highly unequal society often involves some level of redistribution through progressive taxation and provision of services; ensuring everyone benefits in some way – even if the benefit is more symbolic than substantial – can change mentalities and encourage buy-in for a more inclusive system. This is an especially important point for Lebanon, where tax evasion is widespread and widely perceived as a reasonable response to corruption and mismanagement of state resources.[20] Its nascent stages, a universal system that provides small transfer values may still be supplemented by additional poverty-targeted schemes to support vulnerable families.

2. The social protection system should cover all nationalities, as is already the case with the National Disability Allowance. Parallel systems for different nationalities are inefficient and draw attention to differences in eligibility, which can foster resentment between communities; aid tensions in Lebanon have been especially focused on Syrians. Integrated assistance systems remove the sense of competing interests between groups. Moreover, if national systems provide assistance to refugees, they can receive funds allocated to refugee protection and use this to cover some of their overhead costs. This additional funding can support capacity building, especially while Lebanon is still emerging from the economic crisis and tax revenue is low.

3. Programs need to make significant investments in outreach and communication to ensure that enrolment details are widely disseminated, call centres are responsive, and misinformation is actively countered. During our Disability Study, we encountered multiple people who were eligible for the NDA but believed they were not, usually on the basis of age or nationality. Moreover, many people with past experiences of rejection felt frustrated or undignified requesting assistance and being rejected without an explanation. Social protection providers should ensure that call centres are well staffed and trained to respond patiently and transparently to complaints.

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[19] ESCAP. (2022). "Towards Universal Social Protection". *Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific*.
[20] Rahmeh, Hassan. (2023). "The vicious cycle in Lebanon's tax culture". *Middle East Monitor*, August 1st.

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